

Good morning, Moon Valley!

The 30-year-old classic management book, □ *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, written by Stephen Covey has sold over 40 million copies. Habit 2 has become iconic: □ Begin with the end in mind.

But this basic idea is not new. It is reflected in the apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, which is the basis for a brand-new sermon series titled, □ "Living Like He's Coming." In the series, we are going to be learning various ways to live with the end in mind, with intentionality, in anticipation of the Lord's return and his subsequent evaluation of our work as believers. We are going to learn to live in ways that count with the One who counts.

The text we're studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. In this text, the apostle Paul models for us a powerfully transformative habit. I call it a habit because, if you look at all the letters of the Bible written by Paul—and there are a dozen of them—you will find that in all but one (Galatians), Paul does what he does in our text.

Here's the habit, which also happens to be the big idea of our text: □ Tell people why you are thanking God for them.

In his letters to various churches and to various people, Paul takes the time to say, "I'm thanking God for what I see in you," and he spells out what he sees.

Chances are I don't need to sell you on the fact that this is good idea. In fact, right about now you may be wondering why I get paid for this.

You can probably see how applying this big idea could be powerfully transformative for the giver and the receiver.

On the giving end, if we were to embrace this habit, it could cultivate in us a new level of gratitude that would undoubtedly do us good. Numerous studies have shown that gratitude can improve our health, mentally and physically.

On the receiving end, if we were to regularly hear this kind of encouragement from others, no telling what new mountains we could climb.

But here's the rub. Why is this so rare today?

Or is it just me?

When was the last time you told someone specifically why you were thanking God for them?

If you're like me, you can't remember. And it's not because I'm getting old.

It's not as if the giving of thanks is some obscure doctrine. I did a search in the ESV Bible on the English word, "thank" in all its forms, including "thanks," "thankfulness," "thanksgiving," etc. I got 170 hits. That's about the same number of hits as the word, "salvation." So, giving thanks is a big deal in the Bible.

For years, I overlooked Paul's habit of telling people why he is thanking God for them because he usually does it at the beginning of his letters and I would skim over it because I thought it was just a perfunctory, polite, blah-blah-blah warm-up before getting to the more important stuff.

But I was wrong. Paul is not just being polite; he's being intentional.

To tell people why you are thanking God for them and to be specific about it sounds easy enough. Until I tried to make a habit of it. Then I found myself struggling to come up with material. Not because there's nothing to be thankful for, but because I take people for granted. Especially the people I am around the most.

It takes effort to see someone familiar with fresh eyes, with a view to identifying the good and expressing thanks for it. Some of you may be thinking, "I'm not even sure what positive things I'm looking for." Well Paul is going to prime the pump for us. Paul and his ministry partners, Silvanus and Timothy provide an example list of □ eight specific things they see in the Thessalonians for which they are thankful. It's not an exhaustive list, but it helps us get started.

You should know that the list is decidedly Christian. The authors are believers who are addressing other believers, and the list reflects it.

If you don't happen to be a believer in Jesus or if the people you have in mind aren't believers, you'll need to adapt the idea, but it's still helpful. For example, saying you're thankful for the kindness you see in someone else requires no particular religious faith.

As we move through the text, I'm just going to briefly touch on each one of the eight things. The idea is to give a very general overview to spark some ideas for giving thanks.

Let's start at the beginning and work our way through the text. □ Verse 1 presents a standard greeting identifying the authors and the recipients.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

Let me provide some historical context for □ “the church of the Thessalonians,” which may add some depth and color to the thanks Paul is about to give.

During Paul’s second missionary journey, Paul and his ministry partners Silvanus and Timothy travelled from Philippi to Thessalonica as shown □ on this map. The year was approximately AD 51.

Back in Philippi, Paul and Silvanus, also known as Silas, had been dragged before city magistrates, falsely accused of anti-Roman behavior, brutally beaten with rods, and imprisoned in stocks for 24 hours.

Luke and Timothy were also in Philippi at the time, but were not arrested, probably because they were not Jewish. Opposition to the gospel message in Philippi came primarily from Gentiles, many of whom were anti-Semitic.

At the urging of the magistrates in Philippi, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy departed, leaving Luke behind to lead the fledging church there. They traveled west on the Via Egnatia, a road constructed by the Romans in the second century BC. It was about 20 feet wide and variously paved with stone slabs or hard-packed sand.

Keep in mind, Paul and Silvanus had just been brutally beaten with rods. Some prisoners died from such beatings. And now, still in pain, they travelled 33 miles from Philippi to Amphipolis. Then 27 miles farther to Apollonia. Then 35 miles more to Thessalonica. The first two stages of the trip were slightly uphill. The third stage, downhill.

They likely walked the 100 miles in three days. If so, this reflects a remarkable level of determination for men who were seriously wounded.

Thessalonica would have been a strategic city for Paul's missionary purposes. As Macedonia's largest port situated near the midpoint of the Via Egnatia roadway, Thessalonica was a large prosperous commercial hub. A thriving church in Thessalonica could be influential in the spread of the gospel. Paul seemed determined to get there as soon as possible.

Upon arrival, they found a synagogue of the Jews. Paul went to the synagogue and reasoned from the Scriptures, arguing that Jesus is the Christ, the Jewish Messiah, the long-awaited Savior, the blessing of Abraham, the descendant of David.

Many believed and, thus, the church of the Thessalonians was born.

This success eventually prompted a backlash from Jews who remained unpersuaded. They mobilized a mob against Paul, falsely accusing him of treason. Concerned for the lives of Paul and Silas, the new believers in the Thessalonian church sent them away by night to Berea.

Within just a few months of leaving Thessalonica, Paul writes a letter to the people in the church there. It's the letter we are now studying, First Thessalonians.

At the time 1 Thessalonians was written, the church in Thessalonica was a diverse group of new believers who likely faced opposition from the same Jews who opposed Paul. So, these Thessalonian believers needed some encouragement, they needed a good word, they needed a shot in the arm. And Paul is going to provide it by giving them eight reasons why he is thanking God for them.

Again, we're not going to do a deep dive on each of these reasons. I just want to quickly identify and list them so they can collectively serve as a catalyst for our own thanksgiving.

In □ verses 2 and 3, Paul begins by saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first thing for which Paul gives thanks is the Thessalonians' □ “work of faith.” The new believers were doing work which was a direct result of their faith in Jesus Christ, and Paul tells them that he and his partners are thanking God for what they see. This suggests that we also ought to look for a faith that is working in someone else and express our thanks for it.

Paul also gives thanks for their □ “labor of love.” They are doing things out of love for other people and Paul tells them he is thanking God for what he sees. Biblical love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling; it is a decision to sacrificially serve the best interests of others. Paul sees it and commends it.

Paul also gives thanks for their □ “steadfastness of hope.” Steadfastness of hope means demonstrating perseverance in doing what's right even though it's hard. It means hanging on to the hope that God is in control and will take care of us even when life gets terribly hard. It means looking ahead to heaven so you can get through today. It's good to say, “I'm thanking God for the perseverance I see in you. It blesses me to see you hanging in there.”

Paul continues in □ verses 4 and 5, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Here Paul gives thanks for their □ brotherhood—the fact that they are related by faith as brothers and sisters in Christ. It’s good to say, “I’m thanking God for you because he chose you to be my brother or to be my sister in Christ. It’s good to be in the family of God together.”

Paul goes on to say in □ verses 6 and 7,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

There are two things here.

First, Paul gives thanks for their □ Christlikeness, saying they are “imitators . . . of the Lord.” It is good to say, “I’m thanking God for your Christlikeness. I’m thanking God for your compassion, your gentleness, your kindness, your patience, your self-control.”

Second, Paul says, □ “you became an example.” It’s good to say, “I’m thanking God because you are a model to follow. You’re an example of the way it ought to be done. You’re a real inspiration to me.”

Paul continues in □ verse 8, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

Here Paul gives thanks for their ☐ testimony. By testimony I mean the way they tell others about God—the way they share their faith. Paul says “the word of the Lord sounded forth from you,” and “your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.” It’s good to say, “I’m thanking God for the loving way you tell others about God. I’m blessed by your winsome witness, by your contagious Christianity.”

Paul wraps up in ☐ verses 9 and 10, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Paul has received good reports about the Thessalonians from those in other parts of the country. So, he passes along this ☐ praise from others. He says, “they themselves report . . . how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” It is good to pass along a good report. It’s good to say, “I’m thanking God for the wonderful things I’m hearing other people say about you.” Next time you hear a good report about someone, make a note and pass it on to that someone.

So, there you have it. ☐ The big idea: Tell people why you are thanking God for them. And as an example, the list of 8 reasons Paul is thanking God for the Thessalonians: their faith, love, hope, brotherhood, Christlikeness, example, testimony, and praise from others.

This is not an exhaustive list; it's just for starters.

How often should we do this? What should be the frequency of our thanks?

Back in  verse 2, when Paul says, “we give thanks,” it is in the present tense suggesting ongoing action. It could have legitimately been translated, “we keep giving thanks.”

Also, the two adverbs,  “always” and “constantly,” accentuate this. If we are to follow the example of Paul, this thanksgiving is to be given “always.” It is to be given “constantly.” Through the example of Paul, God is calling us to make a lifestyle of thanking him for what we see in others and telling these others we're thankful to God for them. It's a part of the plan.

You may have already thought of this, but just to be clear, telling people why you are thanking God for them presupposes that you are indeed thanking God for them in the first place. If we break it down, the task before us is  this.

1. Prayerfully identify one person in whom you see something for which you are grateful.
2. Thank God for what you see.
3. Tell the person why you are thanking God for them.

I have outlined these simple steps on the back side of your sermon notes. If you are on our mailing list, you will receive them every day this week.

I can anticipate some self-talk you may be silently engaged in right now.

You may be thinking, “Well, Bob, if I do this too much it will lose its meaning. Or, I’ve already done this enough times in the past for certain people to know I think highly of them; more would be overkill and might lead them to believe that I am fawning all over them or trying to ingratiate myself.”

Let’s think about this for a minute.

Have you ever thought to yourself “You know, I am sick and tired of people I care about telling me all the ways they are thanking God for me”?

Have you ever thought to yourself, “You know, I don’t really need and would not appreciate any more encouragement. I’ve had enough”?

So, now you may be thinking, “Okay Bob, point taken. But if I start telling people why I am thanking God for them now, people are going to think I’m doing it insincerely, just because you told me to, and that would be embarrassing.”

Let’s think about this for a minute.

If I am concerned that people are going to think I’m doing it insincerely and that it would be embarrassing, who am I really concerned about? Myself or other people?

Does the apostle Paul seem to hold back because of these concerns?

I am not the authority here. God’s word is. And if the big idea is rooted in God’s word, shouldn’t we just apply it to our lives as best we can, even if it makes us feel a little vulnerable?

Let me mention just a few things you can do to tell people why you are thanking God for them.

In our staff meetings and in our elder meetings at the church, if someone has had a birthday since our last meeting, we go around the room and each person tells something they admire, something they appreciate, some reason why they are thanking God for the person who had the birthday.

In our staff and elder Christmas parties each year, I try to openly and uniquely give thanks for each person . . . before singing a song that pokes fun at them.

In my one-on-one meetings with church staffers each week, I often pray, giving thanks to God for them so they can hear it for themselves. “Thank you, Lord, for the privilege of partnering with so-and-so. Thank you for the work you are doing in and through so-and-so.”

I am no paragon of gratitude. I have a lot of room to grow. But I am working at it. And I have to, because it doesn’t come naturally.

I suspect we grossly underestimate the power of telling people why we are thanking God for them. I know I do.

Let me tell you a couple of personal stories that make this point.

Years ago, someone used to regularly encourage and thank me for aspects of my sermons they found good and helpful. Then the feedback stopped. And I have since wondered, am I doing okay in their eyes?

Now, I know that I am supposed to focus on pleasing God and not other people. But the encouragement of others is still powerful.

This is not a shameless ploy to get more compliments, nor is it an attempt to make anyone feel bad.

In fact, I realize that I myself have done the exact same thing to other people. For example, when others would preach in my place, I would regularly connect with them before their sermon to tell them I'm thankful for them and am praying for them. Then I would follow up afterward by pointing out aspects of their sermon that I thought were particularly good and helpful.

Then I stopped.

Not because I am any less thankful for them. Not because I think the quality of their sermons has diminished in any way. But because I talked myself into thinking that I am too busy, and they have preached enough that they don't really need my encouragement anymore.

And now, for all I know, they may be wondering, am I doing okay in Bob's eyes?

Many of you know that my Dad passed away last week. I mentioned last Sunday that, in his advanced dementia and in his process of dying, there was an extraordinary window of lucidity in which he was able to communicate. The window was open for only a few hours. Afterward, he fell into a deep sleep from which he never awoke.

In the window, we talked, I read Scripture, and we prayed. Then, while I was holding his hand, he squeezed it, looked me straight in the eye and said, "I'm glad I have you."

Just five words. But I will never forget them. Those five powerful words will fuel my fire for the rest of my days.

Let's pray. Lord, give us the insight and the courage to tell people why we are thanking you for them. Amen.