Gratitude Blockers, Part 1

1. Warm up: The season of Thanksgiving is upon us. As Johnny Carson once said, "Thanksgiving is an emotional holiday. We travel thousands of miles to be with family members we only see once a year, only to discover once a year is way too often." Who's the craziest or most colorful person in your extended family? What makes them so "unique?"

2. The season of Thanksgiving is not just about family, turkey, pumpkin pie, football, Black Friday sales, and hot cider. Above all else, it is there to remind us of the importance of living with grateful hearts. On Sunday, we studied two common Gratitude Blockers. Next Sunday, we'll study two more. But first, let's remind ourselves of the profound emphasis the Bible places on gratitude. Read the medley of verses printed on p. 3.

    a. As we read the medley of verses, what did you feel inside as you heard the words of those verses?

    b. Colossians 3:15 says, "Whatever you do, [give] thanks to God the Father." Tell us some random thing that you plan to do tomorrow – and what you're prayer of thanksgiving might be as you do that thing? And how might that prayer of thanksgiving impact what you do?

    c. Ephesians 5:2 says, "Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything." Do you think "everything" really means everything, even the hard things? If so, why? If not, why?

3. The verses we just read are a small sampling of the innumerable verses in the Bible about offering thanks and praise to God. Which raises the question: Why does the Bible place so much emphasis on gratitude? Some churches give the impression that God craves and maybe even "needs" our thanks and praise, and gets upset if we don't do it enough.

    a. Jeff disputed that, saying he doesn't believe God is sitting up there in heaven, saying, "Go ahead, tell me again how great I am. Oh, I just love it when you tell me how great I am. I was starting to feel bad about myself, but now I feel so much better. Your praise really feeds my ego. Thank you, thank you." Although God might appreciate expressions of our appreciation (like a good parent does when a child expresses thanks), Jeff said that God doesn't *need* our praise. What are your thoughts? Does God need our praise? How do you think God feels when we do offer praise or gratitude?

    b. The reason the Bible places so much emphasis on gratitude, Jeff suggested, is because ***we need it***. For starters, volumes of clinical studies have documented the health benefits that accrue to people who are consistently grateful. Take a look at the list of health benefits on p. 3. Does make sense to you that gratitude benefits our bodies in all these amazing ways? If so, why do you think that is? Why are the systems of our body so impacted by gratitude?

c. It's not just our body that benefits from gratitude, but also our soul. Many spiritual teachers over the years have referred to gratitude as the "Queen of Virtues" because, they say, all the other virtues spring from gratitude, including things like humility, patience, joy, generosity, gentleness, etc. Pick one of the virtues just named and describe why that virtue is fueled by an attitude of gratitude.

4. In the second half of Sunday's sermon, we talked about two big Gratitude Blockers, starting with what psychologists call "Hedonistic Adaptation." The idea here is that, when we experience something that gives us pleasure over-and-over again as a constant in our life, we adapt to it and start to take it for granted instead of appreciating it.

    a. In his sermon, Jeff gave several examples of great blessings in our life that we take for granted because they are always there, including our toilets. ☺ He challenged us to genuinely thank God for our toilet the next time we're sitting on it. Did you? Was your gratitude genuine? How did you feel when you did it?

    b. What are some other examples of things or people or experiences in your life that are a great blessing, but so ever-present that you often wouldn't think to give thanks for them?

    c. Is there a way we can get better at remembering to give thanks for these ever-present blessings? Any ideas?

5. The other Gratitude Blocker we discussed is what psychologists call "The Deficit Model." The idea here is that, when we're looking forward to something we want but don't yet have, we can become so preoccupied with what we want that we fail to appreciate what we already have. The Deficit Model can be captured in a simple sentence that we're often tempted to utter: "I'll be happy when . . . [fill in the blank]."

    a. Tell us about a time in your life when you got so focused on something you wanted but didn't have, that it became hard for you to be joyful and grateful for all the things you did already have.

    b. There's nothing wrong with wanting something *per se*. Rather it's a matter of not becoming so preoccupied that you can't enjoy what you already have. What's something right now that you really want? Suppose it never comes. Can you be happy and grateful without it? Why or why not?

    c. In Philippians 4:11, the Apostle Paul said, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have." Elsewhere, in I Timothy 6:6, Paul said, "Godliness with contentment is great gain." What do you think that second verse means?

d. Jeff said, “Happiness doesn’t have to wait until ‘when’ happens. Wherever we find ourselves in life, we already have more than enough to be enormously happy and grateful. So don’t fall into the trap of saying, ‘I’ll be happy when . . .’” Do you agree with what Jeff said? Why or why not?

A Sampling of Bible Verses About Gratitude

Colossians 3:15. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . and be thankful . . . , singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, [give] thanks to God the Father.”

Psalm 138:1. “I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart. . . . I bow down . . . and give thanks . . . .”

Ephesians 5:2. “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jonah 2:9. “With the voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice to you.”

Psalm 95:1. “O come, let us sing to the Lord. . . . Let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!”

Colossians 2:6. “Continue to live your lives in Jesus, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

When We Consistently Express Gratitude, the Health Benefits Are . . .

Lower diastolic and systolic blood pressure (UCLA Health)

Stabilized heart rate variability (UCLA Health)

Fall asleep faster, sleep longer, and wake up more rested (UCLA Health)

Release of hormones that strengthen the immune system (American Brain Foundation)

Fewer infections, digestion problems, and nausea (ABF)

Fewer headaches, head pain, sore muscles (ABF)

Reduced cortisol, the primary stress hormone (Dr. David Jockers)

Decreased systemic inflammation biomarkers (Dr. Jockers)

Release of feel-good neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin (ABF)

Increased gray matter volume in areas of the brain tied to cognitive and emotional processing (ABF)