

Good Morning. Today we wrap our series called Renew Your Mind: Gospel Hope for Mental Health. It's been a roller coaster series. We've talked about our thoughts, our feelings, our habits, our wounds... And today we're going to finish our series talking about attitude. And in order to address our spiritual attitude, today, we're going to talk specifically about gratitude.

If you follow as much nerdy historical and archaeological news as I do, you know that science is starting to find more and more evidence to support particular people, places and events from the Bible. People like us don't need to see that evidence but it always feels good to know the foundation you stand on is even stronger today than it was yesterday. Today, we're flipping it. Today, we're going to use the Bible to help support modern science. There have been a lot of studies in modern science that have proven that practicing gratitude is associated with better psychological well-being. Some of those studies have even found physical health benefits as well. In 2003, two psychologists named Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough published experimental results in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Participants were assigned to focus regularly on things they were grateful for, hassles, or more neutral events. The gratitude groups showed improved well-being across several measures; the strongest and most consistent effect was increased positive emotion. A 2023 systematic review of 64 randomized clinical trials found that gratitude interventions were associated with better overall mental health, greater satisfaction with life, fewer symptoms of anxiety, fewer symptoms of depression and more positive emotions and optimism. Today,

we'll prove these scientific findings to be correct based on scripture that has been teaching Christians around the world for centuries.

Shortly after my wife and I were married, she had an idea for an activity for us to do. She wanted to make a "gratitude jar". The concept is that we place a mason jar on the kitchen counter and whenever we felt grateful for something, we could write it on a small piece of paper and place it in the jar. Ask me how excited I was about this new activity. That jar sat on the kitchen counter slowly filling with gratitude and I can promise you that for the first few months, not a single one of those pieces of paper were mine. After some time, I gave in. I didn't fill the jar, but I put a few in there. Like most things, with time, we forgot about the jar. It sat there and in our minds it was just a permanent fixture on the kitchen counter like the cutting board or the air fryer. But a few years later, tragedy struck. My wife was diagnosed with breast cancer and our entire life was turned upside down. There were feeling of grief, sadness, anger, hopelessness... It wasn't a good time in our lives. But one day, my wife suggested we open the gratitude jar and see what was inside. At this point, it had been so long since I wrote anything on a piece of paper, that I wasn't sure what I had put in there. It could have been something meaningful like gratefulness for our first grandkid, a vacation we took, a tax refund we received. Or it could've been a lot less deep like finding a 7<sup>th</sup> nugget in my 6-piece or going an entire week without the dog treating the hallway carpet like his own personal toilet. But as we poured through those pieces of paper, a portrait of our lives was unfolded. We saw so much good in our world and I remember that for a moment, cancer wasn't on either of our minds. Gratitude

that we had been giving in small doses over time, paid itself off when we needed it most. More importantly, all those little pieces of paper added up to one important fact... God was with us. He had to be. God placed all of those small blessings in our lives and he did so at so many different times in our life. He was with us for all of that, so we know he was with us for this. And he was. She is three years into survivorship and now before and after every medical check-up, we are sure to thank God for all he has done and given us.

**Gratitude is a powerful emotional tool and also a God-given command.**

[illustrate two different worlds on stage. One on the right and one on the left]

Sometimes it may feel like we live in two worlds. Our spiritual world, and our physical world (the ordinary parts of our life that sometimes don't feel like they are attached to our faith.

On one side, we have our faith-grounded life. Our spiritual world. Saying blessings over meals with our family. Sitting with our kids/grandkids as we pray with them and teach them how to talk to God. This time right now when we are here in church. This is where we meet with our small groups as we study the word of God or discuss how to follow Jesus. This is where God is on our minds most. Where Jesus is in our hearts as we praise and give thanks for his sacrifice that gave all of us life for eternity. This is a very powerful world to be in. This is where our soul gets fed. It's where we may feel most connected with Jesus and where we're most comfortable singing our praises for him. In

this world, our attitude feels grounded. This world allows us to shout THANK YOU!! At any time for any reason and at any volume we choose. Many of us here at church know each other and we know how thankful we are when we are here. That's why we're here. We are here to learn, to worship, to praise. We are here to give thanks. That feeling that we have when we leave here on Sunday is a very powerful feeling. And I know you know that feeling I'm talking about. We feel hope. Loved. Re-energized. We feel grateful. We feel joy.

Now, let's look at this side. Over here, we have our ordinary life. This is us at work. This is us driving home from work. Possibly in traffic. Possibly traffic on Main Street here in Middletown. Over here, we're at the grocery store. We're at a friend's birthday party. We're staring at a pile of bills piling up. Over here, we're about to go to doctor's appointment and we aren't sure we're going to get great news. Over here, we recently lost someone we love. Over here in this world, sometimes we forget that we aren't alone. We may get so wrapped up in whatever is happening in this world, that we don't remember God is right here with us. He's here as we pour through a stack of overdue bills. He's here as we mourning someone's death. He's at that doctors appointment with us. If we aren't seeing God, sometimes it's hard to remember what we're grateful for over here. We need to see God over here. We need to remember the inexplainable amount of love Jesus has for us.

God never intended for these to be two separate worlds. We're the ones who sometimes draw that line. It's so easy to see God over here. Gratitude comes easy over here. We're worshiping, praying, praising. Sometimes, we have to

look a bit harder on this side. Sometimes, we just have to remember to look for him.

One of the most important teachers in our early Christian church was Paul. Paul gave us instruction for gratitude in the book of Colossians.

**Colossians 3:17 (NLT):**

***And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.***

**“And whatever you do”.** He doesn’t say only when you’re here in church. He doesn’t say just when you’re praying before dinner. He definitely didn’t say only give thanks when life is going well and you have a hundred reasons to be thankful. He said, “whatever you do”. This means Jesus is present in the ordinary parts of our world as well. He’s there when we’re sitting in traffic on Main Street. He’s there with us in the lobby of the doctor’s office. He’s there when we open that Middletown Electric or Delmarva power bill. Paul tells us that God is part of it all – and so should our gratitude.

**“Giving thanks through Him to God The Father”.** We give our thanks to God through Jesus because Jesus is the one who reconciles us with God. Sin separates us from God and through Jesus that relationship with God can be made whole again. That’s the gift of His sacrifice. It’s through Jesus that we restore our relationship with God.

“And whatever you do, **do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus**”. We are walking, living, breathing representatives of the Lord. We are wearing the Team Jesus uniform at all times. Not just while we’re here at Connection but at all times. The way we speak, the way we live, the way we treat people... We do it all as a reflection of Christ. This means when we give thanks, we are giving thanks with the same intentionality and boldness that Christ would.

This doesn’t mean we have to be thankful for every painful thing that happens to us. There are things in this world that hurt, things we don’t understand, and moments when saying, “Thank you, God, for this” would feel almost impossible. But maybe gratitude in those moments isn’t saying, “God, thank you that this happened.” Maybe sometimes gratitude is simply saying, “God, thank you that I don’t have to go through this without You.” That’s a different kind of thankfulness. It’s so easy to thank God when we can see the blessings, but the Bible teaches us to thank Him even when all we can see is the struggle. And that’s how we begin bringing these two worlds together. We take some of what we feel here on Sunday morning, and we carry it with us out there—the gratitude, the hope, the knowledge that we are loved, and the confidence that we aren’t walking through life alone.

Gratitude isn’t something we’re supposed to give only when we have something that is making us feel good. Gratitude is a way of living because God has already given us the greatest reason of all to be grateful. And once we truly live with that mindset, there are no longer two worlds. Just one. One

where we live with God and for God. One where we can always live with Gratitude.

Let's take a look at another important verse and once again it is from the Apostle Paul.

**Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NLT):**

***Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.***

He says "**Always Be Joyful**" and it's important here to know what joyful means. It doesn't mean you need to be happy all the time. Paul isn't saying fake a smile and pretend you're happy. Joy for Christians is much deeper than temporary feelings of happiness. Happiness is the result of situations occurring around us. Joy comes from knowing the love of God is with us no matter what situations are occurring around us. Joy is rooted in trust, hope and faith. And when we say **hope**, we don't mean hope as in "boy I hope Jesus hears my prayers". Biblically, spiritually, hope is a declaration. **Hope is KNOWING Jesus has heard our prayers and will hear every single one we say. Hope is confidence and trust in God and his promises.**

**"Never stop praying"**. This is how we find God. Prayer is how we find God. If you aren't hearing from God in your life. If you aren't sure he's still with you, PRAY. Pray and you'll find him. God is not something we can touch. For most of us, he's not something we can see. But he can absolutely be heard. If not

audibly by ear, then in your heart. For those of us who pray regularly, you know what I'm talking about. Hard to explain but he's there.

He's always here. We just need to talk to him.

**“Be Thankful in All Circumstances”.** The key word there is **IN**. It does not say **FOR**. Paul doesn't say “Be thankful FOR all circumstances”. He says “Be thankful IN all circumstances”. As Christians, when tragedy strikes in our lives, we aren't told to fake a smile. We aren't told to pretend to be happy. Could you imagine if you just lost someone you loved and then were told “it's okay, just smile and be happy”? No. That is not what we're told. What we're told is that even in the darkest of situations, even as we are certainly NOT thankful for what is happening, we can be thankful that he is with us during all of it. Listening to us. Listening to what we are asking for. We are thankful our father is here to guide us. God is watching over us and with us when life starts “lifeing”. You are never alone. Once you've talked to God and you find God, thank him. Thank him for always being here and tell him what you need.

When we pray, we find him. When we find him, we tell him how grateful we are that he is here. When we see he's here with us, we are filled with joy. Prayer and gratitude produce joy. This passage is a formula for joy and gratitude is a very important ingredient in that formula.

So how can we start living a life filled with more gratitude? I promise you don't have to search far to find for things in your life you're grateful for. You can even start with “Thanksgiving 101”... The food on your table. Your kids. Your spouse. Your home. The everyday blessings we can see so easily. As imperfect



humans, from time to time, we are prone to spiraling. This is when something negative happens in your day and you don't stop to give it prayer and gratitude. Without this, another negative thing happens and then you start thinking about all the negative things that COULD happen. That's what I call spiraling. It's a constant decent further away from our goal of gratitude and further away from God. Sometimes when my wife can see I'm in a spiral or about to spiral, she has me tell her three things that I'm grateful for. Whatever the first that first thing is, I usually don't say it with a lovely tone. But when I state the second thing, I'm grateful for, I can notice my tone start to change. By the time I say my third, I'm usually out of my spiral and more grounded. And after that, finding things to be grateful for gets much easier. These things I'm grateful for don't have to be big. It could be good food I just had, a joke I heard, a meaningful conversation I had with someone that day. God is with us. He's here. Let him at least know that you're thankful for that. Tell him thank you for the blessings he's given you. The more gratitude we show, the more we realize we have so much to be thankful for. No one gets a free pass on pain or loss. Even Jesus experienced pain, deep sorrow and distress. He told His disciples, **"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death"** (Matthew 26:38). We're going to experience anxiety, depression, grief, loneliness, pain... That's part of human life here on Earth. And for some of that, we may need professional help. And for us, as believers, it's much easier knowing God is with us through it all. If you knew me a little over a decade ago, I wasn't a believer. Some of you know my testimony and you know that in the sinful life I was living, I didn't know Jesus and I certainly didn't have Faith. They say ignorance is bliss and I know that to be true. I had no idea what life was for.

Why I was here. I saw the short time we have here on Earth as finite. I didn't know about eternity. I didn't realize this wasn't home. We are NEVER alone while we're here. Not even for a moment. Pray. Find him. Thank him. Over time, gratitude becomes less about having a perfect life and more about recognizing the gifts that are already present in an imperfect one. one of the most meaningful ways we thank God is by how we live. We can thank Him by being generous with what we've been given, forgiving others because we've been forgiven, helping someone who is struggling, showing kindness, and using our talents to serve others. Gratitude eventually becomes something we do, not simply something we feel. My friend Kyle sent me this last week from a recent devotion. It's a quote by Melody Beattie. **Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend.**

Over the past five weeks, we've talked, listened and prayed over our thoughts, our feelings, our habits, our wounds and our attitudes. We've done this all while keeping God and our relationship with Jesus at the forefront as we worshiped through it all. I hope we can take at least some of this and apply it to our daily lives. I know I will. You have a father above. **He loved you enough to sacrifice his only son so that you have a way to be with him for eternity. His love for us is too great for him to not be here whenever we need him. He's always listening. We just need to talk to him and let him know how grateful we are for Him and everything he's provided.**

At this time, I'd like to lead us in a prayer. A prayer that is focused on giving God our thanks. We aren't going to ask him for anything right now. We are simply going to thank him for who he is and what he's done.

[Prayer]