

# The Habit of Thankfulness

by John A. Broadus

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*The habit of thankfulness is a powerful tool for cultivating a positive and grateful attitude, and can bring numerous benefits to our lives.*

**Scripture:** 1 Chronicles 16:34, Psalm 100:4, Psalm 107:1, Psalm 136:1, Romans 2:4, Ephesians 5:20, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:18

**Topics:** "Gratitude To God", "Spiritual Discipline"

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## Description

John A. Broadus preaches on the habit of thankfulness to God, emphasizing its value in quelling repining, enhancing enjoyment, soothing distress, allaying anxiety, deepening penitence, brightening hope, and strengthening for endurance and exertion. He discusses the occasions of habitual thankfulness, highlighting the importance of being thankful for both pleasant and painful experiences, as they can lead to gratitude, character improvement, and a deeper understanding of divine compassion. Broadus encourages forming and maintaining the habit of thankfulness through consistent practice, self-control, and vigilance, drawing parallels to the discipline required in cultivating other habits like playing a musical instrument.

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## Transcript

In everything give thanks. I Thessalonians 5:18

We hear a great deal said about habits. But it nearly always means bad habits. Why should we not think and speak much about good habits? They are as real, and almost as great, a power for good as bad habits are for evil. We do our work largely by the aid of habit. How much this helps one in playing on an instrument, or writing on a typewriter. Through many a familiar conjunction of notes or of letters the fingers fly with the very smallest amount of attention and exertion. Many a man who is growing old will every day get through an amount of work that surprises his friends, and it is possible because he works in the lines of lifelong habit. Besides, the only possible way to keep out bad habits is to form good habits. By a necessity of our nature, whatever is frequently and at all regularly done becomes habitual. If a man has been the slave of evil habits, and wishes to be permanently free, he must proceed by systematic and persevering effort to establish corresponding good habits. The education of our children, both at school and at home, the self-education of our own early life, consists mainly in the formation of intellectual and moral habits. I think we ought to talk more upon this Subject, in public and in private upon the power and blessing of good habits. And the theme of this discourse will be, the habit of thankfulness to God.

## I. Consider the value of the habit of thankfulness.

It tends to quell repining. We are all prone, especially in certain moods, to complain of our lot. Every one of us has at some time or other imagined, and perhaps declared, that he has a particularly hard time in this world. It is to be hoped that in other moods we are heartily ashamed of ourselves for such repining. But how to prevent its recurrence? A most valuable help will be the habit of thankfulness to God. Then if a fretful, repining spirit begins to arise, just in the middle, perhaps, of some complaining sentence, we shall suddenly change to an expression of thankfulness-and perhaps end with laughing at ourselves for the folly of such repining.

It tends to enhance enjoyment. We all know that when we receive a gift, with any true sentiment and any suitable expression of thankfulness, the reaction of gratitude augments our gratification.

It serves to soothe distress. Persons who are greatly afflicted, and not wont to be thankful, sometimes find the memory of past joys only an aggravation of present sorrow. Far otherwise with one who has learned to be habitually thankful. For him the recollection of happier hours is still a comfort.

It helps to allay anxiety. Did you ever notice what the apostle says to the Philippians? "In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus." Notice carefully that we are to prevent anxiety by prayer as to the future with thanksgiving for the past.

It cannot fail to deepen penitence. "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." When we are fully in the habit of thankfully observing and recalling the loving-kindnesses and tender mercies of our heavenly Father, this will make us perceive more clearly, and lament more earnestly, the evil of sin against him; and what is more, this will strengthen us to turn from our sins to his blessed service.

It has as one necessary effect to brighten hope. "I love to think on mercies past, And future good implore" is a very natural conjunction of ideas. If we have been wont to set up Ebenezers upon our path of life, then every glance backward along these milestones of God's mercy will help us to look forward with more of humble hope.

It serves to strengthen for endurance and exertion. We all know how much more easily and effectively they work who work cheerfully; and the very nutriment of cheerfulness is found in thankfulness as to the past and hope as to the future.

If this habit of thankfulness to God is so valuable, it is certainly worth our while to consider,

## II. Occasions of habitual thankfulness. It is obvious that these are numerous and various beyond description. But we may find profit in summing them all up under two heads.

1. We should be thankful to God for everything that is pleasant. No one will dispute that proposition in theory, whatever may be our practice. The apostle James tells us that "every good gift and every perfect boon is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." We have so much occasion to speak about the religious benefits of affliction, to dwell on the blessed consolations of Christian piety amid the sorrows of life, that we are in danger of overlooking the other side. It is a religious duty to enjoy to the utmost every rightful pleasure of earthly existence. He who gave us these bodies, so "fearfully and wonderfully made," who created us in his own image, with spirits of such keen appetency and longing aspiration, desires that

we should find life a pleasure. As already intimated, we work best at what we enjoy. It is highly important that the young should enjoy what they are studying; and while this may, to some extent, be accomplished by giving them studies they fancy, it is also possible that by well-guided efforts they should learn to relish studies to which they were at first disinclined. I sometimes hear young married people say, "We are going to housekeeping, and then we can have what we like." I sometimes feel at liberty to reply, "Yes, to a certain extent you may; but what is far more important and interesting, you will be apt to like what you have." To have what we like is for the most part an impossible dream of human life; to like what we have is a possibility, and not only a duty, but a high privilege.

2. We should be thankful to God for everything that is painful. Well, that may seem to be stating the matter too strongly. We can help ourselves by noticing that whatever may be possible in that direction, the apostle has not in the text enjoined quite so much as the phrase just used would propose. He does not say, "for everything give thanks," though that might be enjoined; he says, "in everything give thanks." Now that, surely, need not seem impossible.

We may always be thankful that the situation is no worse. The old Negro's philosophy was wise and good: "Bress de Lord, 'taint no wuss." We always deserve that it should be worse, no matter how sorrowful may be the actual situation. We can never allow ourselves to question that with some persons it has been worse. Let us always bless the Lord, that but for his special mercies it would be worse with us today.

I recall an unpublished anecdote of President Madison, told to me in the region where he lived and died. It may be mentioned, by the way, that Mr. Madison was a rarely excellent and blameless man. His biographer told me that, notwithstanding all the political conflicts of a life so long and so distinguished, he found no indication that Mr. Madison's private character had ever been in the slightest degree assailed -an example which it would perhaps be difficult to parallel. In his old age the venerable ex-President suffered from many diseases, took a variety of medicines and contrived to live notwithstanding. An old friend from the adjoining county of Albemarle sent him a box of vegetable pills of his own production, and begged to be informed whether they did not help him. In due time came back one of those carefully written and often felicitous notes for which Mr. Madison and Mr. Jefferson were both famous, to somewhat the following effect: "My dear friend. I thank you very much for the box of pills. I have taken them all; and while I cannot say that I am better since taking them, it is quite possible that I might have been worse if I had not taken them, and so I beg you to accept my sincere acknowledgments." Really, my friends, this is not a mere pleasantry. There is always something, known or unknown, but for which our condition might have been worse, and at the very least, that something constitutes an occasion for gratitude. Whatever we may have lost, there is always something left.

As already observed, our present sufferings may well set in brighter relief the remembered happiness of other days. And though men are prone to make this an occasion of repining, yet it ought to be an occasion of thankfulness. Not long ago a young husband spoke to me, with bitter sorrow, about the death of his wife. I suggested that he might well be thankful for having lived several happy years in the most intimate companionship with one so lovely; and that in coming years, when the blessed alchemy of memory should make her character seem all-perfect in his eyes, he might well find pathetic and ineffable pleasure in the memory of that early time. We all know how to repeat, amid sorrowful recollections, those words of Tennyson, "Oh, death in life, the days that are no more!" But it is surely possible so to cherish blessed and inspiring memories as to invert the line, and say, "Oh, life in death, the days that are no more!"

There is a still more important view of this matter. It has become a blessed commonplace of Christian philosophy that our sufferings may, through the grace of God, be the means of improving our character. Such a result is by no means a matter of course. Sufferings may be so borne, with such bitter repining and selfish brooding, as greatly to damage character. But the Scriptures assure us that devout souls may regard affliction as but a loving Father's chastisement, meant for their highest good. In all the ages there has never been a pious life that did not share this experience. To be exempt from it would, as the Bible expressly declares, give clear proof that we are not children of God at all. Many of us could testify today, if it were appropriate, that the sorrows of life have by God's blessing done us good. All of us have occasion to lay more thoroughly to heart the lessons of affliction. And oh! if we do ever climb the shining hills of glory, and look back with clearer vision upon the strangely mingled joys and sorrows of this earthly life, then how deeply grateful we shall be for those very afflictions, which at the time we find it so hard to endure. If we believe this to be true, and it is a belief clearly founded on Scripture, then can we not contrive, even amid the severest sufferings, to be thankful for the lessons of sorrow, for the benefits of affliction?

Remember, too, how our seasons of affliction make real to us the blessed thought of divine compassion and sympathy. When you look with parental anguish upon your own suffering child, then you know, as never before, the meaning of those words, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him." When you find the trials of life hard to bear, then it becomes unspeakably sweet to remember that our High Priest can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, having been "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Thus affliction brings to the devout mind blessed views of the divine character, which otherwise we should never fully gain.

Then sorrow, touched by thee, grows bright

With more than rapture's ray;

As darkness shows us worlds of light

We never saw by day.

Besides all this, remember that the sufferings of this present life will but enhance, by their contrast, the blessed exemptions of the life to come. A thousand times have I remembered the text of my first funeral sermon, "And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." These are the present things now-all around us and within us; but the time is coming when they will be the former things, quite passed away. You know the use which skillful composers make of discords in music. The free use of them is among the characteristics of Wagner; but they are often found in our simplest tunes for public worship. The jarring discord is solved, and makes more sweet the harmony into which it passes. And oh! the time is coming when all the pains and pangs of this present life will seem to have been only "a brief discordant prelude to an everlasting harmony."

My friends, are you optimists or pessimists? Let me explain to the children what those words mean. The Latin word *optimus* means "best," and *pessimus* means "worst." So an Optimist is one who maintains that this is the best possible world; and a Pessimist, that it is the worst possible world. Now which are you, an optimist or a pessimist? For my part, I am neither. Surely no man can really imagine that this is the best possible world, save in some brief moment of dreamy forgetfulness. And as to thinking it the worst possible world-well, a person would have to be uncommonly well off who could afford to think that.

I read, some time ago, a biography of Arthur Schopenhauer, the celebrated German pessimist. I was not surprised to find that his father left him an independent fortune, and he had no painful bodily diseases. He could afford to spend his time in trying to persuade everybody to be miserable, in building pessimistic theories. But most of us have so many real toils and troubles that we are instinctively driven to search for the bright side of life, to seek all possible consolation and cheer. Louis Agassiz had "no time to make money"; and few of us will ever have time to be pessimists. No, we cannot begin to say with Pope, "Whatever is, is right"; nor yet to reverse it, "Whatever is, is wrong." But whether poetical or not, it will be a very true and valuable saying if we read, "Whatever is, you must make the best of it." And just in proportion as we strive to make the best of everything, we shall find it practicable to carry out the apostle's injunction, "In everything give thanks."

The greatest of early Christian preachers, perhaps the greatest in all Christian history, was Chrysostom. His motto was, "Glory to God for all things." He probably derived it from the story of Job, which was his favorite subject of devout meditation, and is mentioned in a large proportion of his eloquent sermons. You might fancy that it was easy for the young man to say, "Glory to God for all things," when he was growing up in Antioch, the idol of his widowed mother, with ample means, and the finest instructors of the age. You might think it easy to say this when he was a famous preacher, in Antioch, and afterwards in Constantinople, when ten thousand people crowded the great churches to hear him; though such a preacher could not fail to suffer profoundly through compassion for the perishing, and anxious effort to reclaim the wandering, and sympathy for all the distressed, as well as with many a pang of grief and shame that he did not preach better. But Chrysostom continued to say this, when the Court at Constantinople turned against him, when the wicked Empress became his enemy, and compassed his banishment again and again. When his friends would go to far Armenia and visit him in exile, he would say to them, "Glory to God for all things." When he was sent to more distant and inhospitable regions, so as to be out of reach of such pious visiting, his letters were apt to end, "Glory to God for all things." And when the soldiers were dragging him through winter snows, and, utterly worn out, he begged to be taken into a little wayside church that he might die, his last words, as he lay on the cold stone floor, were, "Glory to God for all things."

III. How may the habit of thankfulness be formed and maintained?

Well, how do we form other habits? If you wish to establish the habit of doing a certain thing, you take pains to do that thing, upon every possible occasion, and to avoid everything inconsistent therewith. Now, then, if you wish to form the habit of thankfulness, just begin by being thankful-not next year, but tonight; not for some great event or experience, but for whatever has just occurred, whatever has been pleasant, yes, and we did say, for whatever has been painful. You certainly can find some special occasion for thanksgiving this very night. And then go on searching for matter of gratitude, and just continuing to be thankful, hour by hour, day by day. Thus the habit will be formed, by a very law of our nature.

But remember that good habits cannot be maintained without attention. They require a certain self-control, a studious self-constraint. Is not the habit of thankfulness worth taking pains to maintain? The older persons present remember Ole Bull, the celebrated violinist. I once dined in company with him, and in an hour's conversation across the table found him a man of generous soul, full of noble impulses and beautiful enthusiasms, and rich with the experience of wide travel. And I was so much interested in a remark of his which is recorded in the recent biography: "When I stop practicing one day, I see the difference; when I stop two days, my friends see the difference; when I stop a week, everybody sees the difference." Here was a man who had cultivated a wonderful natural gift, by lifelong labor, until, as a

performer upon the finest of instruments, he was probably the foremost man of his time; and yet he could not afford to stop practicing for a single week, or even for a single day. "They do it for an earthly crown; but we for a heavenly." Christian brethren, shall we shrink from incessant vigilance and perpetual effort to keep up the habit of thankfulness to God?

I see many young persons present this evening. Will not some of you at once begin the thoughtful exercise of continual thankfulness? Will you not think over it, pray over it, labor to establish and maintain so beautiful and blessed a habit? Ah, what a help it will be to you amid all the struggles of youth and all the sorrows of age! And in far-coming years, when you are gray, when the preacher of this hour has long been forgotten, let us hope that you will still be gladly recommending to the young around you the Habit of Thankfulness.

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