

“Gratitude, A Dwelling Place”

Colossians 3:15-17

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Colossians 3:15-17 *“Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.”*

This message was inspired by a group of friends who planted a seed in my life last year. On Thanksgiving Day I embarked on a 40-day journey during which I'd get on a conference call every day and a couple of friends and I would share around two questions. First we'd share about what we are thankful for that day. Then, we'd each share what we were up to creating in our lives and in the world during that 40 days. So, it started out where we'd all think of those things in our lives that were going well and say we were thankful for them - like our family, our job, our house, our car, friends, etc. Day after day it would sound pretty much the same. And this was valuable, because it kept us connected to those things that were going well in our lives every day and gave us an opportunity to express appreciation for them. Then, a couple of weeks into this I started to notice that I was thankful for the rainy day when I wanted to do something outside, because it allowed me to see something beyond what I had planned. I became grateful when I was sick because I could see how blessed I was in my typical good health. And on and on. It occurred to me that the value of these situations was not inherently in the things that were happening to me, but in my perspective and how I looked at the situation. I was exercising the muscle in creating a dwelling place of gratitude in my life.

In this passage and through Paul's letter to the Colossians, he encourages them to do a number of things that will keep them on track as a faith community, to remain vital in Christ in the midst of a culture that was not in agreement with them. Through his letters, we see Paul addressing specific concerns and frequently encouraging the churches he set up during his missionary travels. He would stay in communication through letters and messages passed along from others who would travel with him. Paul would receive updates and then write with encouragement and sometimes tough messages. In this case, he sent several people along with this letter so that they would continue working with the church to address issues that were prominent for them. So, what Paul writes is in the context of this ongoing relationship he has with the followers of Christ in the city of Colossi who were meeting in people's homes.

Right in the middle of other things he wants them to do, Paul encourages the people saying “And cultivate thankfulness.” Then he talks about giving God's message the run of the house. I really like the language in The Message - the idea of giving something the run of the house. I'd say it can apply to cultivating thankfulness as well.

When someone has the run of the house they have free reign to go anywhere and are really free to own the space. At my house I used to have on several doors those safety child lock door handles that you have to squeeze to turn. Small children don't have the strength to squeeze enough to turn the handle to open the door so they are restricted. These are really useful to keep kids safe. So, I put one of these safety handles on the door that leads upstairs, so that Qwynn didn't have access to go up and down the stairs when I didn't want her to. She would have to ask to go upstairs before she could venture up the steps. Then there was a day when I took that safety handle off the door and basically gave her the run of the house, going upstairs and down whenever she wanted. All of a sudden, she is all excited and started exercising this new freedom and so proud of her ability to explore whenever she wanted to. In those first few days of freedom she'd come up to me with a big smile saying, “I am going upstairs!” and then she'd hop over and open the door and climb the steps. It was exciting and adventurous for her to have this new range. Her world had expanded and she was stretching her new muscles of freedom. Every once in a while she would forget that she didn't need someone to open the door for her and once again ask if she could go upstairs. She'd quickly remember she could do it by herself and go running off up the steps. It took some time before the novelty faded and it is common for her now to go up and down as she desires. She became acclimated to having the “run of the house” and she really owns and takes responsibility for that new freedom now. You could say that the whole house, including the steps, has become her “Dwelling Place”.

We think of a dwelling place as the place where we live, but it really only becomes a dwelling place for us when we are competent, confident, and effective in that space. Like Qwynn, you could say that the whole house wasn't truly her dwelling place until she became confident and competent and effective on the stairs once the child safety handles were removed. A dwelling place is where we have grown to be comfortable because we are familiar with the landscape. We come to know what to expect from that environment given any variety of circumstances, and we understand our role in that place. This is the case for both the physical external world and our internal world, as we'll talk about gratitude in a minute.

We can see how we cultivate a dwelling place for ourselves in the way we move into a new home in a new community. It is not yet a dwelling place for us, even after we have changed our address and phone number and may call it "home". No, there is a lot of work to do before it becomes a dwelling place. We may be attempting to learn a new language, getting used to new weather conditions, discovering new cultural and social expectations, even working with different people at a new job. With all of these factors, it takes time for us to learn that new environment, to become confident and competent in that new place. And once we do, it becomes a dwelling place for us. How do we do that?

We go about exploring the new environment. We will look at a map or GPS device and figure out the best routes to get from our new home to the nearest express way, the grocery store, to work, to church and other destinations. We visit local stores to see what we can buy there. We visit various churches to see where we might want to attend regularly. We start talking with neighbors, discovering with whom we might want to grow friendships.

We also will pay attention to the inside of our house. We start unpacking boxes we have brought with us from a former dwelling place. We arrange furniture and other personal items to decorate the way we want it. We buy new things that seem to fit the new space. This is the work that will take time to build the muscle required to make the place our own. Slowly we gain confidence and competence and it becomes our new dwelling place.

When I went away to college I quickly learned that my new dorm room was not yet a dwelling place after one night. My new roommate and I built a loft to sleep on. We put up the 4x4 supports and platforms that would hold our mattresses up close to the ceiling so we'd have all this space underneath for our desks and chairs and other things. The first morning I wake up laying on my back and tried to sit straight up and immediately whacked my forehead on the cement ceiling. Then, not being sure what just happened, I tried it again, whack! It was clear my dorm room was not yet my dwelling place.

It is the same in bringing gratitude into our lives. It truly is a process of **cultivating** the space for gratitude and bumping up against those things that require us to build the muscle. So, let's consider, what is gratitude? I have a bit different definition than the common one. Wikipedia says "*gratitude is a positive emotion or attitude in acknowledgment of a benefit that one has received or will receive*".

For me gratitude includes something more. It requires a certain kind of place within us, the dwelling place -- without creating this space, gratitude never really shows up in our lives. My definition is that **gratitude is the space cultivated within us in which we find a deep appreciation for the value of whatever is contributed to us**. Hang with me here to get an understanding of what I am talking about. So, consider that gratitude is the space within us that allows us to appreciate anything. We won't really see value in anything people, or even God, gives to us until we have created the space of gratitude within. When you understand this you can see that whatever is given to us by people or God only has value for us when we give it value. We could say that the value of a contribution isn't inherently in that thing given to us, but it only becomes a contribution when we receive it that way.

For example, two people can be walking outside on a warm summer afternoon, and experience it completely different. One person can be experiencing it through the space of gratitude they have cultivated within themselves. They might say, "Look at the sun! Look at the beautiful world God has created." That person is finding a moment of pure bliss as they praise God for the contribution of the sun. The other person may be walking along beside the first and have a different perspective altogether. "That blasted sun is going to burn my neck again!" And they walk along pouting and complaining. The value for each person isn't in the sun itself, but in how each person received it. It is the same with everything in our lives.

You can imagine a family getting together for their annual Christmas gift exchange. Maybe you have had this experience. A grandma is all smiles as she hands out her gifts. Each one opens the gift and rolls their eyes... another handmade pot holder, just like the prior 15 Christmases. But Aunt Sally, immediately gets a big grin on her face, gets up and goes over and gives grandma a big hug, and says, "Thank you, grandma. It means so much to me that every year you take the time to make something to show us how much you love us." Aunt Sally had cultivated the dwelling place of gratitude so she immediately saw the love in the same gift that others rolled their eyes at.

Gratitude is a space of other-centered living, where our attention is on what is good, healthy, valuable, important, etc.

I was talking with a friend of mine, named Earl, a month and a half ago, about gratitude. He has a powerful testimony. He has had all sorts of tragedies in his life -- his father died, he went through a divorce, he lost his home, and lost his job, all in this past year. All of this happening around the same time gave him what he called a very heavy weight -- as you might imagine. He said he recognized first hand why people contemplate suicide in the middle of that kind of darkness. He found himself in a place without joy, without excitement, without growth where for him life seemed to have no meaning. He said it doesn't really get much worse than when you're at a point where you don't want to be alive. He called it "the epitome of the deep dark abyss."

And even being in relationship with God and knowing in his head that he was loved and cared for, looking from the outside there was no evidence showing that this was the case.

He reflected on his experience being in one of the most difficult places -- and then somehow brought gratitude into the middle of it. He described how he shifted right out of that place in an instant into a whole new reality of appreciation. What made the difference?

"I'm grateful for it because I got that in the trials and tribulations, in the depths of the deepest darkness, is where the real growth comes from," Earl said. "If you can be inside of that very, very dark place where it's fringing on the choice between life and death itself and be grateful at that point, you can be grateful for anything. So, I'm thankful for the challenges that brought me to that place that allows me the opportunity to be grateful on a whole other level. I'm grateful in a place where I have no reason to be grateful for anything."

Earl actually realized that he had cultivated the place of gratitude in his life, he had just forgotten. He found that in a moment he could choose to return there and the whole world looked completely different. The new perspective included the space to just be with what was happening as not personal to him but could provide opportunity to grow.

How do you cultivate a dwelling place of gratitude?

There are two parts to this. It is simple, but not easy. First, just notice where you give your attention. Paul said to the churches in Philippi, *"I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse."*

What we can do is just notice when our attention is squarely on ourselves, our weaknesses, our failures, our pain, the hurtful, the negative, anything where the glass is half empty. We just notice this and don't beat ourselves up over it. Just notice, observing ourselves without judgment - for judgment is one of those things that isn't really helpful at all to cultivating the space of gratitude.

Once we notice where our attention is, then we can actually choose to give our attention something else, perhaps gratitude. We are not left in the default mode of life, where it is predetermined that we have to be a certain way. We may be tempted to say we are depressed because we lost our job. Or we could choose to say we are free. We may be tempted to say "They made me feel bad when they said they didn't like what I wore to the party." Or we could choose to appreciate their perspective is different and accept that they just have different taste in clothes. We may be tempted to be bitter because we say we don't like our job. Or we could choose to be thankful for having a job. We may be tempted to dwell on the critical comments that other people say about us and inside think that we are no good. Or we could choose to recognize that God has made each of us wonderfully and perfectly. Every moment presents us with a choice if we just notice. Are we going into default mode and allow the world to squeeze us into that mold, or are we going to choose gratitude. That is always our choice.

When you realize that you can choose your perspective, and that completely alters the way you experience the world, including all of your relationships, God, your image of yourself, all of it -- then what will you choose? I think one of the best examples of choosing gratitude is the Apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians we see what he went through and what he chose. *“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.”*

And yet, Paul rejoiced that his life might be used to glorify God. For goodness sake he rejoiced by singing hymns to God while in jail! How could he do such a thing knowing he may be dead the next day? He truly had a dwelling place of gratitude from which all of the trials, challenges, ridicule showed up to him as gain for Christ. That is the perspective that Paul chose in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances. His perspective was wholly centered not in himself but in God and God's glory. We could probably learn a thing or two from Paul about choosing and cultivating a dwelling place of gratitude in any situation.