

Sermon Notes

(A basic transcription with modifications for style and clarity)

UNCONDITIONAL GRATITUDE

Michael McKinney, November 25, 2017

Autonomy is a myth.

Satan thought he was autonomous. Adam and Eve thought they were autonomous. And all of mankind ever since, think that they, too, are autonomous.

It is so commonplace that we rarely see it for what it is and it messes with our thinking. It taints our view of God's Word. It gives everything we think and do a selfish twist. It isolates us from each other and it disconnects us from God.

Autonomy is simply looking at life as though we are a world unto ourselves. It is looking at life as though we are self-governing. As though we did it all alone. We answer to no one. We can do as we please. We are right.

We usually equate success with autonomy. Success is finally reaching the place where I can do what I want, when I want, and how I want and it's nobody else's business but my own. "I have arrived when I don't have to answer to anybody. I am not to be questioned. No one can tell me what to do."

Autonomy tugs at our spiritual life. It is an attitude given life by Satan as he seeks to drag us into the same thinking that guaranteed his demise. To be sure, Satan doesn't have to work at it, for we come by it quite naturally. It's pride. It's confidence in the self and we easily give in to it because it soothes the self. Pride makes us feel good about ourselves and makes all the bad go away. How can it be wrong when it feels so good?

If I am right, I can continue to act and think as I have been. I can ignore correction. My reality is reality. Simply said, autonomy is life on our terms.

Sitting here today, it is easy for any of us to think that we don't regard ourselves as autonomous. But it can be a very subtle feature of our human nature. Anytime we believe we can think what we want, do what we want or say what we want, our autonomous self has disconnected us from God. If our feelings and beliefs become the basis of what we say and do, we are favoring our autonomous self.

Fortunately, there is a way out of this. There is a way to guard against this frame of mind. The way out is gratitude.

Gratitude is the opposite of autonomy. It is the opposite of pride. It has the power to undo the damage created by the ugly face of pride.

Most of our problems—especially relational issues, not only with each other but with God Himself—can be traced back to a lack of gratitude. In dealing with any of our problems, you will find that there is a lack of gratitude over something or someone. Marriage problems, family problems, roommate problems. All are fueled by a lack of gratitude. If you are mad at God, you lack gratitude.

Gratitude isn't dead, but it is in trouble. Society does not see gratitude as a moral or a character issue, which it certainly is. Although it is a key to happiness, it is something much more profound than that.

Writing about 100 years before the apostle Paul, the Roman statesman Cicero wrote, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others." Even Adam Smith, the economist that believed that the market should be driven by self-interest, expressed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* his belief that feelings of gratitude are crucial for maintaining a society that is based on goodwill. He considered gratitude to be a crucial source of social civility and stability.

Like all character traits, gratitude is expressed in action. It's returning a favor, giving thanks, showing appreciation or simply giving someone your time and attention. Cicero said, "There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness."

Ingratitude, on the other hand, has been called the "essence of vileness" and "the most horrible and unnatural crime that a person is capable of committing." It is a moral issue that impacts our lives and thinking in significant ways. When we are full of pride, angry, frustrated, depressed, defensive, stressed, irritated or anxious, we would do well take a time-out and uncover our ungratefulness.

Gratitude is most often expressed by simply thanking others. In Paul's letters, he always used precious space to thank others. Romans 16 is a chapter primarily devoted to giving thanks and acknowledgments. It's a lesson for us.

When you begin to read Romans 16, you notice that it's not easy to read. The first thing you ask yourself is, who were these people's parents? Were they first-century hipsters? Seriously? Let's name our kid Epenetus or Andronicus? Or how about Phlegon? Most people in the New Testament named their kids Peter, Paul or Mary, Joe, or a few Johns; but not these parents. What would be wrong with, "Greet Bob, as he is outstanding among the Apostles"?

God willing, the next thing you might notice, is that these people all filled different roles in the body. As Paul told the Corinthians, there are many parts in the body, they all serve a function and no part is more important than the others. As you can imagine, when viewed this way, when one part of the body is not functioning well, the whole body

suffers. The over two dozen people mentioned here were doing work every bit as important as what Paul was doing. Paul knew it, and he expressed it to them in front of all of us. It's personal, but not private.

Romans 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.

2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people...

"In a way worthy" is, as Jesus commanded, that we are to "love each other as I have loved you." It is a physical expression or representation of our love of God.

...and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus.

4 They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

5 Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

6 Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.

7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

8 Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.

9 Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.

10 Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

11 Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

12 Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Pursis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.

15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.

16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

Paul is demonstrating a connection with these people. He is submitting to these people as he recognizes the profound impact they have had on his life and the work God asked him to carry out. There is a bond there. A community. Paul is stating by giving thanks, that he is not autonomous. He doesn't do what he does alone. We all matter.

Another idea you might take from this—and it comes through clearly in conjunction with what Paul writes in other letters—is that gratitude is more than just giving thanks. It is a way of looking at life; a way of seeing other people. Paul's appreciation of these individuals reflects the fact that they were all part of an ongoing relationship. It is more than a strategy or a technique to influence others. It is a way of being. To be grateful is to see the bigger picture. It is an expression of humility as you see yourself in relationship to the world around you.

We shouldn't think of gratitude as something that happens at certain moments throughout our life. Real gratitude doesn't appear at moments in our life, but it is a disposition we have towards life. Gratitude endures through everything. It is not a fleeting response. As such it is not really an emotion. It's not a reoccurring emotion, but a state of mind. It is not circumstance-dependent.

That may sound odd, but Paul states this idea to the Church in Thessalonica.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice always,

17 pray continually,

18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

God expects this of us. Unconditional gratitude. Paul says to give thanks in all circumstances because it is a way of looking at life and not just a response to circumstances. It's not necessarily a response to what is happening around you. It is a way of being. It's a way to move beyond the self. It takes the focus off of me. It means I can't put my life on hold, disconnect myself from reality, to play the victim; to feel sorry for myself. It means we are grateful whether or not we like what is happening to us; whether or not we agree with what's going on around us. It needs to be a consistent state of character; a way of being in the world.

You may remember Blanch Dubois's classic statement in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where she said that she always depended on "the kindness of strangers"—people she didn't know and may never see again. It was not about individual episodes in her life, but rather it speaks to a perspective on life. It's not just gratefulness to a person, but a gratefulness for your existence. It's being aware of your whole life. An awareness of how much we owe to others throughout our life and, more importantly, to the God that created us.

Paul writes in Romans 12 that we would be silly not to be grateful to God because of what God has already done for us. Christ died for us and God has called us into an understanding of His very mind. Paul thinks that should put us into a state of gratefulness—unconditional gratefulness. God’s mercy should cause us to live out our physical existence from a different mindset. We are not autonomous. We are connected. It should permeate our thinking and therefore transform our behavior. It should define us.

Gratitude creates perspective. It gives our life perspective. Gratitude says, “I’m part of something bigger. I am not alone.” It connects us with each other and God. Gratitude takes us outside ourselves, where we see ourselves as part of a network of mutually reciprocal relationships. In this way, it helps to regulate and strengthen our relationships while it moderates our behavior.

The autonomous person rejects gratitude precisely because they must recognize and submit to others in this way. They think, “If I can find something wrong with that person, I don’t have to recognize their kindness. I can invalidate them.” The selfish don’t want to recognize others so that they can justify treating them any way they want. They feel no moral obligation to respect and to acknowledge others. As with all autonomous thinking, it is not based in reality. Eventually, the autonomous person self-destructs into their own stagnate thinking and pseudo-reality.

A number of years ago, along with 26 million other people, I watched a video titled *The Power of Words*. It depicts a blind man on the street asking for money with a sign that read, “I’m blind. Please help.” He got very few donations until a woman came along and rewrote his sign to read, “It’s a beautiful day and I can’t see it.” The change in wording helped others to be grateful for what they took for granted every day of their lives. It changed their perspective and therefore their compassion for what the blind man was going through. It stripped away their indifference. Gratefulness changes us. It puts us in touch with reality because it acknowledges our connections—our networked existence. It changes our perspective and it gives us access to better thinking.

It is this gratitude effect—the way it grounds us in reality—that benefits us and those around us the most. Gratitude moderates and even inhibits toxic emotions, but more than that, it gives birth to positive emotions. It’s why Cicero said that it was the parent of all of the other virtues. Gratitude gives birth to and nurtures patience, a sense of humor, curiosity, creativity, insight, kindness, respect, courage, generosity, empathy and positivity, to name a few.

Gratitude creates the space for positive emotions to grow and flourish. Anger, irritation, defensiveness, worry and impatience are choices. These emotions don’t happen to us; we choose them. Have you ever been in the middle of an angry rant when the phone rings? When you answer the call, you are all “sugar and spice and

everything nice.” When it’s over, you go right back into your angry rant. It’s a choice. The point is, we can choose gratitude to drive these toxic emotions out of our lives.

Let’s look at a very common toxic emotion and see why Cicero placed such importance on gratitude and why God expects it to be our permanent state of mind. Unconditional gratitude.

Anger is toxic to us and those we spew it on. Because of our carnal nature, it is always in the background waiting for an opportunity to take over. Throughout time, people have always been angry at something, but they weren’t as proud of it as we are today. It’s a badge of authenticity. It declares our righteousness. When we express it, we are thought to be assertive rather than lacking in self-control. Anger is empowering today. Anger has become not merely a response, but a state of being that has driven out gratitude. (It also drives out introspection. And so we don’t grow because of it.)

An anthropologist observed that we often reframe our anger caused by someone or something else into an accusation of phoniness, hypocrisy and lying. He says, “They are the trump cards in our anger deck.” It’s really a way to distance ourselves from our own hypocrisy. It’s a way to make ourselves autonomous and unaccountable for whatever we feel anger over.

Today, few view anger as a weakness and something we need to control. We buy into the myth that it is harmful to hold it back. The expression of anger seems to give one some kind of emotional credibility. “I’m right because I am so angry.”

In Proverbs 29:11 we are told we are foolish if we vent our anger. Solomon writes:

Proverbs 29:11 A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back.

The *New International Version* states that “**Fools give full vent to their rage.**” We’re fools if we vent our anger. Have we ever considered that maybe we don’t really need to get our point across; maybe we don’t need to explain ourselves.

What about righteous indignation? If our anger is about something that is an affront to God that causes us to look at ourselves and deal with the very thinking that exists in our own human nature, we’re on the right track. Later in verse 22 we are told:

22 An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression.

Solomon says that when we are angry, we are apt to do something wrong. When we are angry we make a lot of bad decisions and we easily assume things that lead to self-destructive thinking. We aren’t capable of thinking right. In that state of mind, we set ourselves up for mistakes of magnitude. When angry, our next move is usually the wrong move because our perspective is wrong. Anger is about me. It’s selfish. Our anger grows in direct proportion to our self-centeredness. In contrast, gratitude is about others.

When looking at the fragmentation of the Church, it's easy to get angry. But that only serves to turn our attention away from the real issues. It's easy to think that our situation is the result of the actions of a few people. But the thinking that led to it—the autonomous man, the “I am right,” the “I am the bearer and defender of truth,” kind of thinking—is part of our natural, every-day thought process and it is still something we all struggle with individually to this day. We are all the problem. To think otherwise is hypocrisy.

God allowed the fragmentation and will continue to allow it until we get our thinking right. When we get it right, when we learn to rely on Him, He will work through us.

We should be grateful that a loving God is willing to work with a stubborn people rather than just moving on. That gratefulness should remove any lingering anger.

Gratitude gives us clarity about the condition of God's people and our part in it. It makes sense of our past. Gratitude heals and creates understanding in relationships. Gratitude shows us the way forward.

God has brought us to a place where we can begin to appreciate that Christ really is the head of the Church. And by appreciate, I don't mean just an intellectual understanding, but a knowledge that guides and shapes our behavior. That realization hasn't been on our agenda in the same way that it is today. And we struggle with it because we haven't always lived our life as though we actually believe it.

We are here today because God is trying to teach us something. Something about government, reconciliation, the gospel and, most importantly, a reliance on Him for everything.

God has pulled each and every one of us up short—young and old—to get us to wake up and rethink the behavior and thinking that put us to sleep in the first place. I don't know if that's because God thought we were teachable or if He thought, “If I can get through to this group, the rest of My people will be no problem.” We have to stick with it. We're not ready to get on our horse and ride. In Proverbs we are reminded:

Proverbs 19:2 Desire without knowledge is not good—how much more will hasty feet miss the way!

The *New English Translation Bible* puts it this way: **It is dangerous to have zeal without knowledge, and the one who acts hastily makes poor choices.**

We need to take the time to rethink and relearn. We don't want to miss the way.

It's not easy. Some wish to get comfortable again. But if you are grateful, you will see this lesson through. Counting the cost is more about intentionally doing whatever it takes to face your own human nature and doing what it takes to develop godly character than it is, for instance, facing persecution.

Persecution is not a feature of God's Plan. God does not present a fear-based gospel message. Persecution to one degree or another is an inevitable but unfortunate consequence of following God in a world ruled by Satan. All around us the news is filled with people taking to the streets in a clash of opinions. If you suggest by your actions or words that someone might be wrong, you unleash an uncontrollable rage. People feel personally threatened. We have seen people who feel justified in killing other people who disagree with them. Our beliefs do clash with the views of this world.

When we think about persecution, it's not a test of wills. It's not an extreme sport that we have to man up for. If we think it is something we power through in a display of extreme willpower, we may make all the right decisions but end up as a person God does not recognize. "I don't know you. I have no relationship with you. You did this on your own." Dealing with persecution of any kind is about having a relationship with God. It's not about our power, but the power of God dwelling in us and we should be extremely grateful for that. It's not about my might. Paul explains in Ephesians 6:

Ephesians 6:10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.

11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

This is not a battle we can win without God.

13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place,

15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This is not about you and me.

Paul is instructing us to develop a relationship with God now so we can withstand whatever Satan throws at us. It's not about us. It's about God. Persecution is not a test of our strength—spiritual or otherwise. It's a test of our relationship with God.

Persecution is not about showing God what I can do; it's about allowing God to work through me. It's about relying on God. It's about withstanding temptations and persecution because we are prepared for it; because we have reconciled with God and developed a relationship with Him now. And when persecution comes now or in the future, He already knows us. He is there for us. This is what God is trying to teach us now. We are not autonomous. We should be grateful for that. That's where our hope lies.

In Acts we read an example of the power of this kind of relationship in the face of persecution and even death in the life of Stephen.

Acts 7:54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,

58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

That man Saul is Paul. Imagine Paul having to live with that after God called him. Paul's calling was quite a turnaround for him and his conversion speaks to the power of God's Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit that God gives that will turn us around, too, if we will let Him.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

The ability to do what Stephen did can only come from a relationship with God. This wasn't a testosterone-filled battle. This was a quiet, confident, reliance on God. His focus was on God. Stephen relied on God and God saw him through. Ironically, our power comes when we empty ourselves of power and rely on the power of God in us.

We have this incredible example not because Stephen was tough, but because he looked to and relied on God. And if we have that same kind of relationship, God will see us through anything and we can be grateful that it is this way. I don't know what I would do by my own strength and I'm grateful that I don't have to. What I have to do is work now to develop a relationship with God and overcome my human nature.

Along these same lines, Jesus said to his disciples regarding persecution:

Matthew 10:19 But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak;
(Just like it was for Stephen.)

20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

It's not about us. It's about what God will do through us if we have established a relationship with Him now. This is critically important for us to be doing now.

For David, it wasn't how big Goliath was, but how big God is. David's confidence came from his relationship with God and not his own strength. That episode in David's life was to God's glory, not his own.

What little we have learned by the grace of God should humble us and make us grateful. Instead, it all too often makes us opinionated, judgmental and close-minded. Instead of continuing our education, we effectively end it. We must allow a state of gratitude to exist in us so that we can drive out stubbornness, pride, anger, frustration, defensiveness, stress, irritations and anxiousness.

Gratitude has the power to pull us together and build patience. When things don't go our way, or when people don't do what we think they should, we tend to pull away—withdraw. We want to take our ball and go home—disengage, be autonomous. If we can develop a mindset of gratitude, that will not happen. We will stay engaged. We will work together. We will set our priorities on what God is doing instead of our own agendas. It is an ungrateful mind that doesn't reflect an appreciation for our beginnings and the place God has brought us to.

Speaking of beginnings, you will remember Paul reminded the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 1:26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.

27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;

28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,

29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

As we've said before, God does not want us to remain ignorant. He wants us to develop the talents and capabilities He has given us, but we are to remember where it all came from. We are to grow to demonstrate the power of God's mind working through us. It is to show the world what God's way of life brings. It is to His glory, not ours. So we have no reason to disengage or become impatient.

It's interesting that Paul's comments come after he has just told the Corinthians that they are smart and have no shortage of gifts. They were not incompetent. And yet, because of that, they began to divide themselves up according to their knowledge and opinions. They became divisive over their own rightness. So Paul takes them back and says, "Hey, you wouldn't be here, you wouldn't know what you know, if it wasn't for God working in you." So as he goes into chapter 2, he tells them that all these things have been revealed to us by God's Spirit. You can't get this on your own, no matter how smart you are. It's not about you and me and how amazing our thoughts are. Paul is telling them to "... cool their heels. Don't get ahead of yourselves."

Gratitude has the power to slow us down and reflect and refocus our attention on what matters. There is a danger in not being grateful in that we become more pliable to the ways of this world; more easily deceived. The autonomous person is more easily deceived because they live in their own head. The autonomous person is more likely to become depressed and lonely.

David combated depression and loneliness with gratitude.

Psalm 77:9 Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His tender mercies? Selah.

10 And I said, "This *is* my anguish; *But I will remember* the years of the right hand of the Most High."

11 I will remember the works of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old.

By remembering, David moved outside of his own head. Gratitude for what God has done will give us strength and confidence as David said continuing in verse 13:

13 Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary; Who is so great a God as our God?

14 You are the God who does wonders; You have declared Your strength among the peoples.

15 You have with *Your* arm redeemed Your people,

That connects us with God and gives us hope in the middle of anything life throws at us. We are not alone. Sometimes we have to step back to see our lives in perspective; to be able to connect the dots of what God is doing in our lives. If we can see where God has worked in our lives before, there is every reason to expect that He will continue to do so.

I like the way American writer Ursula Le Guin put it. She wrote, "If you can see a thing whole—it seems that it's always beautiful. Planets, lives But close up, a world's all dirt and rocks. And day to day, life's a hard job, you get tired, you lose the pattern."

It's easy for any of us to "lose the pattern", to lose the narrative, to forget what we are doing this all for, if we never step back and see the bigger picture with gratitude. Frequently, people who seem to have it all together on the surface—consistently making all the right moves—are paddling as fast as they can under the waterline. Don't be fooled.

The Holy Days and the Sabbath Day are there to help us stay within the story; to stay within the plan of God. They are about what God is doing, how we are to respond, how we are to live life, the value of time and how over time we tend to forget and lose track of the narrative. We drift when we forget what God has done for us.

Gratitude opens our mind to possibilities. We are more creative and better problem solvers. On a physical level, there is something wonderful about the way God designed things to work relative to us and we grow physically and spiritually because of it.

For example, the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant supposed that if a bird understood, that for it to fly the only obstacle it has to overcome is the resistance of the air, then it might think that, if only the air were out of the way, then it could fly with the greatest of ease and speed. But, of course, if the air was out of the way, and the bird was to try to fly in a vacuum, it would instantly fall to the ground, unable to fly at all. The very element that makes it difficult to fly is at the same time the necessary element that makes flight possible at all.

For a locomotive to move a train, the greatest obstacle it must overcome is friction. Yet without friction, the locomotive could not move the train an inch. The same is true when trying to propel a ship through the water. The resistance of the water against the bow of a ship is the primary difficulty a ship must overcome, but if it weren't for the resistance of the water against the blades of the propeller, the ship would not move at all.

In these examples, it is the friction—the difficulties—that are the necessary condition for success. The difficulties become the essential ingredient—the key—for success. They make success possible. This principle is also at work in our lives. It is often the friction that we encounter that allows us to move ahead. Growth is prompted by friction, difficulties and adversity. As a result, we acquire new thinking that allows us to see the world and what God is doing differently. We should be grateful for the friction we encounter that allows us to grow. It's why James says to count it all joy when we are faced with obstacles, problems and trials. It moves us outside our head—away from our autonomous self. Unconditional gratitude is what James is talking about in James chapter 1.

So how do we begin to develop this unconditional gratitude that God expects of us? How do we begin to make it who we are? How do we get to the point where it defines who we are?

Humility, of course, makes all of this work. Humility is the ability to silence the autonomous self. Humility is valuing other people; appreciating them. Humility allows us to be open to recognizing the good in all of our circumstances. It creates the space for faith. Gratitude is humility in action.

Not surprisingly, the mechanism behind gratitude is remembering. Developing a mind of gratitude is about remembering. It's not surprising that God is forever telling His people to remember.

Gratitude was an issue for the Israelites. From the moment they left Egypt, they focused on the wrong thing. They complained about the dangers the Egyptian army presented, they complained about the lack of food and water, the manna, the lack of meat and vegetables and about the inhabitants of the lands they were entering. They lacked gratitude during the difficult times. But Moses told them they faced an even greater danger regarding gratitude. He warned them:

Deuteronomy 8:11 Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day.

12 Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down,

13 and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied,

14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

When your bank account gets large—when you're not in survival mode—you forget where you came from; why you are here.

15 He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock.

16 He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you.

17 You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."

18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

19 If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed.

20 Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God.

Living in their own heads, disconnected from reality. Moses warned them that they would self-destruct if they forgot God and what He has done for them. If they forgot how it was they came into the Promised Land, how God promised it to their ancestors and delivered them from Egypt and took care of them in the wilderness, they would self-destruct.

It would not be wise for us to forget how it was that God got us here and begin to complain or look to get comfortable. As Moses warned, we should never attribute our achievements to ourselves—“My power and the strength of my hands”—but instead, we need to remember God and be grateful for what He has done for us. This theme is repeated over and over again in the book of Deuteronomy and throughout the Bible.

Before God gives us the 10 Commandments, He tells us to remember. He says, remember, “I *am* the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. So remember that, humble yourselves and listen. What I’m about to tell you is for your own good. I am on your side.”

Paul is continually reminding us to remember what God has done for us. We were once without Christ, having no hope and without God in the world. But because of God’s mercy, we have been given the opportunity to navigate this life with the wisdom that can only come from God and with it a chance to have eternal life.

We don’t come by gratitude naturally. It’s not common sense. It’s something we have to cultivate. There is nothing normal about finding joy in times of trial or to find meaning in the depths of suffering. Faith is not normal. But we can be grateful that God has shown us why the events in our lives have meaning. Faith is not certainty, but the courage to live with uncertainty—in not knowing, in not knowing what to do next—but relying on Him. We should be grateful that we even know who to thank in the first place. We should be grateful that we know He is the source of all good things.

In Philippians 4:8 we are told to dwell on what is good to keep us grounded and unconditionally grateful for what we have. This practice leads us into gratefulness.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Of course, we can find the differences; we can find the negative. We can dwell on it. We’re wired for that. Satan encourages it. It is what makes a toxic individual. But to combat that, we are told to seek out anything that is excellent or praiseworthy because it keeps us focused on what God has asked us to do. It keeps us from turning inside our own heads and dwelling on the self and what it wants. Gratitude moves us away

from the selfishness that fuels the autonomous man. Gratitude has the power to keep our mind on the things of God. Let's look at what Paul told the Colossians.

Colossians 2:6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, **7** rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

And then later in the same letter:

Colossians 3:15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Unconditional gratitude. Autonomy is a myth. We are connected. What are you grateful for and to whom? Unconditional gratitude will keep us connected to each other and to God. ♦