



The Virtues and Character Development Project

The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

I Thessalonians 5:24

Gratitude – Pre-Activity Curriculum

Note – before reading the content in this module, it is important that Step 1 has been completed (reading *Overview – a background perspective for parents to get started*). This provides the context on which each virtue module is based. As pointed out in that document, the instructions are written to parents, but they apply to any leader who is working with youth (ages 5 to 25). Since the family unit is the foundational one, the focus of the materials lies here. Previous completion of the module on *Humility* also is helpful.

It is quite customary for a parent to tell a child to say, *thank you*, when the child has been given something, e.g., a cookie. Why would this be done? It is to teach the child to be thankful. This has been a common practice since biblical times. The idea is that the outward action (saying *thank you*), when repeated over and over, will result in changing one's inner nature. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is based in this concept of repeating actions that lead to changing a person within.

There is a popular expression: *have an attitude of gratitude*. Why should we do this? What is the purpose of gratitude? When we tell our children why they should be thankful, we are telling them that a *spirit of entitlement* leads to *pride*, both of which are not Christ-like and not good for the community.

Why should we thank others? If you study the Bible, you will find many commands to give thanks to God. However, there are no commands to thank others. So why do we teach that we should be giving thanks to people? A teacher of the law asked Jesus, *what is the greatest commandment in the Law?* (Matthew 22:36) He answered by quoting the beginning of the Jewish Shema,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

He followed that by stating, *this is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself* (Matthew 22:38-39). Jesus is pointing out that loving God leads to loving your neighbor, and loving your neighbor leads to loving God. This can be applied to thanking God and thanking your neighbor. As you learn to thank God, which is commanded, you

become more inclined to thank others. Similarly, thanking others teaches you to thank God. So, fulfilling the command to thank God can be done by thanking others.

Another example comes from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:40. In this passage, Jesus states that *whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me*. The teaching describes instances where meeting the needs of others is viewed as meeting the needs of Jesus. Even giving a cup of water is praised (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:41). Therefore, giving someone something in the name of Jesus is just as if you are giving to God.

This can be pictured as a circle: as you learn in the physical realm, you also learn in the spiritual realm. Also, as you learn in the spiritual realm, you learn in the physical realm. We can conclude that, while the Bible does not directly state we ought to thank others, this action is encouraged as a means to fulfill the command to thank God. As thanking is practiced in the physical realm with others, the habit becomes the virtue of gratitude in giving thanks to God in the spiritual realm. As we learn to thank God, we learn to thank others.

The Jewish Passover Seder contains a song that is intended to remind people to be thankful for what God has already done. The *Dayenu* is a series of remembrances of the mighty acts of God, with a refrain of, *it would have been enough*. This song brings the people to a realization that we ought to be thankful for the blessings that we have, and to not focus on what we do not have. The vice of avarice (greed) focuses on always wanting more. Since gratitude requires someone to thank, it begins by giving thanks to God. This is *transcendent gratitude*. Then, it becomes possible to give thanks to others.

Gratitude is a word that most people understand, but find it hard to define. It involves recognition of receiving a gift from a giver. In the Bible, the root Greek word for *thanksgiving* is *charis*. This also is the root word for *grace* and for *joy*. This tells us that gratitude arises when someone realizes what has been given is a gift that came from the heart of the giver. Thus, gift giving is a celebration of the bond of gratefulness that unites the giver and the receiver. As a result, there is a debt of gratitude. Thomas Aquinas taught, *the debt of gratitude flows from the debt of love*, first for God, then for others. The one who says, *thank you* to the giver is really saying, *we belong together*. So, the greatest gift one can give is thanksgiving.

Paul helps us understand that gifts come in many forms, even some that are not what we desire. In I Thessalonians 5:18, he writes: *Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*. Then, in Ephesians 5:20, he adds: *always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. We are called to give thanks **in** all things and **for** all things. Charles Stanley taught, *When we come to the place where we can thank Him for everything, our faith will prove unshakable*. This is not merely human effort; it is only possible as the Holy Spirit enables us. We learn that these gifts from God lead us to having more faith in Him.

To understand the connection between the act of giving thanks and the development of the virtue of gratitude, consider three words that often are used. First, *thankful* is an emotion that expresses an attitude in the moment. It is a relief or immediate response. Second, *grateful* shows an attitude of deep appreciation or mood over a longer period of time. Third, *gratitude* is the virtue that

arises when the attitude itself that has become second nature. This affective trait has become part of one's nature. This is the goal of giving thanks, to be transformed in one's inner nature.

Research on the brain has found that the connections within the brain increase with gratitude. The primary location is the ventral tegmental area (VTA), which is important in how we respond to positive and negative events in our lives. The positive connections are stronger in people who are more grateful. Social science research on gratitude has revealed many positive outcomes in people. It has been found that gratitude (a) enhances learning, (b) improves overall health and emotional well-being, and (c) leads to love, compassion (empathy), and forgiving and seeking forgiveness. Clearly, there is benefit to the individual who has the virtue of gratitude. In addition, as we know, virtue formation occurs within a community. The relationships within the community are very important. So, when one articulates being grateful to someone, that person also gains a benefit, i.e., both the giver and the receiver benefit. In fact, both people must benefit, or it is not really gratitude. In addition, it has been found that saying *thank you* to someone is contagious; it increases the likelihood that others will express thanks more often. On the other hand, research has shown that cynicism and narcissism hinder the development of gratitude. They, too, spread through a community, harming it.

The list of activities for the *Gratitude* module provide age-specific options for families. Again, these are intended to help you develop habits. It is possible that you will create your own ideas that would be better for your family. Since you are working on developing habits, repetition (daily, weekly) will be very important. The point is to repeat over and over until they become *second nature*.