



The Virtues and Character Development Project

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

I Thessalonians 5:24

BOOK REVIEW

Gratitude: Why Giving Thanks Is the Key to Our Well-Being

Cornelius Plantinga

In his book, *Gratitude: Why Giving Thanks Is the Key to Our Well-Being*, Cornelius Plantinga describes the relationship between gratitude and human flourishing, in particular, in the life of the believer. He begins by pointing out to the reader that the root word in Greek for *gratitude* is *charis*, which also is the root word for *grace* and for *joy*. He walks the reader through why these are connected, as well as the impact on the overall life of a grateful person. He reminds us that Paul wrote in I Corinthians 4:7 – *what do you have that you did not receive?*

Plantinga defines gratitude as *a glad sense of being gifted with something by someone and thus being indebted to the giver*. This means that a *benefactor* provides a benefit to a *beneficiary*; there must be someone to thank. The receiver must learn to receive gifts, and therefore, a debt of gratitude that is owed to the giver.

In his explanation of how we get gratitude, Plantinga refers to a song in the Jewish Passover seder, the *Dayenu*. This serves as a reminder of the mighty acts of God in their history. The response is *Dayenu* – *it would have been enough*. We learn that gratitude arises from faith in God's goodness, shown by His mighty acts in creation and redemption. Plantinga calls this *transcendent gratitude* since it focuses on God. He also notes that when you thank someone, you also are thanking God who enabled the person to give the gift to you. We learn that ***all Christian virtues are both God's gifts and our calling***.

Plantinga turns our attention to barriers to gratitude. He points out several examples that are vices: cynicism, an attitude of self-sufficiency, greed (avarice), apathy (sloth), resentment (envy), and a sense of entitlement (pride). He notes that *greed* is especially important since it makes us discontent. This is the reminder in the *Dayenu*: what we have is enough. Wanting more is at the heart of greed. This also is contagious, spreading to those around us. In contrast, gratitude and contentment lead to human flourishing. We ought to be thankful for what we have, not what we do not have (or have lost). This leads to contentment as we humbly accept gifts from givers. This leads from grace to joy, often expressed through song. It also results in generosity.

Plantinga identifies scientific investigation that has demonstrated that gratitude has a positive impact on one's well-being. Christina Karns and her colleagues at the University of Oregon have shown that the connection between gratitude and generosity appears in the physical wiring of the brain. Martin Seligman proposed that psychology studies ought to investigate positive effects. Charlotte vanOyen-Witvliet found that gratitude predicts hope and general happiness. Paul Mills showed the hearts of people who are grateful have healthier hearts and lower blood pressure. A broader study by Scott Barry Kaufman, who used Martin Seligman's PERMA model, revealed that the *single best predictor of well-being was gratitude*. Plantinga reminds us that, *in God's world, if we do our duty, we also thrive*.

Biblical themes are used by Plantinga to discuss the connection between memory and gratitude: the *Dayenu*, the Eucharist, remembering the mighty acts of God throughout history. We ought to be thankful as part of our *rising with Christ*, as evident in baptism and the spiritual journey of clothing ourselves with His righteousness. *Gratitude is part of the family uniform of the people of God*. Thankfulness is part of the image of God and a key component of unity in the church. Plantinga states it this way: *If I am grateful to God, I will be grateful to others, which leads to a healthy inner life, which tells others in the Church. Then, the Church becomes more united, stronger, and more powerful for God's kingdom.*

The question of why we should thank God is raised. Plantinga answers by discussing how God saves sinners, provided a good creation, and everyday gifts in our ordinary lives. He also points out that grace is powerful, expensive, lavish, and surprising. While grace is free, it is not cheap. ***Grace is graciously given, but it is expensive, and it always comes to us with blood on it.***

Our tendency to view life as less than what we desire is evident when life hurts. Plantinga encourages us to recognize the trouble, but refuse to concede that trouble has the last word. It always could be worse. We should choose to focus on the good, what we have. He reminds us of St. Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie ten Boom, and Horatio Spafford. Despair is never the last work for a believer since, through the cross, Jesus showed us that it is safe to trust God when we do not understand.

Plantinga proposes a virtuous cycle of gratitude and savoring as our voices are used in singing praise, thanks, and worship at times of celebration. This is continued as we take care of things for which we are grateful, including our faith. ***Gratitude is the Christian's natural response to God.*** This is lived out in doing good for others. In fact, the central business of a Christian is doing good. Plantinga stated that this is part of disciplined holiness. Christianity is not a do-it-yourself religion, but living in response to God's grace with gratitude. This leads to human flourishing. The cycle begins with our faith, which leads to doing good deeds that are practiced until they become a habit (the virtue of gratitude). This leads to godly character that is lived out as one grows in faith, completing the cycle.

The book concludes with examples of how people live out their calling. The various reflections reveal ways Christians do good. *As we are called to be prime citizens of the Kingdom of God, a natural response to having purpose in life is thankfulness.* This book encourages Christians to respond to the gifts of God with gratitude that overflows in joy that arises when one gives to others. The many insights contained in this book make it an important read for Christians who are desiring to grow and to know God more deeply.