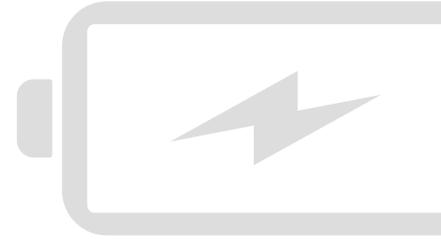


THEME SUMMARY



Theme:

“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
I Thess 5:16-18

Key Thought:

Have you ever heard of “sin, salvation, service” or “guilt, grace, gratitude”? These are often presented as the three moves of faith. First, we realize our sin or our guilt, then we receive the gift of salvation or grace, and finally we live our lives in service and gratitude. Service and gratitude go hand in hand. Both are responses to what God in Christ has done for us!

You came into this week preparing to serve. But are you ready to be grateful? We are going to learn about gratitude this week. By looking at different Bible texts, by trying different things in prayer and by keeping our eyes open to what God is up to, we are going to discover the beauty and joy of gratitude.

Also, psychologists tell us that the two ways to lift us from anxiety and/or depression are...service and gratitude! It’s like our Creator knew exactly how we needed to live in order to thrive.

How will the discovery of gratitude shape your week of service? Wait and see!

The Gospel as reflected in the Theme:

Christians throughout history have been known for their service. In the early days of the church, a plague swept through Rome. Those living in Rome who had the resources to flee to the country did, leaving the sick and poor behind. Included in the group that left the city were the pagan priests. They were considered elite, and they had the money to get out of town.

The Christians, however, stayed. Wealthy Christians opened their homes to those who needed it. Church members tended to the sick and dying. They shared their food, they shared their water, they took care of orphaned children. But they didn’t just do it during the plague; they did it all the time! Serving others was simply part of the Christians’ life. Service was so much a part of the early church that one of the pagan emperors who wanted Rome to return to their traditional gods was annoyed at the Christians’ practice of serving others because it made those traditional Roman gods and their priests look so bad!

Here’s what he said:

“Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism (non-Roman religion)? I believe that we are really and truly to practice every one of these virtues.... For it is disgraceful that, while no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”

—Emperor Julian “the Apostate” as quoted in *Resilient Faith* by G. Sittser pp. 138-13

Wouldn’t it be amazing if those who watched you serve this week were struck by your compassion and kindness? You are in a community this week who needs you. They may need the things you’ll be doing—gardening, painting, cleaning, sorting— but what they really need is the love and grace you can show them. They really need Jesus.

We do, too. Maybe you came to SERVE tired, or discouraged, or regretting the choice to come. Maybe you're feeling pretty empty. Maybe you need some folks who serve you through meals, or prayer, or worship, or just hanging out and playing cards. Can you look for how God will bless you through the service of others?

Or, you may be full of energy and ready to rock! It's easy when we are full of joy to run right by someone else who may be hurting. This week, pay attention to others and pay attention to God. Your zeal may rise and fall over the course of the week, but the practices of service and gratitude can keep you steady regardless of how you feel. Wouldn't it be great if your heart for service and gratitude not only blessed the community you're in, but also made you healthier and happier? Doesn't that sound just like something God would do?

Service. Gratitude. They change the world. They change us! #gratefull

SESSION OUTLINE

Session 1: In all circumstances?!

- **Session Focus:** Can we really give thanks in all circumstances? What does that even mean? What if I/we don't feel thankful?
- **Key Passage:** I Thess 5:16-18
- **Small Group Discussion:** What connection does gratitude have with service? Why does gratitude matter?

Session 2: Anxious

- **Devotions:** Psalm 42; our emotions can be all over the place! This psalm shows us that this is a normal experience for God's people. Our goal is to center back on God's love as a calming, centering presence.
- **Session Focus:** Lots of things make us feel anxious, including taking a SERVE trip! What does God think about our anxiety? What does Paul suggest as an antidote?
- **Key Passage:** Philippians 4:6-7
- **Small Group Discussion:** Two of the key ways proven to address both anxiety and depression are gratitude and service. What happens in us when we serve? What happens when we are grateful?

Session 3: Designated Thankers

- **Devotions:** Psalm 100; Maybe this is a psalm you hear on Thanksgiving Day. But what if it were our everyday psalm? What if we remembered God's steadfast love every day?
- **Session Focus:** David thought it was so important that the people of Israel remembered to be grateful to God that he assigned people to have this job! We don't always remember to be thankful either. Who can serve as our designated thankers? For whom can you be a designated thanker?
- **Key Passage:** I Chronicles 16:39-42
- **Small Group Discussion:** Our relationship with God is very intimate and personal, but our practices of discipleship are best done with other people – prayer, singing, listening to scripture. What about gratitude? How do other people inspire our gratitude? How can we inspire gratitude in others?

Session 4: Turn Around

- **Devotions:** Psalm 13; The writer pours his heart out to God. He is hurting and doesn't know what God is up to. But he knows God will listen, and he knows that someday he will trust God again. Even in challenging seasons of life, God is there and cares for us.
- **Session Focus:** Sometimes we are so very happy a prayer has been answered that we forget to say thank you! Remember that David designated people to be thankful? That's because people forget so easily. Jesus points out that one person in this group of 10 remembered to give thanks, even though the other nine also came from a religious tradition that valued and promoted thanksgiving. What are some things that help us remember to "turn around" like this leper did and give thanks?
- **Key Passage:** Luke 17:11-19
- **Small Group Discussion:** Did you have a time today (as a person or with your group) when you remembered and turned around to give thanks?

Session 5: Our Battle Cry

- **Devotions:** Psalm 95:1-7; We give thanks because God is our shepherd. What are ways in which a shepherd cares for the sheep? What are ways in which you need God to shepherd you today?
- **Session Focus:** In this amazing story, the people of Judah are threatened by their enemies. There is no way they will win. But Jahaziel has a vision and inspires the people to trust in God. Because of this, King Jehoshaphat has the people sing songs of thanksgiving on the way to meet their enemies. When they arrive, they see the enemies have all killed each other! Who knew thanking God could be a battle cry? How can that be our battle cry when the enemy threatens us?
- **Key Passage:** 2 Chronicles 20:1-4; 13-30
- **Small Group Discussion:** We may not think a lot about our enemy, but scripture is clear that he exists and he "prowls like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Where do you sense the enemy prowling in your life? In your work this week? In your home church? How does the story of Jahaziel and Jehoshaphat inspire you?

Session 6: Rescued

- **Devotions:** Psalm 40:1-5; The psalmist writes, "I was in the muck and mire, but God lifted me out." If you've ever been stuck in mud (or snow!) you know how grateful you are to be rescued. Where are you stuck in your life right now? What would rescue look like?
- **Session Focus:** The core of gratitude for the believers in Colossae was that they had been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light. They did nothing, but God rescued them. Do you need rescue? Are you ready to say yes to the invitation of God?
- **Key Passage:** Colossians 1:9-14
- **Small Group Discussion:** Gratitude isn't a feeling; it's a practice. We practice it because of what God in Christ has done for us. The core of our gratitude is that we were dead, lost, stuck in the mud of our sin, and God saved us. God keeps saving us! How has God rescued you today? What does this mean for you?

Session 7: Jesus Gives Thanks

- **Devotions:** Psalm 107:1-3; 23-32; This psalm describes a handful of situations in which God's people get into trouble and God saves them. The section we read was about people who are out to sea and get stuck in a storm. Can you (or your group) think of one story from the Old Testament and one story from the New Testament when people are in boat and need help? (Hint for OT: big fish; Hint for NT: scared disciples) The psalm looks back at what God has already done and looks ahead (even though the writer didn't know it) at what God will do. How can you look back on your week and see what God has done, and look ahead with thanks at what God has yet to do?
- **Session Focus:** Jesus is celebrating the Passover with his disciples. We have read this story so often we may overlook the fact that before he hands out the bread and again before he hands out the cup, Jesus gives thanks. He is hours away from his death, and yet he gives thanks. Why? For what? He is the Passover lamb himself, and yet he thanks God for the gift of salvation. What does this tell us about Jesus?
- **Key Passage:** Matthew 26:26-30
- **Small Group Discussion:** Our theme has been "Give thanks in all circumstances." What gratitude practices have you started this week? What do your feelings have to do with gratitude? What does Jesus' example in the passage read for tonight show us about thanksgiving?

