

“In The Zone—Re-Learning Thankfulness.”

This may surprise you but in our family, I’m the goofy one. I’m the silly one. I’m the jokester. Janet, my wife, is more serious. She’s got a sense of humor, it’s just more subdued than mine. I was always the class clown. Janet was always the serious student. That’s just who we are as individuals. Which probably explains what happened a few weeks ago. I was putting Zoe, our 6 year old, to bed. Janet was giving the baby a bath. Zoe and I were saying our prayers and I had asked her to tell God what she was thankful for. She listed a few things and wrapped it up by saying, “Thank you God for my freaky father and my not-funny mom.” Of course I busted out laughing, and Janet said from the bathroom, “I heard that!” I thought that was great! Janet, not so much!

Today we’re wrapping up this series called *In The Zone* by talking about thankfulness, or gratitude, or appreciation. We started this series two weeks ago talking about you know you’re in the zone because you feel it. You can be in the zone in a sport, in your occupation, in a relationship. We say it all the time, “Man, I’m in the zone.” And we can be in the zone with God too. And that’s the most important zone of all. It’s the sweet spot of God’s success. That place where we feel connected, close, alive.

Can I draw it out one more time?! Living in the zone means we’re getting certain things. God is the bless-or, we are the blessed, and we understand that we’re supposed to be a blessing. That’s called being God-hearted. We become a blessing by understanding that we’re supposed to receive and reflect the blessings in our lives. To do that is to understand that we are not owners, we’re managers of the blessings in our lives.

Too many of us live in the land of Ing. We’re into owning, earning, housing, clothing, bling, bling, hoarding, charging, owing. It’s outside the zone. When we’re in the zone, we’re God-hearted, we’re generous. Not only are we generous in general but we follow God’s direction on how to allocate the blessings we’ve been given. The direction God has given is for us to bring, not give, bring the tithe to our local house of worship.

All that’s what we’ve talked about so far. But today is about one more element in living in the zone and that’s being thankful. This is a decision we make every day, lots of times throughout each day, it’s about not just allocating our blessing the way God asks us to, its about seeing those blessing and responding with joy, with thanksgiving.

You see, gratitude is the second most powerful of all human emotions and responses. It is second only to faith in how it can transform people’s lives, and transform our world. Gratitude is very, very important. In the Bible we’re commanded 184 times to be grateful. 184 times! We read that we are to, **[SLIDE...] “give thanks to the Lord, for he is good and his steadfast love endures forever!” (Psalm 106:1).** We read that Paul wrote that we are to give thanks in all circumstances, for everything.

Giving thanks is clearly important in the Bible, but why? Why is the Bible so concerned about this? Why does it tell us more than any other commandment, except love, to give thanks? Well, there are several reasons. First, because **[SLIDE...] gratitude is the most appropriate attitude and response for a Christian to have in life.** Why is that? Because God is good, because God’s blessings are all over the place. Because life is a gift from God and you who are Christians understand that. You receive everything that comes your way as a gift and you understand that even when the most tragic things happen, God has a way of taking them and transforming them, and making something good come out of that tragedy. The worst thing that can happen in our lives, the death of a family member or friend, or our own death, we know is the way in which we enter God’s kingdom. It may be very difficult to accept at the time, but even in death, we can be thankful. Because death is not an end, it is a new beginning. We have the opportunity and obligation to be grateful in all things. Everyday and everything is a gift from the Lord, and it calls for the posture and attitude of gratitude on the part of God’s people.

The second reason that the scriptures command us to be grateful is because **[SLIDE...] our gratitude blesses other people.** A boy came home from school went up to his mom and said, “I learned to say thank you in Spanish today!” The mother said, “Strange that you learned to say it in Spanish before you learned to say it in English.” It’s interesting that if you talk to people who are unhappy in the work place and ask them

why they're unhappy in their job, the number one answer people give is, "Because I feel underappreciated. Nobody appreciates the work that I do. I'm just a cog in the machine. Nobody seems to even care that I'm here." When people feel unappreciated, they feel demoralized.

I've had women, and men, but mostly women, tell me how frustrated they are with their family situations because for years they have felt like their husbands and children have been taking her granted.

Some people that find themselves in that boat get to a point where they say, "In all honesty, I'm ready to just take off. I'm just going to leave a note telling them that I've had enough, and I'm gone, and I'm not coming back." Most of the time when these people have some time to think through what's going on they don't walk out. But the feelings of not being appreciated are very, very real, and there is a huge amount of hurt there that builds of year after year after year.

The tragedy is that this can so easily be avoided if two words are used. Two words that give life... "thank you... thank you." Giving thanks for the people around us and what they mean to us and do for us, blesses other people. Sometimes when you give thanks to somebody who has been taking care of you, somebody whom you employ, a family member, you may be the one person that day that has helped them feel like they are worthwhile.

One man wrote, **[SLIDE...]** **"Gratitude has a way of softening hearts, easing pain, and giving others an incentive to soar."**--Ardath Rodale. You see, that's part of the calling that God places on your life! That's part of living in the zone. To give other people an incentive to soar; to help other people be everything that they can possibly be, whether they are neighbors, or family members, or coworkers, or friends.

Finally, gratitude is commanded in the scriptures because **[SLIDE: "Gratitude shapes us."]** it shapes us. What we express with our words, what we focus on in our lives, shapes us. It shapes how we approach all the rest of life. It frees us from self-centeredness and from focusing only on ourselves. Gratitude allows us to see, really see other people. And gratitude helps us to experience real joy.

One woman wrote, **[SLIDE...]** **"When we offer thanks to God, or another human being, gratitude gives us renewal, reflection and reconnection. Gratitude can lead you away from the darkness of complicated need into the light of simple abundance."** -- Sarah Breathnach. Gratitude changes us, that's why we are commanded to be grateful people who give thanks. It changes us for the better.

Some marriages that are struggling could experience deep renewal if only a husband would look at his wife and see the things that are there that he is thankful for. Or if a wife would look at her husband, seeing beyond the things that are frustrating, and saw the things that she is thankful for. In many marriages this is all that is needed for a deep sense of renewal. I've found this to be true of me. I pray for my wife and when I pray, I thank God for her. There are times when I just list as many things as I can think of that I'm thankful for in her. Her patience, her kindness, the grocery shopping and laundry that she does, her care for the kids, how beautiful she is, how I love to run my finger through her hair, for her musical gifts, for her wisdom and common sense. Sometimes I can just go on and on. And when I do that, I almost always have to end my prayer time and go and see her. I want to be with her because I feel this overwhelming love for her.

This is interesting: you see, we think that we have to feel something toward somebody before we express gratitude toward them. We may not feel something for a person, so we think it's hypocritical to thank them, when we actually sort of resent them a little bit, or maybe things aren't going so well in that relationship. But listen, here's what gratitude can do: we begin by making a decision with our minds, we decide that we are going to be grateful for another human being, we make a decision that we are going to be grateful to God in all circumstances, even if we don't feel it at that particular moment. We make the decision to be thankful then we articulate it with our lips. We express gratitude to that person and to God. What happens is that the more you express gratitude, the more you begin to feel it in your heart! That's how a grateful heart is cultivated in our own lives!

You see, real thankfulness sets a tone for our lives, it opens our eyes, it stabilizes our families, it helps put things in proper perspective. Thankfulness should not just be a day, it should be a part of our spiritual lives that we spend time cultivating. Without it we run the risk of living dry, empty, anxious lives. Giving thanks is important to our emotional and spiritual well-being. It's vital to living in the zone.

Let's look at a few practical ways of giving thanks. How about this, **[SLIDE: "Practical ways to give thanks: Live within your means."]** I know that's very un-American. But it's a very important part of thankfulness. Live within your means. We have a real hard time with this one. So much so that it's become a joke. Take a look at this from the good people at Saturday Night Live. **[VIDEO: SNL skit. Steve Martin. Book entitled, "Don't Buy Things You Can't Afford." Approx. 2.5 min.]**

Living **within** our means is a way to say to God, "God, I'm thankful for what I have, and I'm not envious of what I don't have." Living **outside** our means is like saying to God, "What you've given me isn't enough, it isn't good enough, so I'm going to go into debt to have the things you should have given me in the first place."

Living **within** our means is about delaying gratification. It's about knowing the difference between a need and a want. It's about not buying into cultural pressures to have the newest, the latest, when what you have does just fine. Living **outside** of your means is living in the land of Ing—owe-ing, charg-ing. It's living outside the zone.

Living **within** your means isn't just good financial sense, it's good spiritual sense. It's a way to say to God, "Thank you that you have given me enough. I choose to be thankful and not envious, not driven by desire for stuff, but driven by thankfulness and generosity." Paul put it this way about his own life, **[SLIDE...]** **"...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11-13, NIV).** We're thankful for what we do have, because more than any thing we have God with us. That's real thankfulness, that's living in the zone.

Another practical way to be thankful is **[SLIDE: add to previous] choose to be grateful in every circumstance.** Paul also wrote, **[SLIDE...]** **"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1Thessalonians 5:16-18, NIV).**

Don't forget that the words "think" and "thank" come from the same root word. This should remind us that thanking comes from thinking about our blessings. Even in the worst of circumstances, it's there, that one element to give thanks for. It may take some effort, but **think** about it, and then **thank** about it!

I'll never forget the most unusual Thanksgiving I've ever had. I spent my Junior year of college in Japan and I lived with a Japanese family while I was there.

When it started to get near to Thanksgiving I started to tell them about what we Americans did. I told them, as best I could in my new Japanese words, that we gather as a family to give thanks. I told them how we eat turkey and stuffing and salad and cranberries and a bunch of other stuff. They seemed real interested and I thought that they had taken the bait. I was sure that I would come home from school on that Thursday and would be surprised by a Japanese-style Thanksgiving celebration. Family, turkey, stuffing--the works! I had my hopes up.

I came home about six o'clock that evening to a dark empty house. Everybody in my host family had gone their separate ways and left me my dinner on the table. My Thanksgiving dinner consisted of a bowl of brown beans, a bowl of black beans, cold rice and a dish of pickled bee larva. And it was left there for me to eat by myself.

I ate what I could stomach and went to bed. I was never more thankful for turkey and family...and the fact that we didn't eat bee larva in America.

God provides. Our job is to trust him to provide us with what we need, when we need it. And of course we know the difference between our wants and needs. God won't always give us what we want, but his promise is to always give us what we need, when we need it. Living a life of gratitude includes giving thanks no matter what the circumstance. This is key to living in the zone.

Another way to be thankful is the most fun way of all and that is to celebrate! **[SLIDE: add to previous, "Celebrate!"]** You'll be happy to know that the Bible says that one key way to show our thanks is to gather together and celebrate. It says this, **[SLIDE...]** **you "shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house" (Deuteronomy 26:11, NRSV).** In other words, party! God loves to party! Jesus loved to party, to celebrate the goodness of what the Lord has given. We're called,

in fact we are commanded, to celebrate! So make sure that you do this week! Celebrate God's goodness! Celebrate the little things! Celebrate the big things! Let your celebrating be a way to give thanks and live in the zone.

One final way to give thanks is **[SLIDE: add to previous, "Through our offerings"]** through our offerings. Today is commitment Sunday. The day when our members and those of you consider this your church family fill out your commitment card and drop it in the basket.

There are two ways of looking at your commitment card when you turn it in. You can look at it and say, "I'm a church member, it's my obligation, and hopefully it will help pay the bills for next year." That's one way of looking at it. Here's how I look at it. Last night as Janet and I filled out our card and we figured out what our tithe was going to be, it's our way to say, "Thank you God for everything you've done for us. Thank you for the blessing we anticipate next year. Thank you for being our God. Thank you for the love that you've shown for us. We could never repay you for all this. This is just a small reflection of the love we have for you, and of how grateful we are." And when we put this in the basket it's an act of worship and an act of thanksgiving.

My prayer for you as your pastor is that you might rejoice always...always. And that you might give thanks to God in all circumstances. That's Jesus' will for you. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

During this last song, bring your commitment cards up and put them in this basket. Let's give thanks.