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Presentation Transcript
Benefits of Gratitude
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Bill here for LifeResource Ministries.

We've called today's topic *Gratitude*, but we could have also called it *Thankfulness* or *Appreciation* or *Gratefulness*. We're talking about that feeling we often get when someone has done something for us – most often when it's something we couldn't have done for ourselves, that we very much needed, or something we could have done for ourselves, but was not done yet because of a lack of time. Not only are we going to talk about the feeling, but the expression of gratitude, as well.

Why would we talk about this topic? Is it a mental health topic, or a social topic, or a religious topic? Well, actually, it's all three. We're going to talk about the *benefits* of feeling and expressing gratitude emotionally, socially and spiritually.

Let's start first with emotional benefits. Every now and then I get a client that I worry about more than the others. I've noticed this usually happens when they're in a situation they can't do anything about. Bad things are happening and they have no way of protecting themselves or getting away from the problem. Most of the time, this happens to children, as adults can usually *do* something to better their situation.

I had a young teen client some time back who lived in a family that was struggling – single parent mom, low-income, plagued with financial problems. They moved fairly frequently because of evictions. Mom was depressed. She had two children – my client and another, who was emotionally unstable to the point of occasional violence. My client was sometimes bruised by blows from her sibling. Child Protective Services had been involved with the family. All these issues combined caused my client to be anxious, depressed, angry and bitter toward her sibling. She put up a brave front, but inside she was insecure. She had withdrawn from peers, was isolated, felt lonely and rejected, and she had no motivation to succeed in school – little interested her. You know, when you're depressed,

everything is so hard – you know, what’s the use? Her life was bland beyond words most of the time, but punctuated with periods of rage and fear. One day she came into my office visibly upset. It turned out that she’d been in an argument with her mother on the way to her session – I don’t even remember what it was about now – but, with little prompting, she poured out her sadness, frustration, blame and anger. Later that evening, I received a text from her. She thanked me for being there for her. She wanted me know that she felt better when she left. Of course, it was satisfying to know that I’d helped her when she needed it, but more, I thought about how good it was for her to be able to show appreciation.

Most who listen to me know I regularly talk a lot about the benefits of building our own personal life story and how good it is for us to work through the events of our lives as we construct such a story. Social science tells us the presence of such a story is an indicator of secure attachment as an adult. This attachment leads to many good things. At the same time, it’s a cyclical thing. It’s not just that the presence of the story shows emotional health. The constructing of the story also heals us of our past hurts as we construct it.

So it was, also, with this young girl. To be able to thank someone for helping her, reinforced in her heart that she was cared about. And because the one who cared for her, in this case, was someone who didn’t know anyone she knew, she knew that she, by herself, had won that care. She knew she was worth being cared for and about. So her expression of gratitude reinforced and increased her sense of self and emotional well-being. In a bleak world, where she had no friends at school and enemies even in her own home, to know that she was able to attract someone who was *for* her and *with* her emotionally strengthened her and augmented her sense of self. Maybe the world wasn’t as bad as she had assumed. Maybe she could have a better life than she had imagined. She became open to thoughts of how she could make things better for herself. To do that, she had to consider what assets she possessed and how she could leverage them to meet her goal of a better life for herself. She was looking beyond her present situation toward the future. I remember talking with her and she’d come up with a plan to go to night school, so that she could get away from all the drama of public high school and graduate by doing four hours in the evening and then work during the day. And this would give her some resources to work with to save money when she was old enough to leave home and be on her own. Since anxiety is about what bad thing might happen in the future, she gradually began to feel less anxious, as well. Of course, with all that bad stuff happening at home and the negatives at school, she had her ups and downs, but she gradually began to look ahead for something better. Of course, the support I gave her helped, but her ability to express appreciation to me helped with it all, too.

Did you know all these good things happen to us when we express appreciation? If you want to be less anxious and depressed, start thinking about what you’re grateful for and to whom. Make a list. Pray about it. Spend some time with it. It will help you. You’ll feel

better. It will help you take positive steps to resolve issues that trouble you and, maybe, you thought were unable to be resolved. It will help you sleep better at night.

Some time ago, I walked away, at fifty-eight years of age, from a career that I had been in from my youth – a steady salary and a retirement program – not much of a salary, but at least it was steady. I had to start all over. Several years after that, I began to realize I was not immortal and began feeling my age a bit. I felt financially vulnerable for the first time in my life. In checking this out with friends my own age and older, I learned this is kind of how it works as we get older and face the lessening of energy and the attendant health issues, etc. I began to take stock of what I still had. It wasn't as bad as I'd let myself think. I began expressing more gratitude to God for all His gracious gifts and I felt better, even though nothing had changed, except my outlook. Of course, I realize all of you who are younger can hear this and not understand it, just like I didn't when I was younger. But don't worry, you'll get there sooner than you think.

Social benefits. Let's switch away from emotional benefits of gratitude now and talk for a while about the social benefits. When we show appreciation to others for the things they have done for us, it goes way past simply being polite. It draws us closer to each other. Gratitude is a relationship builder – a relational glue.

I was thinking about the way the young girl's comment made me feel. Doing therapy with her was an energy-drawing siege. It was so hard to see her struggle with all these problems – to know that she didn't deserve any of it and, yet, could do nothing about them. Because of my role as a professional therapist, I also was limited in what I could do. My role was to do therapy rather than all the things I could do when I was a minister. As a minister, I always had a lot more flexibility to support a child. That contrast increased my frustration. So when I heard from her that I had been helpful to her, do you think that encouraged me to continue on? Very much! Do you think it made me feel more connected? Absolutely! Such a sweetie! Was it satisfying to see that she was developing the ability to draw people close? That's just what she needed. Was it good to know that she was becoming strong enough to be vulnerable enough to express appreciation? Really exciting to see that progress. Expressing appreciation feels like we're giving part of ourselves away. So we have to be strong enough to do that. If she could cause me to *want* to help her to feel connected – to draw help to herself – that meant she could do it with other people, too. So that was a very good sign.

I've also been thinking lately about all the comments we get from viewers, readers and listeners. Many of them express gratitude for the help they've received from our materials. In thinking about the effects of those comments, I find myself willing to struggle through the difficulties associated with a non-profit and continue to produce materials associated with mental health and the Bible, motivated by the evidence that we are making a difference one person at a time through our work.

I also find myself moved by many of the comments and connected to the people who make them, as well. Have you ever noticed that in yourself? Expressing appreciation and gratitude is a way to reach out to other people.

Okay, that's a few thoughts on how gratitude can help us socially. Let's think now about the spiritual ramifications of gratitude. God tells us to be thankful to Him, to praise Him and to glorify Him. Look with me at Psalm 16:7 through 11.

Psalm 16:7 – *I bless the LORD who gives me counsel. In the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the LORD always before, because He is at my right hand. I shall not be shaken.* So David is praising God here. Notice what he says happens when he does this. *Therefore, my heart is glad and my whole being rejoices. My flesh also dwells securely.* So he's saying that blessing God and thanking God gives him confidence and courage. It reduces anxiety. It helps him feel better. Verse 10:

V-10 – *For You will not abandon my soul to the grave, nor let Your Holy One see corruption.* Amazingly, this is a reference to Christ's resurrection from the dead and that we are saved by His life. Verse 11:

V-11 – *You make known to me the path of life. In Your presence there is fullness of joy. At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.* So he's thinking about what it's going to be like with God when he's finally in God's family. He's going to be happy.

There's another good one we can look at, too. It's in Psalm 107:17.

Psalm 107:17 – *Some were fools through their sinful ways and, because of their iniquities, suffered affliction.* Have you ever felt like you've really blown it with God? David knew all about that, didn't he? Verse 19:

V-19 – *Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble and He delivered them from their distress. He sent out His word and healed them and delivered them from their destruction. Let them thank the LORD for His steadfast love, for His wondrous works to the children of man, and let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of His deeds in songs of joy.*

You know, under the covenant of Moses, people used to offer animal and other kinds of sacrifices. Today we don't do that any longer – at least, for a while. But we're to offer the sacrifices of thanks to God. We're supposed to spend some time thanking Him. It makes us feel better.

Let's look also in the New Testament – in Philippians 4:6.

Philippians 4:6 – *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.* So when we pray,

it's not just supposed to be the gimmes – you know, “God, gimme this and gimme that.” We're supposed to *thank* God for what He's already given us and be appreciative for it – and express that to Him. *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* That's a promise!

You know, if you want peace and a reduction in your anxiety level, then be thankful to God. Talk to Him and express it. The Bible teaches us that it's not for God's benefit that we're to thank and praise Him, but for *ours*. Faith is the byproduct of praise and thanks. And faith is one of the most important aspects of Christianity.

If we think of my young client and how expressing appreciation not only signaled strength in her, but also was created by it, that's exactly the same with us and God. The more we count our blessings and thank Him, the more we meditate on His greatness, the easier it is follow and believe Him. Just as with thanking others for the things they do for us, thanking God draws us closer to Him.

I told you a bit about my story earlier – about my anxiety and about my career change late in life. Well here's a scripture that really helped me. It's in Isaiah 46, beginning in verse 3.

Isaiah 46:3 – *Listen to me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel who have been borne by Me from before your birth, carried from the womb. Even to your old age, I am He. And to gray hairs, I will carry you. I have made and I will bear. I will carry and I will save.* God can do anything He wants. If He says He will save me in my old age, then He will! All I have to do is keep walking the walk.

Let's turn our attention now to our children and how we can help them. If we teach them to be appreciative for the things that they have received from others, if we help them build a habit of appreciation, it becomes a natural thing with them. And their graciousness will curry favor with other people. People will have more respect for them and appreciate them more. Doors will open that might otherwise remain shut. And they will also be happier, because they are more aware of things others give to them and do for them – but also with God. Showing appreciation, praise and glory to God will draw them closer to God as their little minds grow into the ability to think abstractly and conceive of God. Teaching them to count their blessings will help them know that God is present in their lives and that He loves them. So there are so many blessings that come from being appreciative.

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