7 Days *of* Gratitude



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We often hear that people don't appreciate something until they lose it. I've seen that bit of wisdom played out many times in my experience as a family counselor. Whenever people tell me about something that they've lost or broken—a friendship or relationship, a job, a treasured possession—they often say that they didn't fully recognize the goodness of what they once had.

One client—a man who'd been paralyzed years before coming to my office—wanted to walk again, even though he knew it was impossible. "You never stop to appreciate something until it's gone," he told me. Yet even in his circumstances, he was able to see all the things he still could do in life. He told me he was now a far more thankful person than he was before the accident paralyzed him. He recognized the good things in his life better than he ever had before, even though life had dealt him some setbacks. A heart of gratitude—of always trying to see the positive and being thankful for it—made all the difference.

Gratitude is good for you! In fact, research repeatedly shows practicing gratitude benefits your mental, physical, and relational health—it lowers stress, depression, and addiction levels. Interestingly, a thankful heart makes you emotionally healthier, enables you to handle conflict better, improves your sleep, and enables you to serve others better, too.

Gratitude is a simple concept, but it can be difficult to live out. It takes intentionality and practice. The goal of the devotionals in this download is to help your family purposely practice the skill of gratitude. **Read the material together over dinner this next week, discussing the questions that follow each story. May you begin to recognize all the blessings you have—while you have them!**



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Articles in this document, unless otherwise indicated, were written by Danny Huerta and Vance Fry. Danny Huerta is Vice President of Parenting and Youth at Focus on the Family. Vance Fry is a writer and editor with Focus on the Family.

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DAY 1

Gratitude does the body *good*

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. *—1 Thess. 5:18*



It's generally known that the more time you spend doing something, the better you get at it—whether it's playing chess, practicing the trumpet for two hours a day, or heading to the batting cage with a bucket of baseballs when team practice is canceled. That old saying "practice makes perfect" is probably an overstatement, but practice certainly makes us better than we were before.

Well, the same is true of having an attitude of gratitude. If you practice being grateful, you'll get much better at it. Say, "Thank you, Mrs. Anderson," after class every day for a couple of weeks and it will come more naturally on the third week. Start telling Dad that you appreciate a few of the little everyday things—grilling burgers or airing up the tires on your bike—and you'll be able to better recognize and remember to be grateful for all the other stuff parents do.

And this isn't just developing good habits of expressing gratitude to those close to you. Like any good habit, living a more grateful life is also really good for you. Thanks to a decade's worth of scientific studies on the subject, we now know that gratitude has huge benefits for your heart, your brain and your overall physical health. Grateful people are healthier people.

Robert A. Emmons, often called the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude, has in his research helped hundreds of people cultivate gratitude. One technique that he's used is to suggest that his clients keep a gratitude journal, in which they write down little things that happen each day that they are thankful for. It's a simple exercise, Emmons says, but the evidence for positive changes in their emotional, physical and psychological health is overwhelming. One interesting observation is that being more grateful has a huge effect on blocking toxic emotions such as envy and resentment. **"You cannot feel envious and grateful at the same time," Emmons notes. "They're incompatible feelings. If you're grateful, you can't resent someone for having something that you don't. Those are very different ways of relating to the world. . . . People who have high levels of gratitude have low levels of resentment and envy."**

So, like an athlete training for the Olympics or a pianist dreaming of performing at Carnegie Hall, you can train yourself to have an attitude of gratitude. And just like all those other kinds of exercise, training in gratitude is good for you, as well.

Conversation Starters

Years

0-3

What is one thing you love?

4-8

Would you rather be stronger or faster?

What is one thing you love about how God created you?

9-12

What talent, hobby, or ability are you thankful that God gave you? How can you get even better at it?

13-18

How can you train your heart to be more grateful this week?

Name someone you know who is a thankful person.

Would you rather meet a grateful quiet person or a talkative, ungrateful person?

DAY 2

Gratitude lives in the *present*

Be content with what you have, for He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." —*Heb. 13:5*



Can you imagine if Satan's demons wrote letters back and forth to each other discussing the art of deceiving humans? That's the background of C.S. Lewis' classic novel *The Screwtape Letters*. In the story, Screwtape, a senior demon, gives advice to his nephew, Wormwood, a younger demon who is somewhat inexperienced in his ability to deceive the human who has been assigned to him. As they write back and forth to each other, the two demons discusses many different topics, with Screwtape giving Wormwood a wide range of devilish advice, all with the goal of eroding the faith of his nephew's "patient"—a young human male who has recently become a Christian.

One of the demons' goals is to get humans to be less thankful. Screwtape informs his nephew that humans can often be tempted away from moments of potential gratitude. **The job of a demon is to distract Christians from focusing on the present and on the eternal truths of God. "The humans live in time, but our Enemy destines them to eternity," Screwtape advises. "He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and that point of time which they call the Present. . . . He does not want men to give the Future their hearts, to place their treasure in it. We do."**

An effective demon, Screwtape argues, must try to focus a human's attention on the future. "Nearly all vices are rooted in the future," he writes. "The future inflames hope and fear. . . . It is unknown to them, so that in making them think about it we make them think of unrealities . . . We want a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy now, but always using as mere fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the future every real gift which is offered them in the Present."

What wicked wisdom! But isn't there some truth in there? Screwtape is telling his nephew that when humans (us) obsess with all the unknown potential and possibilities of tomorrow, we neglect to appreciate the gifts we have today. We strain forward, toward that murky, unknown future that just has to be better, we tell ourselves. All the while, our hearts darken with discontentment because we are not satisfied with all the blessings of today.

Conversation Starters

Years

0-3

What is another thing you love?

4-8

What makes you forget to be grateful sometimes?

What do you notice right now that you are thankful for?

9-12

Why do you think it is hard to stay focused on the things you're grateful for?

Do you ever envy what other people have? Why?

13-18

How does the enemy distract you from focusing on gratitude? Why do you think he enjoys that?

What is something you are grateful for that has shaped who you are?

Would you rather clearly see 200 years in the past or 200 years in the future? What is something from your past that you love to remember? What is something in the future that you're looking forward to?

DAY 3

Gratitude requires an *object*

And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." —*Mark 10:18*



What do you notice every November? People everywhere—neighbors, friends, the happy faces on television—sure are more thankful than at any other time. We make colorful paper turkeys that list the things we are thankful for. Families relax around the dinner table talking about what they are most grateful for this year. We're thankful for our beautiful country. For our freedoms, our military, our teachers and our friends. For loving families and meals and warm beds to sleep in at night.

Sometimes it seems a little strange, all this generic thankfulness. Can you really be "thankful" without actually thanking someone?

Robert A. Emmons, who has published several books on the benefits of gratitude, says that gratitude has two parts. The first is an affirmation of something good: gifts, blessings or benefits of some kind—the stuff we hear about every year at this time. **But positive and undirected feelings are not enough. "The second part of gratitude is figuring out where that goodness comes from," Emmons notes. "We recognize the sources of this goodness as being outside of ourselves. . . . True gratitude involves a humble dependence on others." In other words, without someone as the object of our gratefulness, our gratitude is logically incomplete.** That truth has been acknowledged throughout the history of the Thanksgiving holiday. The first American president, George Washington, declared November 26, 1789, to be a day of public thanksgiving. And because Washington recognized that gratitude needs an object, he announced that the public celebration would be in honor of "that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be."

God is indeed the ultimate source of goodness. We don't always remember that. When President Abraham Lincoln later established the Thanksgiving holiday that we celebrate today, he acknowledged that it can be easy to forget the true source for the blessings in our lives:

> *The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.*

As we gather around with our families this Thanksgiving, let us not forget to thank Grandma for the turkey, Uncle John for the roaring fire in the fireplace, and Aunt Joanna for her famous peach pie. Most important, let us not forget that the ultimate source of all these good things is our Creator, Provider and Savior.



Conversation Starters

Years

0-3

- Who is someone you love?

4-8

- Who is someone special that you thank God for?
- What's something nice someone did for you today? Why do you think they did that?

9-12

- Who is someone you're grateful to have as a friend, and why?
- Would you rather hear you're good at something or that you are a loving person?

13-18

- How has gratitude impacted your relationship with God and others?
- How has someone encouraged you?
- Would you rather be encouraged through something difficult, or be the one encouraging someone else? Why?
- Would you rather show your gratitude to someone, or have someone express their gratitude to you?

DAY 4

Gratitude leads to *kindness and service*

Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.
—Prov. 14:21



Many families thank God daily for the blessings of life. They thank Him for providing a home, for food, for warm beds and for family. But sometimes, those feelings of gratitude are best expressed through action.

Siblings Brayden, Spencer, Bryn and Brooklyn believe that being grateful for a warm place to sleep at night means wanting to reach out and help others have those same things. These four children, who live with their parents near Portland, Oregon, raise money to buy sleeping bags and warm clothes for homeless people.

This family's heart to help the homeless started eight years ago. Brayden and Spencer visited the Burnside Bridge in Portland with a local ministry. When their mother explained that these people had no homes and slept on the street, Spencer, who was 4 years old at the time, wanted to help.

"Let's build them houses!" he suggested.

"Houses are expensive," his mother replied. "I don't think we can help that way."

Then Brayden had an idea. "Let's buy them sleeping bags!"

The boys went door to door around their neighborhood, asking for money to buy sleeping bags, along with socks, hats and warm gloves. People at church donated, too. That first year, Brayden and Spencer gave away 14 sleeping bags, along with winter clothing.

When Bryn and Brooklyn were old enough, they joined their older brothers' efforts. The kids ran lemonade stands and sold homemade jewelry. They held baby-sitting nights, and all the money went to purchasing sleeping bags.

Over the years, the siblings have given more than 1,000 sleeping bags to the poor. They like to work until they have about 80 bags, then they go downtown as a family to distribute them.

Brooklyn remembers visiting the bridge on a very cold day, when she and her sister were younger. "We had coats on and were really warm, but we saw these people who didn't have any," she says. "So my mom said, 'Take them off. Give them to these people.' "

As they continue their ministry this winter, the four siblings know that every sleeping bag helps show the homeless how much Jesus loves them. And the hours these siblings put in to earn money are well worth the reward of knowing that more people will have a warm place to sleep at night.

Danika Cooley's full article about this amazing family appeared in Focus on the Family Clubhouse.

Conversation Starters

Years

0-3

Point to something you love.

4-8

Who have you shown gratitude to today? How did you do it?

What are some ways you can show gratitude to others? To God?

9-12

Who in your area doesn't have as many good things as you enjoy? How can you help them?

Would you rather help someone who is hurt or someone who is homeless? Why?

13-18

What blessings do you enjoy in life that you wish everyone could enjoy?

Name someone you know who is a thankful person.

Beside serving the poor, how can you express gratitude by your actions?

DAY 5

Gratitude leads us toward *respect*



And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. —*Col. 3:15*

Sometimes life *sure looks different* than how we thought it would.

Our ambitions don't pan out, our dreams wither, and we're convinced that God's loving gaze has shifted elsewhere.

Coach said I didn't make the basketball team.

My math score was terrible.

I didn't win the art contest.

The boys at school wouldn't let me play freeze tag with them.

In those moments of disappointment—when our dreams of what might have been seem to collapse before our eyes—it can be difficult to have an attitude of gratitude. **We get so focused on the grand plans we have for ourselves—maybe even thinking they are God's plans—that we don't appreciate the realities and blessings we already have. We also forget that God's path tends to have different priorities. The ambitions and possessions of this world will all pass away (Luke 12). The only real thing of lasting value is our relationships, with God and with people.**

"Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans," John Lennon once wrote. *Mr. Holland's Opus*, a 1995 film inspired by the life of a music educator in Oregon, illustrates this truth with warmth and wit. The movie tells the story of Glenn Holland, who desperately wants to write a great American symphony. But he needs a job, so he starts what he believes to be a "temporary gig" as a high-school music teacher. As the years pass, he spends untold hours preparing lessons, connecting with students, leading marching band practice, directing the high school's musical and teaching driver's ed during the summer.

Meanwhile, his unfinished symphony collects dust. Graduating classes come and go, and the daily grind continues to keep him from zealously pursuing his musical masterpiece. When his job is eliminated a few years before he is to retire, he finds his dusty, unfinished symphony and sees it as a reminder of how his old dream has all but evaporated. But Mr. Holland is in for a surprise: Hundreds of his former students gather in the school's auditorium to express their appreciation for their favorite music teacher. One of those former students is now the governor of Oregon, and her speech before the crowd is one of the most inspiring movie moments of gratitude expressed:

Mr. Holland had a profound influence on my life, on a lot of lives that I know. Yet I get the feeling that he considers a great part of his own life misspent. Rumor had it he was always working on this symphony of his. And this was going to make him famous, rich, probably both. But Mr. Holland isn't rich and he isn't famous, at least not outside of our little town. So it might be easy for him to think himself a failure. And he would be wrong, because I think that he's achieved a success far beyond riches and fame.

Look around you [Mr. Holland]. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each one of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony, Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. And we are the music of your life.

Looking for an uplifting family film for Thanksgiving weekend? *Click here to download* our "Movie Nights" discussion guide for *Mr. Holland's Opus*.



Conversation Starters

Years

0-3

Hug who you love.

4-8

What dreams do you have that you hope will happen someday?

9-12

Have you ever realized that a dream wasn't going to happen? How did it make you feel?

What plans do you think God has for your life?

13-18

When you've been disappointed because something you dreamed of did not come true, how did you respond? What new dream came out of it?

What challenges are you facing that you can reframe as opportunities for growth and gratitude?

DAY 6

Gratitude gives us *peace*



Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —*Phil. 4:6-7*

If you were to list *what you suspect* are the most popular pictures

that people post on social media, could you guess them? You'd probably get a few correct. Although there are a lot of selfies and pet pictures online, more and more people are posting images of things they are grateful for, thanks to the "365 Gratitude" movement started by Australian mom Hailey Bartholomew. Hailey has inspired families around the world to create a picture every day for something they are thankful.

It wasn't always this way. In 2008, Hailey was struggling with depression. She couldn't understand why. She had a loving husband and two healthy children. A good home and a comfortable life. But she told friends that life felt a bit like running on a treadmill. Plenty of activity, but what was the point?

Hailey sought the advice of a local Catholic nun who was a counselor. The nun gave Hailey an assignment: **"Go home, get a notebook, and write down something that you are grateful for every day. Do this for 10 days."**

Hailey thought the assignment was a bit odd, but she did it anyway. What a change! "I began to notice things that I otherwise would have missed," she later wrote. "I remember sitting on my bed one night and realizing that the little moments I was thinking through were really special, and if I had not taken the time to notice them they would be lost forever."

She decided to commit to a year of recording such moments, now with a camera. Every day, she created an image based on something she was grateful for. Ducks swimming at sunset. A favorite umbrella. Children snuggling with a kitten. Friends getting married. The project "reprogrammed my brain," Hailey says. "Seeing and celebrating the good in my life affected not only the way I felt spiritually and physically but it improved my relationships with others, too."

The project also gave Hailey a new perspective on her husband. "I didn't think he was very romantic," she said in a recent speech. "He didn't buy me lots of flowers or do all the things that in my head a husband should do." But one evening, as she was looking for a subject for that day's photograph, she saw her husband preparing dinner. There were two slices of pie left on the platter—a big one, and a smaller one that was falling apart. As she secretly watched, she saw her husband slide the large slice of pie onto her plate, giving himself the lesser piece. She'd found her gratitude photo for the day: a nice slice of pie, from a loved one.

"I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't been looking," Hailey recalls. "And he was doing that every day. . . . He was putting me first. Throughout the project, he continued to do beautiful things. But I wasn't seeing it because I hadn't been looking.

"When I went looking, I saw something far more beautiful than the ideal I had in my head."

Conversation Starters

Years

0-3

What food do you love?

4-8

Draw a picture or act out something you're thankful for. Then, let us guess what it is.

9-12

Would you rather snuggle with a kitten or a puppy?

As a family, decorate a notebook or posterboard together—adding something different you are grateful for each day.

13-18

Would you rather enjoy a beautiful sunrise or a spectacular sunset?

If you want to rest and explore, would you rather go to the mountains or the beach?

What do you think Hailey Bartholomew meant when she said, "When I went looking, I saw something far more beautiful than the ideal I had in my head"?

DAY 7

Gratitude reconnects us with *God's love*

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. *—1 Thess. 5:18*



For many of us, it's easy to express gratitude at Thanksgiving. Who wouldn't be thankful with a warm house, a table loaded with food, and the warm memories of the family all together celebrating? But God instructs us to be intentional about our thankfulness every day. In fact, His Word tells us to "give thanks in all circumstances."

All circumstances? you might ask yourself. Even when I'm really sick, or after I broke my arm? Even when I got a D on a math test, or when we found out that Dad's new job means we have to move to another state?

In 1985, Daisy Catchings-Shader wondered how she could ever be thankful to God again. Her husband had a sudden stroke and lapsed into a coma for two weeks. When he regained consciousness, Daisy had no idea what was in store for her marriage.

Her active, loving husband was a different man. The stroke had left him with vision in only one eye. He had no depth perception or peripheral vision, and much of the time he had to hold his good eye open in order to see anything. It was easy for him to lose balance and fall over. Sometimes he would tear towel racks off the wall in order to prevent falling to the ground. Other times he would drop dishes on the floor. "Not wanting to discourage him, I never said a word," Daisy says. "I just picked up the broken pieces. Little did I realize that a bit of me was breaking with each episode."

Daisy's husband struggled with his new life. In the weeks after coming home, he would sit at the table after dinner and tell his wife how sorry he was that her life had changed so much.

What can I thank God for today? Daisy wondered one evening. That day, her husband had pulled down a potted tree in the living room, falling and breaking a piano bench in the process. And then Daisy felt God's quiet, loving word speak to her. I am in control. Be thankful always. Even in these circumstances, have an attitude of gratitude.

"And then I prayed the strangest prayer I'd ever prayed," Daisy says. "I thanked God for the towel racks that saved my husband from falling. I thanked Him for the broken dishes, because it wasn't long ago that I doubted he'd ever be able to hold a dish again. I thanked God for the tree and the bench that slowed my husband's fall, sparing him from injury."

"And through it all, from that day forward, I felt a calmness beyond measure, an overwhelming experience of gratitude."



Conversation Starters

Years

0-3

Do you love smiles or hugs or both?

4-8

When you feel unhappy about something, how do you find something else to think about and be grateful, instead?

9-12

Think of a time you had a bad attitude about your circumstances. What could you have chosen to be grateful for in that situation?

13-18

Romans 8:28 says, "All things work together for good . . ." and for those who love God. How has God shown you the truth of that in your life?

Would you rather it be cold or hot outside 365 days a year? What is your favorite season?

On your birthday every year, would you rather have cheesecake or ice cream? What is your favorite dessert?



Advent Blessings

Focus on the Family's 25 Days of Advent Calendar



Celebrate Christ's birth!

Enjoy fun activities, Christmas Adventures in Odyssey episodes, recipes, devotionals, and more!

Engage with God's Word as a family!

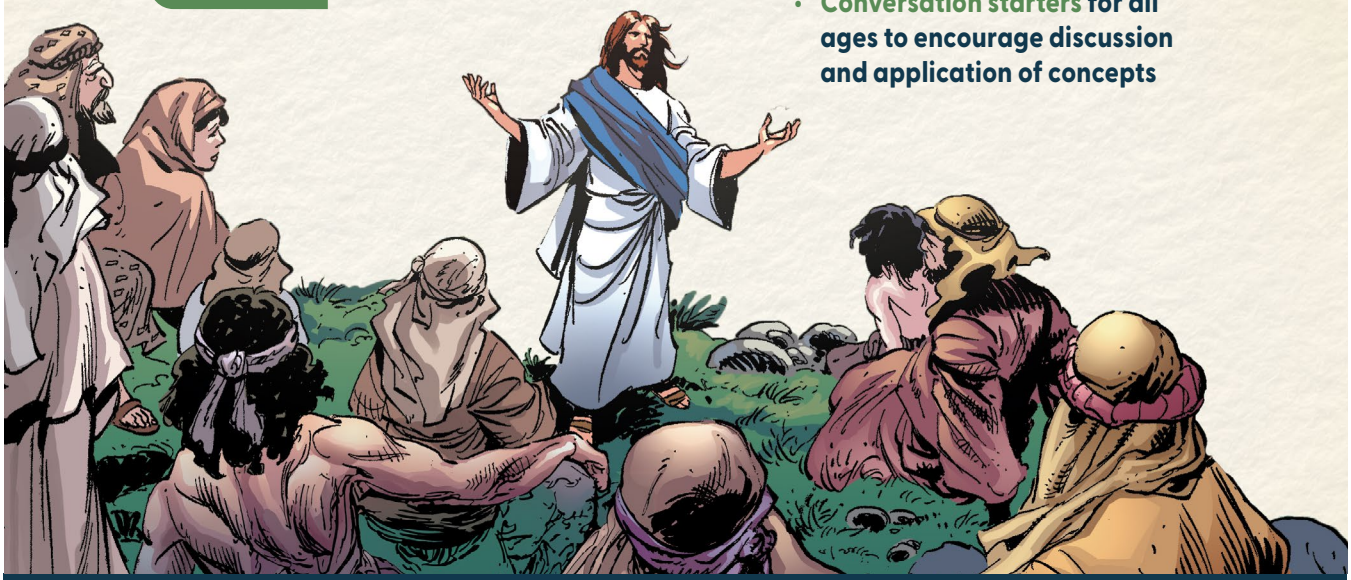
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