

We are creatures of habit. Our routines give us order and reassurance. We don't have to think about what to do next. Our brains are complex enough to go into autopilot so that we don't have to tell our legs to move when we want to walk, and we don't have to waste decision-making energy on where we are going to sit. We come in and sit in "our" pew. We get comfortable and feel secure in the little niche we've carved out for ourselves. Routines and habits can be good things, but they can also be not-so-good.

We can get stuck in a routine and don't know why we're still doing the same things over and over. When we're thrown off our routines, like when our power is shut-off, we are forced into a different routine, and we feel off-kilter and discombobulated. In our home, we have a very detailed list for the kids' morning routine on a board, so they can go and look at what they are supposed to be doing. When the power was out this week, they couldn't see the board or couldn't do some of their chores, so they were just standing around like zombies. They didn't know what to do because their routine was disrupted. Creatures of habit.

Last week we began our sermon series, *Grateful*, and learned that gratitude is a feeling, something you feel in your heart, but it's more than an emotion. "Gratitude involves not only what we feel, but also what we do;"<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass calls it an "ethic or disposition."<sup>2</sup> A state of mind or a person's outlook on life, which can be "chosen and cultivated."<sup>3</sup> This way of seeing the world "involves developing

habits and practices of gratefulness that change us for the better."<sup>4</sup>

Many of us don't have habits or practices of gratitude. When trials and hardships come, we too often just lash out in self-preservation mode, or we focus on the negative -- our suffering and pain. And, what we focus on expands. If we choose to stay in a negative outlook on life, the negativity will grow. We then find ourselves engulfed in a cloud of ick. If this is true, and I think we can all agree there is truth to it, then if we focus on good things, on being grateful for the gifts in our lives, then gratitude grows.

This is what Paul was trying to show the Thessalonians in this scripture. The Thessalonians were not feeling very grateful. They were being persecuted for their beliefs, and some were having doubts about whether following the Christian way was worth it. Some were beaten down so much that they were allowing false prophets influence their thinking.

When Paul and Silas had first come to Thessalonica to share the good news of Christ, some of the leaders were not happy with their success. Both Jews and Gentiles believed Paul's message. Paul and Silas were run out of town, and were even followed to the next town, when they were successful there too. The people who believed formed a church, but they were severely persecuted for it. Their property was seized; they weren't allowed to work in their trade; their families shunned them. They truly experienced the worst hardships for their faith.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.seminary.edu/in-the-hardest-of-times-1-thessalonians-31-5/>

Paul was concerned that they would lose their faith, so he wrote letters of encouragement. In this letter, he tells them three times: “We must always give thanks to God for you” (1:3) because their love for God and each other were growing despite their hardships. “We always pray for you,” (1:11) he says, so that God will give them the power to fulfill their call and stay committed to the work in which God has called them to do. “We must always give thanks to God for you” (2:13). We are compelled to give thanks. We can’t not give thanks!

Paul’s repetition shows that he has a habit of gratitude. When things get tough, he prays a prayer of thanksgiving. He encourages the Thessalonians to focus on the gifts from God rather than on their hardships. And, Paul models a life of gratitude, hoping the new believers will follow his example.

Giving thanks to God was an automatic response for Paul, no matter what he was experiencing. Prayer had become a habit – a holy habit --that changed his life for the better. So many of our actions are “habitual – based in a cycle of cues, routines, and rewards that form the well-worn brain pathways of daily existence.”<sup>6</sup> Those pathways in our brain in which we don’t think about what to do; we just do it. Paul’s brain pathways had been rewired to a habit of gratitude.

Many of us probably know more about unholy habits, and those habits are hard to break. If we can create new habits of gratitude, they can help to replace the unhealthy habits. We can rewire our brain.

(Next Sunday in LIFT, we will talk more in depth about how to do this.)

It is possible to create a habit of gratitude. Your gratitude journal can become a habit with the repetition of writing things down on paper. Praying can become a habit if we do it enough. How do we remember to stick with our holy habits? We need cues. Bass says, “Developing cues to actually initiate thankfulness and establish a routine is a way to foster gratitude.”<sup>7</sup>

Cues can be times, like “when I wake up,” “after my coffee,” “before a meal,” “last thing at night,” or “on Sunday afternoon.” You have to look at your life to see what fits best and what works for you. I recently saw Diana Butler Bass speak about this book, and she shared a habit that helped change her life. She was really struggling with life and not feeling very grateful, so she knew that she needed to start her day with gratitude. So, her cue was “When I wake up,” and her routine would be to pray a prayer of thanksgiving.

She continued to explore how she could cultivate more gratitude because she was saying the words but still not feeling truly grateful. She said she did a google search on grateful people. She wanted to see what grateful people looked like. The first image was this: [Image 1]. She couldn’t believe how many different variations she saw, but the posture was the same: Standing with arms outstretched and looking up, as if they are praising God.

Here’s the second image: [Image 2]. Grateful people feel it in their hearts. They feel it in their center. The next image [Image 3] is not surprising to us. Grateful

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, qtd in Bass, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Bass, 55.

people bow in reverence and give thanks to God. Did you know the emoji for “thankful” is praying hands too? The last image of grateful people shows someone who is open to receiving all of life’s gifts and is thankful for them.

And, so she put these postures together to form a new morning habit of gratitude, a prayer of gratefulness. A bodily prayer that she does when she can’t find the words. I invite you to try it with me.

Habits and practices of gratitude can change us for the better. What we focus on expands in our hearts and lives.