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Training Your Heart to Be Grateful

Guest: Mary Mohler
From the series: Growing in Gratitude (Day 1 of 3)
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Bob: Do you ever find that your worship of God is muted by the circumstances of your life? Mary Mohler says that's when we turn to the Book of Psalms and we begin to use the words of the Bible as our language of praise.

Mary: It is hard to praise the Lord with your whole heart when you have a grumbling attitude / when you don't understand why things are happening as they are. So that's when, as I suggest, you keep praying those verses in Psalms back to the Lord; and do it until you mean it. Don't come away from it until you actually *mean* what you're saying.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. How do we, as the hymn writer says, tune our hearts to sing his praise? That involves gratitude as we'll hear about today from Mary Mohler. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us.

We had a little dispute about the correct pronunciation of the hometown where our guest is from. How do you say it?

Dennis: LOO-ih vil. How do you pronounce it?

Bob: LOO-uh vul. It's the full double-mumble approach that I think is the right approach today.

Dennis: And our guest, Mary Mohler, lives there. So how do *you* pronounce it?

Mary: As a resident for most of my life, I proudly pronounce it LOO-ee vil, Kentucky. [Laughter]

Dennis: According to Bob, that is not the biblically-approved way to pronounce—

Bob: No, no; it's not the original dialect you see you're going with. [Laughter]

Mary: Well, that may be true. There are t-shirts in Louisville with five different lines on them that give you one that you can choose from, and I choose LOO-ee vil.

Bob: LOO-ee vil.

Dennis: Well, Mary, we are thrilled to have you here on the broadcast. Your husband, Al, has been here before several times. We're excited to have you here as well. Mary is the wife of Al Mohler—been married since 1983. They have a couple of children who are adults. She is the founder and director of the Seminary Wives Institute at The Southern Baptist Seminary in *LOO-ih vil*, Kentucky. [Laughter]

Mary: That's correct. [Laughter] The Southern Baptist *Theological* Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, to be technical. I'm honored to be here. Thank you.

Dennis: No doubt about it. She has written a book called *Growing in Gratitude*. I just wanted to ask you, right out of the gate, are you a grateful person?

Mary: I pray so, and I'm more grateful having written this book. It's taught me more than my readers will ever learn.

Dennis: Is it your nature to be grateful?

Mary: I would say probably not.

Dennis: So this didn't come out of what you would call a strength.

Mary: That's right.

Dennis: This has been an area of growth for you.

Mary: Absolutely.

Dennis: So what do you want our listeners to know about gratitude? You say it's an intensely theological issue.

Mary: It is. There's so much more to it than just being thankful—counting your blessings, saying: "I know we're supposed to do that—it's mandated in Scripture. Okay; you're right. I'll do that. Now, let's talk about more serious items that are on our list of things to do—okay; I'll be more grateful."

But the more I started looking into this—and felt convicted to research this and do some speaking and writing about it—the more I learned, of really, what a deeply theological issue it is and how telling it is—of how much gratitude really has a part of our lives as believers.

Dennis: You say it has a deep sense of awe about it.

Mary: Yes.

Dennis: Explain what you mean by that.

Mary: As believers, you have to just go to Scripture and realize how hopelessly lost we were. Go to Ephesians 2, and we were lost; [hopelessly] unable to save ourselves. Then, in the middle of that passage, we have those two words: “*But God*”—“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the love that He had for us, made a way for us to be reconciled to Him.”

We have such an *amazing* debt we can never repay. We have been reconciled to God forever. Colossians 3 says that our lives are hidden with Christ in God—nothing—no one can ever change that.

So our lives should be overflowing in gratitude. For many of us, as believers, it’s really not. It’s something that we don’t give much time or effort to. It’s just kind of in the background of: “Yes; I’m supposed to do that. I’ll do better.”

Dennis: You quote one of my favorite verses—in Colossians, Chapter 2, verse 6. I don’t think I had made the connection as clearly as you made it. Let me just read this passage for our listeners: “Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” I really had never noticed that there is a tie to us being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and that we ought to be the most grateful people on the planet.

Mary: That’s absolutely true. I start the book with that passage; I end the book with that passage. When I sign the book, I put that as the verse; because, to me, that is such a great summary of what I’m talking about.

We’ve been bought with a price—we can never repay that. We should just be—and I say this several times in the book too—I don’t mean we need to walk around with some big cheesy smile on our faces all the time that people wonder what we’re up to. But this is just a *mindset* that we have to train our thinking—that at the very forefront of our minds is an overwhelming feeling of gratitude in *every* situation—in good times and in bad.

You have to kind of go through the book to see how I walk through—how I’m not suggesting that, when life is hard and you’re dealing with difficult circumstances, that you’re just this kind of happy clappy: “Oh well, God’s on His throne. Everything’s fine.” That’s not the kind of gratitude I’m talking about. But it is that feeling that we retrain our thinking to be grateful people.

Bob: When we’re thinking about the eternal realities that you’re drawing us back to here, those are real and those are things we need to be rehearsing and remembering. But in the midst of the day to day—the realities of life / the hardships that we face on a daily basis—and you talk to people, all the time, going through very difficult circumstances—the reality of gratitude, in the midst of some of life’s curveballs, can be really challenging for people. You’ve experienced times in your life—in your marriage, in raising your kids, in the work at Southern Seminary—where it had to be hard to think, “I’m supposed to be *grateful* today with all that’s going on here?”

Mary: That's certainly true. You don't have to look far to either see people who seem to be breezing through life without adversity or to look to the other side and to see people you can't believe are able to put one foot in front of the other. But in all of those cases—there are no asterisks in any of this—we are to train ourselves to refocus our minds so that we are considering the perfect love of Christ *first* and, then, we're reflecting on our circumstances.

If we get that backwards—and we are constantly, *first*, going to: “Here's the circumstances that I'm walking through. How does that reflect on this perfect love that God is to have for me?” Why—if that's true, then that's faulty; and we get into this rabbit hole of—just some people never get out of it.

Dennis: You and Al went through a circumstance that is one many in our audience are not unfamiliar with—infertility.

Mary: Yes, sir.

Dennis: If we could have visited you during that time, would you have said you were practicing thanksgiving at that point?

Mary: Oh, probably not and not well; because, in seminary, you look around and it's—you know, they joke that it's in the water because everybody's pregnant, except for us. It's not something that you talk about with everyone you meet; so we would pick up from some couples that: “Oh, we just kind of thought we heard the Mohlers didn't want to have children,” or—which couldn't have been farther from the truth. To say that I walked through that with a sense of awe and gratitude that the Lord's timing is perfect and that He had a reason in all of this would be less than true.

Bob: So, if you could go back today—after writing the book / speaking on it—and you could talk to a young Mary Mohler about what she was walking through, what counsel would you give her?

Mary: I would have to just take her to Scripture, which is where I should have been, more faithfully, in terms of looking specifically for trusting the Lord. I mean, this ends up being a trust issue.

When you look at any one of the four obstacles that I outline in my book—as to *why* we're not just doing this so well—it all comes down to: “Do you trust the Lord or do you not? Do you not believe what we read in Romans 8:31-39?—that there's *nothing* that can separate us from His love?” That—as Paul David Tripp says—that it's gospel irrationality to think that the Lord has saved us and between, when we've become justified and when we'll become glorified, that there's going to be any time in there when we are not held in His hand. So that's what I would tell her.

Dennis: I've been spending a lot of time in the Psalms; and until I looked at your book, I don't think I'd ever connected that praise is really the Old Testament word for what the New Testament calls being grateful or being thankful. Do you agree?

Mary: I agree; and you—just as you say—you go through the Psalms and its *replete* with this command over, and over, and over again. It's like: "We just don't get it; so let me say it another way." David comes up with a different way, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to remind us that we are to have—whether he's talking about praising the Lord / whether he's talking about thanking Him with our whole heart—just meditate on that for a while.

It is hard to praise the Lord with your whole heart when you have a grumbling attitude when you don't understand why things are happening as they are. So that's when, as I suggest, you keep praying those verses in Psalms back to the Lord and do it until you mean it. Don't come away from it until you actually *mean* what you're saying.

Dennis: It's not natural to praise God when you're facing *impossible* circumstances, difficult circumstances, *painful* circumstances that aren't going to go away any time soon. You've got to face them, and you have to deal with your own heart in the process.

Mary: And you can't reach out to others when you're being hypocritical about your own thorns that you're dealing with.

That's when we look to Scripture for wisdom, and that's where we try to—as we accept what the Lord has given to us. I love one of the verses that we can turn to in the New Testament—in 1 Corinthians 7:17, it says, "Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him." We have to come to a point where we realize: "This is not the calling that the Lord has given to *you*, or to you, or to you; but He's given it to *me* for this season. There has to be some good in this. God is *always* good, *always* just, always kind. He loves me more than I can ever, ever imagine."

That's where you just have to step back and, again, discipline your thinking to not make this a big black cloud that is following you around but is going to be used, by the Lord, in ways that you *will* understand one day.

Bob: Mary, I've always marveled at the fact that the Book of Philippians is thought of as the epistle of joy.

Mary: Yes.

Bob: Paul talks about joy over and over in that epistle. He begins most of his letters to New Testament churches with "I thank God in all my remembrance of you."

Mary: Right.

Bob: And then I remember where Paul was when he wrote Philippians—he’s in a hole in the ground—

Mary: He is.

Bob: —chained to Roman guards, not getting humane treatment. You just stop and consider his circumstances; and it’s in that book that he says, “I’ve learned the secret of being content.” Paul, somehow, figured out how to be *grateful*. What did he know that we don’t know?

Mary: Well, he also says in that same letter that “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it,” and he believed that.

Bob: Yes.

Mary: And we also read in several places, including 1 Corinthians, about the thorn in the flesh that Paul had—that he asked the Lord *three times* for it to be removed, and it wasn’t; so he pressed on. As you say, the conditions in which he lived were so deplorable and, yet, he continued to trust in the Lord and to realize that the Lord would be faithful to complete this work that He began in him.

Bob: So do we have to somehow minimize our circumstances in order to get to gratitude? Or do we embrace the circumstances, fully, and try to find gratitude in the midst of them?

Mary: I don’t think we minimize it so much as we put to the forefront of our mind gratitude—we’ve got that as the default. From there, we go to: “Okay; this is what’s on my plate now—these are my circumstances; this is my thorn,”—however you want to look at it. Whether it’s a temporary situation, or whether it seems to be a chronic problem, whether it’s a relationship—whatever it is—the commands are still there for you to be grateful. Those commands are still there for you to praise the Lord with your whole heart, and that’s going to be more difficult to do under adversity. But as Paul illustrated so beautifully, it is both possible and very doable—to God’s glory.

Dennis: I don’t think we’re supposed to minimize our circumstances. Sometimes, they’re so big; there is no minimizing.

Mary: That’s true.

Dennis: Instead, I think what we are to do is to maximize who God is.

Mary: That’s right.

Dennis: As I would read through the Psalms over, and over, and over again, I would say, “But God, I don’t feel like giving thanks in all things,” speaking of the Apostle Paul, over in 1 Thessalonians, Chapter 5, verses 16-18—it says, “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give

thanks in all circumstances”; and then—this sounds a little bit like the passage you just read from 1 Corinthians.

Mary: Yes; “This is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus”; yes!

Dennis: Exactly; so: “Will you embrace this?”

That’s tough, Bob. When you’re in the circumstance, they’re painful—you want out of it—but a lot of life is lived where we’re talking about right here.

Mary: But Paul is just so clear; and you don’t have to be a Greek scholar to understand what he is saying there when he says: “rejoice,” “give thanks,” “pray,”—and at the end of it—“for this is the will of God.”

Here’s the reason: There are whole books written about how to know the will of God. Well, he’s got it here in a nutshell for us—that we do these three things. That’s not really over simplifying. That’s a tough challenge *to do* those three things, consistently, and to come away with an overwhelming trust in our Creator who loves us.

Bob: A couple of years ago, Ann Voskamp wrote a book that kind of took the world by storm—

Mary: Right.

Bob: —*A Thousand Gifts*, where she’s just recounting things for which she is grateful.

Mary: Right.

Bob: Do you think that that practice of being intentionally observant about the things in our lives, for which we ought to be grateful, is that a healthy spiritual discipline for us to practice?

Mary: I think it is. I think it’s biblical for us to regularly count our blessings and enumerate those before the Lord; but I would answer that question differently than I would have before I wrote the book, and before I started speaking on this, and the Lord began to teach me so much about it.

I’m so grateful for saints who’ve gone before, like the great Puritan, Jonathan Edwards. He’s the one who actually put into words that there are two different forms of gratitude. You’ve got this natural gratitude—that we’re all familiar with—

Dennis: Right.

Mary: —which is thanking God for the blessings we receive; and yes, we need to do that. But there is a *second* level that’s called “gracious gratitude” that is thankfulness for God, Himself, for who He is.

Dennis: Yes.

Mary: This one's the primary one—it's deeper; it's relational—our relationship with God. It's not conditional upon what He's given to us—it's for His character and who He is.

For me, personally, when I now seek to praise the Lord on a daily basis in prayer—and I have a blessing journal, where I have a list of things for which I am thankful—I've completely redone that list. I have vaulted to the top of that list the attributes of God. I want to thank Him, first of all, for who He is. Below that I have a list of things that are, not unique just to the Lord, that are characteristic of Him—of being faithful, and patient, and kind, and gentle—and He is *always* all of those things—but I can also *learn* to be patient, and holy, and kind, and gentle. I will never learn to be omniscient, or omnipotent, or sovereign. It's kind of a—two different lists.

I try to work through those before I ever get to “Oh, and thank you for my good health,” and “Thank you for my family,” and “...my possessions,” and all of that.

Bob: If our gratitude is based on how life is going—the fact that the sun is out today, my health is good, my kids are obeying / whatever it is—then tomorrow, when it's cloudy, and I got a cough, and the kids aren't obeying—

Mary: That's right; it's conditional.

Bob: —then, all of a sudden, what happens to my gratitude?

Mary: That's right.

Bob: But God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. If my gratitude is found *in Him*, then tomorrow, when it's cloudy, I'm still thankful that God is who He is on cloudy days.

I'm thinking of Job and his wife—

Mary: Right.

Bob: —and Job's wife says: “Based on circumstances, don't be grateful. Curse God—

Mary: “Curse God and die”; right.

Bob: —and he said, “No; I'm going to bless God in the good days, and I'm going to bless God in the bad days; because blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Mary: Absolutely. This gracious gratitude can be transformational when you *train* yourself to think that way. It's just something I had never read about before—to where we need to be very intentional because it's not something we will naturally do—to thank God for who He is.

You know, in the book, I tell the story about the guy that's so nervous about asking his wife—future wife—to marry him. He buys the ring, and he gets down on one knee, and he does all of that. She is so thrilled with this ring. He asks her to marry him; and she quickly says, "Yes!" but then she just can't stop talking about the ring. She goes into all of its attributes—its color, and its clarity, and all of this.

He's relieved, because he spent a lot of money on this ring—she likes it—but "Okay; what about me?" He's carefully rehearsed what he wanted to say; but now, she has a chance to tell him words that he, hopefully, will never forget of this moment; and they never come, because all she's consumed with is the ring. He'd be foolish to marry a woman like that; because she just knows he has a great taste in jewelry, but he does not know what she thinks about him for him—so that's where we are.

Dennis: It's interesting—when you are facing circumstances, like we're talking about here, that are negative—the Psalmist declares praise in all those circumstances. I want to read you something, and this is what I appreciate about the Bible—it doesn't sugar coat real life. The Psalmist—throughout the entire book—over, and over, and over again talks about people who don't like him / people, who are encircling him.

Mary: Right; enemies.

Dennis: You know a little bit about that in your life.

Mary: Yes, sir.

Dennis: Let me just read Psalm 109—just a few verses—but listen to where it begins: "Be not silent, O God of my praise!" So the Psalmist is giving thanks to God—he's praising God. But listen to his complaint: "For the wicked and deceitful mouths are open against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They encircle me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, but I gave myself to prayer." The Psalmist did the very thing you're calling us to do, too, Mary. He's calling us to meditate on who God is—look at your circumstances, but don't lose sight of who God is.

Mary: Absolutely.

Dennis: You were encircled, for a period of time, by people who didn't like you.

Mary: True!

Dennis: You remember those years.

Mary: I do.

Dennis: Share with our listeners how you handled that—maybe just a little bit of the story and how you expressed praise in the midst of that.

Mary: Well, 25 years ago, my husband, at the age of 33, was called to become the president of Southern Seminary. We moved back to the campus, where we had been just four years prior, where he was a student there—a PhD student.

Bob: Not everybody was delighted with his appointment.

Mary: No; you could say that. [Laughter] People were not only surprised but not too happy about it; because they knew where he stood, theologically.

Bob: Were you counseling your own heart toward gratitude in those years?—do you think?

Mary: Probably not. I was taking it one day at a time, and I was trying to be very intentional about not letting that root of bitterness spring up.

Bob: But there's a difference between not allowing bitterness to take root in your heart and having a heart of gratitude.

Mary: That's true. I would say I did not have a heart of gratitude, at that time in my spiritual walk, for what we were being handed.

Bob: And a lot of people will listen to those circumstances and say, "Well, nobody is going to *expect* you to have a heart of gratitude in the midst of that." But you would say, "God expects that, *even* in the hard times."

Mary: Now, I would say that—from what I have learned and what He has taught me through a more careful study of His Word—that gratitude is always appropriate, even though it doesn't feel like the natural default. Again, it goes back to that faulty thinking that we have—where we've got to mentally train ourselves that that's where we go first.

Dennis: And I want to encourage our listeners—maybe, tonight before dinner or after dinner—they just gather around and make a list, as a family, of 25 things you're thankful for.

Bob: —and start with who God is.

Dennis: Start with God's character. Then, after you've listed the 25 things, as a family, then open to 1 Thessalonians, Chapter 5, verse 16, and read [this verse]: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." That is unnatural.

Mary: It's true.

Dennis: That demands faith; and that demands a knowledge and an experience, Bob, of what you were just talking about—God's character.

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