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Rediscovering Gratefulness

Guest: Mary Mohler
From the series: Growing in Gratitude (Day 2 of 3)
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Bob: You're familiar with 1 Thessalonians 5:18?—the verse that says, "In everything, give thanks, for this is the will of God for you,"—so where's the disconnect? How come we're not seeing more gratitude? Here's Mary Mohler.

Mary: Since this *is* such a clear biblical mandate, why do we not see more people talking about it? Why do we, most of all, not see people exhibiting great gratitude on a regular basis? There've got to be some hindrances.

The one I put at the top of the list is that: "We're grateful, but we are conflicted; because we're pained by the fact that we have loved ones who do not know the Lord. We feel conflicted—being so happy in Christ—when they're so hopelessly lost."

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. Is that one of the things that's keeping you from giving thanks to God, or are there other hindrances? We'll explore that with Mary Mohler today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. I don't think of you as a grumpy, grumbler type. You would not classify yourself that way; would you? I mean, I'm thinking about those two—

Dennis: I know my own heart—that's the problem.

Bob: I know, but I'm thinking about those two guys on *The Muppet Show*. Do you remember the two guys, who would sit in the balcony, on *The Muppet Show*? Did you ever watch *The Muppet Show*?

Dennis: I did, but was it Grouchy?—was he one?

Bob: No! There are two guys—now, you're thinking of *Sesame Street* and Oscar the Grouch—is what I think.

Dennis: Okay; that was a puppet too.

Bob: I'm thinking of the two critics, who would sit there in the back—and whatever would go on, they'd just grumble about what they had just seen; and they would

denigrate it. There are people like that, who—whatever—you tell them that their favorite team just won the World Series—and they go, “Yeah; but next year, they’re going to be terrible!”—right?

Dennis: Right.

Bob: You know people like that. You’re not one of those people.

Dennis: I’m not; but I must have it in my DNA, because I gave birth to six kids—

Bob: Yes?—and what are you saying about that?!

Mary: Did you?

Bob: Oh! Did you hear that?! [Laughter]

Dennis: What?

Mary: I said, “Did you give birth to six children?” [Laughter]

Maybe we should get Barbara in here! [Laughter]

Dennis: Yes; well, we should.

Bob: I think so!

Dennis: Did I say, “I” or “we”?

Mary: You said, “I.”

Bob: No; you said, “I gave birth to six kids.”

Dennis: Okay; let’s correct that.

Bob: No! Let’s leave it! Barbara gave birth; you take the credit. [Laughter]

Dennis: Let’s give the credit where it’s due! We did have six kids—but we would go on vacation—

Let me just introduce our guest, though, here. Mary Mohler joins us, again, on *FamilyLife Today*. She’s the author of *Growing in Gratitude: Rediscovering the Joy of a Thankful Heart*. Welcome back, Mary.

Mary: Thank you so much. Glad to be here!

Dennis: She lives in Louisville, where she's married to Al Mohler since 1983—two children.

Mary: —two grandchildren—let's not leave them off!

Dennis: Ahhhh, two grandchildren!

Mary: Yes.

Dennis: I've got to mention them.

Mary: Yes.

Dennis: Where I wanted to go was—at the beginning of our vacations, Mary—

Mary: Oh!

Dennis: —we would create a little jar. Back then, I think it was a quarter jar.

Mary: Yes.

Dennis: We would fill it with about ten bucks' worth of quarters. Six kids into ten bucks; they could each end up with, you know, \$1.50 or something like that to go get an ice cream cone. That was back when \$1.50 would do that; you know?

Mary: That's right! Sure.

Dennis: So we would start out the vacation; and we would say: "We're going to eradicate griping, grumbling, and disputing on this trip. So, the first time we hear you griping about obeying or griping about your brother or sister, we're going to take a quarter out.

Mary: Oooh; how did that go?

Dennis: "And if you gripe about the quarter coming out, we're going to take *another* quarter out."

Mary: Oh, tough!

Dennis: And this really, really worked—it got the vacation started off on the right foot. Now, I wish I could tell you that, because we practiced that, that took care of it for the rest of the existence of time on earth—it didn't!

Mary: And now, you're telling me that your kids, when they go on vacation, do this with their kids; right?

Dennis: I would imagine—

Mary: It's generational now.

Dennis: —I would imagine they would. That's why I answered Bob the way I did—they had to get it from somebody. They didn't get it from Barbara. [Laughter] They had to get this DNA from someone—griping, grumbling, and disputing. It's a disease of the human heart; isn't it, Mary?

Mary: It is; and some people will try to attribute that to kind of an Eeyore mentality—that it's in the genes—that some people are just born that way; you know? I also make the argument—like: “Maybe there are just some parents who just nail this life lesson better than others did with their kids,” “Maybe some just—you know, they have the gene for it—to be grateful and not grumpy,” “Maybe some are just like the Eeyore, that can manage to find a storm cloud on a clear day.” [Laughter] But that is not, biblically, how we are to be.

We go back to the passage that we started with—that I start and end the book with—in Colossians 2. It talks about how: “As we have received Christ the Lord”—Christ Jesus the Lord—“so we walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” The Greek scholars tell us that that abounding means—it connotes the idea of us spilling over with gratitude. It's not like we're half-full of it / three-quarters of the way full; it's: “If you bump into us, gratitude spills out.”

Bob: Yes.

Mary: It's impossible to be grumpy if you are filled up with gratitude as we are commanded to be through God's Holy Word.

Bob: One of the treasures of your book, *Growing in Gratitude*, is that you help us identify gratitude robbers—things that make gratitude difficult / things that hinder us from being grateful. So give us an example of something that would hinder us from gratitude.

Mary: Sure; I'm glad to. I have to say that I started to pinpoint these; because it became very unsettling to me that, since this is such a clear biblical mandate, why do we not see more people talking about it? Why do we, most of all, not see people exhibiting great gratitude on a regular basis?—there've got to be some hindrances.

I came up with a list of four. You know, your list of four may be completely different than mine—this is not exhaustive—but the one I'd put at the top of the list is that: “We're grateful, but we are conflicted; because we're pained by the fact that we have loved ones who do not know the Lord. We feel conflicted—being so happy in Christ—when

they're so hopelessly lost," that's a huge concern. Those who have prodigal children know what a concern that is. You almost feel guilty feeling grateful, which is completely counterintuitive and wrong, but that's one obstacle.

A second one—

Bob: Well, hang on; before you go to a second one—

Mary: Oh, okay.

Bob: —just help me with this a little bit; because there are people in my life—I'm burdened for them to come to know the Lord. If they are family members; if they are children; or if there are parents, who are approaching death, this can be a burden on somebody's heart. How do we cultivate *gratitude* if we've got a parent, who is in hospice, who doesn't know the Lord? Where do you find gratitude in the midst of that?

Mary: It's a huge, huge obstacle. I consider this one to be *the* most serious. I think that we would almost sooner—if we were in control, which we're not, deal with a life-threatening illness to ourselves or to a loved one, who's in the Lord, than deal with a healthy person—seemingly, physically healthy—who has just slammed the door on the gospel so many times.

There are no quick, pat answers to this.

This does become a trust issue: "Do you trust the Lord, or do you not? Do you believe that He loves that loved one more than you do, or do you not? I mean, He created that person in His own image; He is working His plan in ways that we do not know, or will not understand, this side of heaven. So we keep on praying; we keep on trusting."

I give a quote about how seeds that we plant now may lie under the ground until we do—until we're dead and in the ground—and then, that may be the perfect time that the Lord chooses for those seeds to sprout, and grow up, and break through that ground. What a glorious thing it is—when we would write somebody off—that: "There's no way that person's coming back to the Lord," and they do in a tremendously glorious way that honors the Lord.

Bob: I have a friend of mine—burdened for his mom for years. She was pretty stubborn in her resistance to the gospel in spite of her son's love and care for her. In the last three weeks of her life, in a conversation with a granddaughter, the light came into her soul. She recognized her sin, and she turned, and she repented.

This son thought to himself, "This will never happen." But God's grace can penetrate the most stubborn, hardened heart. As long as somebody still has life and breath, the story's not over; is it?

Mary: Absolutely! And we don't know—I mean, we've got that very short account that's given to us, just in one of the gospels, of how that thief on the cross—

Dennis: Yes.

Mary: —you know, is with the Lord in paradise. Look at what a horrible life he lived; and moments before he died, we know that the Lord saved him. Only the Lord knows the heart. So, in those end of life cases, we have to keep on praying / keep on trusting.

You know, I advise even *dreaming* about what it would look like for that person to come to Christ: “It seems so bad now, but look what could happen if that person were in these circumstances, and then the Lord draws him to Himself, and that person is then able to go to others, who've been in that circumstance, and say, ‘You know, I was there, too; and here's how the Lord transformed me.’”

Bob: Parents of prodigals—

Mary: Yes.

Bob: —struggle with this—

Mary: Absolutely.

Bob: —to have gratitude for who God is when a child is wandering—it is a hard place to be.

Mary: It's a super-hard place to be. It's one of those places where the Lord can use that to draw us closer to Him, even though that also sounds counterintuitive—that our trust has to be so strong in Him—that we really believe what we're reading in this precious Book that He has given us—that He has preserved for us for centuries so that we don't have to wonder—but we *know* who He is. He is God, and we are not! Our thoughts are not His thoughts; our ways are not His ways—He's in charge!

Bob: You tell a story in the book about a father of seven—

Mary: Yes! I love that story!

Bob: —and he was a believer—but none of his kids were?

Mary: He was; he was a believer; his wife was not. He had one son, of the seven, who came to Christ before he died. He died with one son trusting the Lord, and that son then felt so burdened for his remaining family. Time and time again, he would share the gospel; and they would just shut it down.

So, for whatever reason, he felt convicted to make a recording—to give one last chance, should he pre-decease them. He made this recording, and he gave it to a Christian friend—he said: “Look, just keep this in case anything ever happens to me. Pull it out at my funeral.” Well, this man was a young man; but he was a passenger on an aircraft, and that aircraft went down. He died in that plane crash.

This Christian friend pulled it out and played it at the funeral. Of the family members that were there—so that’s what?—[six] remaining siblings—they all came to Christ, except for one. His own wife, his own children, his own *mother* came to the Lord, hearing his words that were recorded. In such a glorious way, the Lord took those people—and took their life stories—and made them flourish in the Lord.

One in particular is a medical doctor—he and his wife were both medical doctors in New York City. Their world turned upside down. They closed their medical practices; they ended up in the Dominican Republic, where Sr. Miguel Nunez is now pastor of a strong church.

He’s planting churches; he’s doing medicine on the side now. I just love to think about what a great reunion that will be in glory when that brother realizes that seeds he planted have come to fruition in ways he would *never* have dreamed had happened!

Dennis: That’s cool.

Mary, you have such a strong conviction about this second hindrance to gratitude that you want to start a national campaign.

Mary: I do! “Stop the glorification of busy!!” This is something among homemakers, in particular, that we tend to want to one-up each other about: “Well, you think you’ve got a lot going on...” As the mother of only two children, which to me was a full quiver; but to mothers of so many more than that—they have so many plates spinning in the air—that becomes, if we’re not careful, an excuse to be so busy fulfilling that calling of motherhood / fulfilling the calling that the Lord has given us to do in our particular circumstances, where we just, frankly, are not intentional about gratitude; because we don’t have time.

We’re grateful that we get to just open the Scriptures—find some inspirational nugget to get us through the day, many times; thank God for our blessings—and feel pretty good about that.

Bob: What I hear you saying in that is that, to really cultivate a grateful heart, we have to cordon off some quiet time/some contemplative time. If we’re rushed around every day, we’re not going to have margin to even stop and think about the things that we ought to be grateful for.

Mary: Absolutely true. I love Richard Swenson’s work on that word, “margin,” and how he coined that for us.

Dennis: Yes.

Mary: There’s so much truth in that! I heard a pastor recently talk about the internal race of holiness that we have and the external race of gospel-advance that we read about in Scripture—of advancing the gospel—Paul talks about that. It’s not an either/or—we’re not supposed to go off into some cloister somewhere and just work on our internal race of holiness, but we’re also to be about this external race of advancing the gospel—doing them *both* and doing them well until Jesus comes.

Bob: The biblical account of the ten lepers, who were healed,—

Mary: Yes!

Bob: —that plays into this whole busyness thing that you’re talking about; doesn’t it?

Mary: It certainly does; and you know, *certainly*, we’d be that one who went back; right? We wouldn’t keep running, having been cured of this horrible disease, and forget to say, “Thank you.” But nine out of the ten do. We’ve been cured of something horribly worse than leprosy—we’ve been separated, eternally, from God—now, we’ve been reconciled to Him through Christ. We should be brimming with—overflowing with gratitude.

Bob: Now, I’ve got to believe—because I know your husband and his schedule—and I’m thinking your schedule is pretty intense too—

Mary: It is!

Bob: —is this just something you’re telling other people to do?—or are you doing something about this yourself?

Mary: Oh, no; that would be very hypocritical of me. [Laughter] I teach student wives. I am now an empty nester. That is a different phase of life that I share with many other women, including Barbara Rainey, who has done some great work on writing about that.

Things do change, and you do have more time to set your own schedule.

I try to encourage the student wives that I teach at Southern Seminary that they don’t need to necessarily feel guilty that they don’t have an hour of quiet time every day. For some of them, quiet time is going to the bathroom, locking the door, and having just a few moments, where someone cannot come in and disturb them. [Laughter] That is a season that will not last, and they must not just punt during that season; they must *carve* out the time, not only for gratitude, but for other spiritual disciplines of Bible intake, and of prayer, and all that goes with that.

But when you get to be my age—and you’re a grandmother, and you have more time—then, you get to set the schedule. It is very telling how much a priority you make of that internal race.

Bob: Do you find yourself going through seasons, where you’ll get to the end of a week and go, “I have just—I’ve been going so fast that I didn’t carve out the time”?

Mary: Yes; I’m probably a little bit unusual in that I’m not one of those people—up at 5:00, who embraces the whole thing of “Seek the Lord early in the morning,”—because I would come back with, “Well, midnight or 12:03 is earlier in the morning than your 5:03 is!” [Laughter]

I’ve always taught that the Lord deserves my *best* time of day. For me, that’s not going to be when I first wake up. Maybe that’s because I’m not a coffee drinker or whatever. My day needs to get going first; and then I, purposefully, will set aside the best time of day when my mind is in its best frame of learnedness so that I can open up God’s Word and seek to be taught by Him.

As I teach that—as I teach spiritual disciplines, and I talk about a method that I use for Scripture memorization, and the Bible journal that I use—at the end of all that, I hasten to add to these women, before they go home feeling very inadequate, that I *do not* do all of those things every day. That would be a flat-out lie to say that I do. There are times when I am guilty of letting that external race cramp out the internal race, and that’s just wrong. I have to repent of that and come back to: “Here, is the Lord who made me—He wants to hear from me!”

I mean, how do we ever get over the fact that *He* wants to hear from us?!

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: And I want to skip the third one.

Mary: Okay.

Dennis: People who want to know number three are going to have to get your book.

Bob: Really?! [Laughter]

Mary: Okay!

Dennis: I want to go to the fourth one, which I think is a biggie—it’s *doubt*.

Mary: Yes.

Dennis: Explain how that undermines a spirit of thanksgiving and praise.

Mary: This was one where I had to give kind of a disclaimer at the beginning of the chapter; because I had the blessing of being raised in a Christian home, where my earliest memories were in the church. I made a profession of faith at a very early age—an age that I wouldn't even recommend now. I remember it—I remember it clearly—I remember being baptized, and the Lord has held me fast my entire life. I've not drifted away from Him—not really been tempted to do a lot of the things that teenagers do and get into. But that's my life story, and I'm grateful for the fact that my testimony is a *powerful* one.

This is a little off the topic; but I get irritated with people who say they don't have a powerful testimony, because it's one like mine.

I was hopelessly lost! I was a great little rule-keeper—a goodie-goodie kid—but I could no more save myself than the worst, most-hardened criminal. So every testimony of God's grace is a miracle. There are people who have been saved from *horrible* life choices, and the Lord turned them around—by His grace, He saved them—but they still struggle with doubt that they can really be forgiven / that they can really stand clothed in Christ's righteousness.

I give the example of—it's like someone, who's walking into court, and they're guilty. Here's someone else, who has come in and said, "I'm going to accept this sentence, and you're free to go." That person—instead of being happy about it, and jumping up and down, and being forever grateful, and telling everyone what that person did—it's like they wake up every morning and worry, "Well, maybe he's going to change his mind," or "Maybe I'm going to have to go back to prison after all," "Maybe I'm really not—maybe my record really isn't expunged."

That's how those who doubt act when they *don't* want to freely accept what the Lord has given.

They don't really trust that He is true to His Word and that, when He says that you have been justified and that "You are safe in My hand forever," then doubt can definitely be an obstacle to gratitude.

Bob: I read somebody on Twitter, just recently, who said, "Jesus didn't just show up in the courtroom with our acquittal papers; He showed up with our adoption papers as well."

Mary: Absolutely; He did. Praise God!

Bob: You stop and you think about gratitude—to be free from the punishment of sin, which we deserve—is enough of a source of gratitude. To be adopted into the house of

the King?—I mean, if you can meditate on those two things and *not* get to a place of gratitude, you haven't thought deeply enough about what we've just been talking about.

Mary: That's so true! How do we begin to get our minds around that?—we can't, this side of heaven.

Dennis: I can't engage in a conversation around doubt without quoting a guy, who made an impact in my life through one of my favorite quotes. His name was Tom Skinner, and here's what he said about doubt—this was where I was living, Mary; I did struggle with doubts—I wanted to see it before I would believe it; okay?

Mary: Yes.

Dennis: But Tom Skinner said this: "I spent a long time trying to come to grips with my doubts; when suddenly, I realized I'd better come to grips with what I believe. I have since moved from the agony of questions that I cannot answer to the reality of answers that I cannot escape, and it's a great relief!"

Mary: Yes.

Dennis: So, to the person, who's struggling with doubt and can't give thanks—may need to take a step back and determine: "What do you believe?"

Mary: That's right.

Dennis: "Do you believe what Mary said?—that you once were condemned, but now you are declared to be forgiven?" That has a way of moving the needle—the doubt needle—toward faith—

Mary: It does.

Dennis: —causing us to embrace God, and Who He is, and His character.

And, to the listener, who's wondering, "So what do I do with this?" I want to give you an assignment. I want you to turn to Psalm 106, and I want you to go read the punch line in verse 25—it says, "They murmured in their tents and did not obey the voice of the Lord." It's talking about the nation of Israel. They griped, belly-ached, murmured, and groused in their tents.

What your assignment, as a listener—go read the previous 24 verses and see if you can find the five things that led them to get to that point—there are some really important things. The first one—I'll just let you know—is in verse 13: "They soon forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel."

Bob: This sounds like a sermon you're getting ready to preach somewhere; right?
[Laughter]

Dennis: I've preached it a few times to my own soul—[Laughter]

Bob: Right.

Dennis: —because I need to remember what God has done; so that I don't forget who God is—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: —and I don't forget to trust Him today.

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