

Flourishing in Faith

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Theology Encountering Positive Psychology



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Chapter 8

Gratitude

A Theological and Psychological Dialogue



CARLA FORD AND ANDREW FORD

INTRODUCTION

GRATITUDE, A CHRISTIAN VIRTUE and central tenet within Christian theology, is being lauded as a panacea for wellbeing within Positive Psychology. A myriad of studies have been conducted and the results are impressive. Gratitude has been shown to increase wellbeing, both physically and mentally, and those who practice gratitude consistently report a range of benefits: stronger immune systems; lower blood pressure; better, more refreshing sleep; lower levels of stress and depression; higher levels of positive emotions; more energy; and more optimism and happiness. In addition, they are more generous and compassionate and have stronger relationships.

Although traditionally a topic of inquiry within the disciplines of philosophy and theology, interest from sociology and psychology has seen the number of publications referring to gratitude increase exponentially over

the last twenty years. It seems that Positive Psychology is catching up with what Christians have known for two millennia—gratitude is important.

BIBLICAL GRATITUDE

The Bible contains instruction on, and examples of, thanksgiving to God. Sacrifices of thanksgiving were offered in the Old Testament (Lev 7:12–15; 2 Chron 29:31; Ps 50:23) and priests were allocated to represent and facilitate the people in giving thanks to God (1 Chron 16:4, 41; 2 Chron 20:21). Thanksgiving and gratitude to God are prevalent within the Psalms: “O Lord my God, I will give you thanks for ever” (Ps 30:12) and “I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart” (Ps 9:1). Throughout the gospels Jesus models the practice of gratitude by giving thanks to God (Matt 11:25; 15:36; Mark 14:23; John 11:41). Pauline theology is rich in both expressions of thankfulness and instruction regarding gratitude: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father, through him” (Col 3:17). Biblical gratitude always appears to be attributed directly, and indirectly, to God, as in 1 Thess 1:2, “We always thank God for all of you.”

The life and death of Jesus Christ is viewed as the highest expression of God’s love and benevolence to humanity (Phil 2:6–8; 1 John 3:16). The English words “grateful” and “grace” share the same derivative *gratus* from the Latin, meaning thankful and pleasing. The eminent theologian Karl Barth wrote, “Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. . . . As far as man is concerned there can be no question of anything but gratitude”¹ and this acknowledgement forms a deep part of Christian worship.

Unsurprisingly, Positive Psychology studies have found a strong correlation between religiousness and gratitude. When participants of one proto-type study were asked to list the characteristics or attributes they associate with prayer, “thanking” was frequently mentioned, second only to “God.”² Individuals who spend time praying, reading the Bible and cultivating a relationship with God, tend to be more grateful in everyday life.

1. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 42.
2. Lambert et al., “Prototype Analysis.”

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY'S UNDERSTANDING OF GRATITUDE

Gratitude is complex and has been conceptualized in a number of different ways within Positive Psychology. Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, leading researchers in the area of gratitude, have described gratitude as an attitude, an emotion, a personality trait, a habit, a moral virtue and a coping response.³ Positive Psychology has analyzed gratitude, dissecting and scrutinizing the various components in order to understand its complexities.

There is a difference between gratitude as a state (a temporary emotion) and as a trait (a consistent personality attribute), yet recent insights from neurobiology show that states, traits and moods all concern activation of the same neural circuits. This means that those with a disposition towards gratitude (trait) will experience more frequent and intense states of gratitude, whilst those who practice gratitude (state) may eventually find their disposition changing.

Positive Psychology, as a science, has developed three main scales to measure levels and types of gratitude. An analysis of the questions posed in these scales point towards eight distinct, but related, concepts:

1. An individual's perception of how often and how deeply gratitude is experienced, (expressed in terms such as "I have so much in life to be thankful for").
 2. An appreciation of others (I'm really thankful for friends and family).
 3. An appreciation of what an individual has (I reflect on how fortunate I am to have basic things in life like food, clothing, and shelter).
 4. Feelings of awe (When I see natural beauty like Niagara Falls, I feel like a child who is awestruck).
 5. Behaviors designed to express gratitude (I say "please" and "thank you" to indicate my appreciation).
 6. Stopping and focusing on positive aspects in the present moment (I think it's really important to "stop and smell the roses").
 7. Appreciation arising from the understanding that nothing is permanent (Thinking about dying reminds me to live every day to the fullest).
3. Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings," 377.

8. An appreciation of one's own life in comparison with someone worse off (When I see someone less fortunate than myself, I realize how lucky I am).⁴

As a result of this analysis, Wood and colleagues conceptualized trait gratitude as involving a life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in life.

ELEMENTS OF GRATITUDE

In psychological literature, gratitude has widely been defined with reference to the presence of a benefactor, a benefit, and a benefit appraisal.

External Benefactor—Or Not

Some researchers conceptualize gratitude as an emotion that occurs after receiving a positive outcome from a benefactor. This triadic understanding of gratitude requires 1) a beneficiary, 2) a benefit, and 3) a benefactor to whom the beneficiary is grateful. The emotion that results from this interpersonal exchange has been referred to as “benefit-triggered gratitude,” or “agentic gratitude,” and research has shown that the level of gratitude experienced depends on one's perception of the cost, intention and altruistic nature of the benefit. We've probably all received a gift at Christmas that could have been for anybody in the family, and we have perhaps not been as appreciative as we were of a carefully selected or expensive gift. When the recipient of a benefit (the beneficiary) perceives the benefactor as being thoughtful and responsive to their needs, it can lead to increased levels of gratitude and a higher quality relationship, for both parties.

An in-depth review of publications from psychology, sociology, and philosophy revealed two related but possibly distinct constructs—gratitude and gratefulness—whereby gratefulness is perceived as similar to gratitude in terms of benefit appraisal, but differs in that there is no perceived agent or benefactor. For example, it may include a sense of wonder and universal gratitude, such as a peak experience in the solitude of a mountain top. This dyadic understanding of gratitude (beneficiary + benefit) has been called “generalized gratitude” or “non-agentic gratitude,” whilst some have referred to it as gratefulness.

4. Wood et al., “Gratitude,” 890–905.

Theological Objection

As discussed in the opening chapter, the science of psychology is based on the belief that human behavior can be explained without resorting to spiritual or transcendent explanations. In its simplest form the philosophy that underpins psychology, naturalism, is often defined as an understanding of the world without God. This obviously leads to tensions and disagreements between the fields of Positive Psychology and theology.

The suggestion that gratitude exists without a benefactor is incompatible with a Christian worldview. During the Anglican Eucharist service, the congregation declare, “Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendor, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you,” and Col 1:15–17 makes it clear that God is the creator and sustainer of life and that all things originate from him. God is intricately involved in all of life, regardless of people’s awareness or acknowledgment of his presence.

Positive Psychology may interpret phrases such as “I have a very good life” and “I am fortunate to be me” as measures of non-agentive gratitude, but when viewed through a Christian lens, these items can still be attributed to an agent; God. Some researchers have suggested that gratitude occurs in two stages. Firstly, people recognize that they have experienced a positive outcome, which causes happiness. And secondly, this happiness is attributed to an external source and labeled as gratitude. This theory seems to align more with a Judeo-Christian worldview, in which the positive emotion induced through experiencing a glorious sunset, whilst having no immediate benefactor, is attributed to God, as creator.

There has been a call within Positive Psychology for further research to explore the extent to which the experience and expression of generalized gratitude may relate to views of God. In their proto-type analysis of gratitude, Lambert, Graham and Fincham found that although almost half of the participants considered generalized gratitude as an important component of their concept of gratitude, God still appeared as a subtheme within these narratives.⁵ With over 84 percent of the world’s population (5.8 billion people) identifying with a religious group (Pew Research Center, 2012), exploring all aspects of religiousness/spirituality and how it relates to human flourishing is imperative.

5. Lambert et al., “Prototype Analysis.”

Benefit Appraisal

Benefit appraisal is the notion that a real situation is more favorable than the alternatives. As human beings, we are constantly comparing and assessing ourselves, and our situation, against other alternatives, past, present, or even expected future, and this often influences how we think, feel, and act. For example, we may take our previous circumstances into consideration (I'm glad our noisy neighbors moved away), compare our current situation with a negative outcome of what could have been (at least no-one was seriously injured in the accident), view the situation against what was expected (I didn't think I would get such a large bonus), or compare our own situation with that of a third party (I'm so thankful that I'm not a refugee). Benefit appraisal spans a wide range of subjects, such as our circumstances; our relationships; our possessions; how we perceive qualities such as peace and happiness; events or experiences; sensations such as warmth; and opportunities such as education. In addition, someone else's actions or motivations may cause a benefit appraisal, either in a specific way (e.g., I'm grateful that Bob made my lunch today) or more vaguely (e.g., I'm grateful that people are willing to be farmers).⁶

Theological Objection

From a Christian perspective, a person can feel and express gratitude to God without being the recipient of a specific gift. The fact that God is God elicits thanksgiving and gratitude from his people. 1 Chron 16:25 declares, "Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise," whilst the psalmist exhorts the people to give thanks to God for his goodness (Ps 136:1). The theologian C. H. Spurgeon remarked, "he is the Giver of all good . . . the source of good, the good of all good, the sustainer of good."⁷ Separating God from his goodness is a redundant notion, as is separating the gift from the giver. Giving thanks to God for who he is, is arguably distinct from benefit-triggered and generalized gratitude, and was referred to as "gracious gratitude" by the seventeenth-century theologian, Jonathan Edwards.⁸

As the research surrounding gratitude continues to grow, it is becoming apparent that the layperson's definitions and understandings of gratitude

6. Rusk et al. *Gratitude or Gratefulness?*

7. Spurgeon, "Psalm 136."

8. Edwards, *Treatise*.

are broader than those currently being used by researchers. Participants in a 2009⁹ study listed characteristics that came to mind when they heard the word gratitude, resulting in fifty-two gratitude features, more than commonly utilized in research. The use of more qualitative methodology, and drilling down into more complex concepts such as indebtedness and gratitude, as well as felt and expressed gratitude, may help to deepen our understanding of this complex concept.

Children of God and the Abundant Life

In the opening chapter of this book, Ellen Charry writes, “God wants us to flourish [and] is genuinely distressed when we languish.” In much the same way parents and teachers want the children in their care to flourish. In keeping with this desire they give their children “requests” (which are actually commands in disguise), only to be met with “why?” Of course, the immediate answer may be “because I said so,” and yet behind the command lies wisdom and a desire to see the child safe, happy, and successful.

As a child grows and develops, the adult may share the reasoning behind an instruction. In the same way, God urges us to give thanks, which as believers, we do without necessarily knowing why. Positive Psychology, in observing and analyzing gratitude, has highlighted many positive outcomes associated with giving thanks, and can perhaps give some insight as to why God has given this instruction. In John 10:10, Jesus says, “I have come that you might have abundant life,” and it could be argued the findings of Positive Psychology illustrate some of that abundance.

BENEFITS OF GRATITUDE

When asked which commandments were the most important, Jesus answered, “Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30–31). The benefits of gratitude are well documented and plentiful, but Positive Psychology’s primary focus has been on the “loving self” part of the command, with more recent studies beginning to look at “loving your neighbor.” Physical benefits were revealed in an analysis of almost 1000 Swiss adults, where higher levels of dispositional (trait) gratitude correlated with

9. Lambert et al., “Prototype Analysis.”

better self-reported physical health.¹⁰ Psychological benefits were demonstrated in a 2003 study, showing that those who consciously focused on and documented what they were grateful for, were more optimistic.¹¹ Social benefits are discussed in more detail below.

Positive Psychology has shown there are many positive relational outcomes associated with the practice of gratitude, including benefits to the beneficiary, the initial benefactor and the wider community. Researchers have suggested the experience of gratitude, and the actions it stimulates, build and strengthen social bonds and friendships. In one study, 2000 Swiss children were asked how they would respond if someone gave them something they had always wanted. Whilst many of the children spoke of repaying the action in some way, many imagined doing things that would connect them more closely with the benefactor, such as sharing an activity together or offering friendship or faithfulness.

A number of studies support the idea that people who have been grateful for receiving a benefit are more likely to act pro-socially towards the benefactor, and in some instances, towards other people in ensuing interactions. Not only do grateful individuals demonstrate more positive mental states (e.g., optimistic, enthusiastic, and motivated), they are also more helpful, caring, and generous towards others.¹² McCullough et al. refer to this “pay-it-forward” idea as a moral motivator. In addition, gratitude can act as a reinforcer of moral behavior.¹³ When a beneficiary expresses gratitude, the benefactor is reinforced for his or her benevolence, encouraging more benevolent behaviors in the future. Evidence has also supported the idea that gratitude may inhibit people from engaging in destructive interpersonal behavior.

Gratitude is a key element of successful close relationships such as marriage. According to a study of long-term married couples, appreciation is one of the important factors in contributing to a satisfying marriage.¹⁴ Another study of couples (who had been married for an average of twenty years) found felt or expressed gratitude significantly related to marital satisfaction.¹⁵ Amongst newly-weds, couples expressing gratitude (and

10. Hill et al. *Examining the Pathways*.

11. Emmons and McCullough, “Counting Blessings versus Burdens.”

12. McCullough et al., “Grateful Disposition,” 112.

13. McCullough et al., “Is Gratitude a Moral Affect?,” 249.

14. Kaslow and Hammerschmidt, “Long Term ‘Good’ Marriages,” 15–38.

15. Gordon et al., “Have You Thanked Your Spouse Today?,” 339–43.

other protective factors such as trust, respect, commitment, and affection) were more likely to have higher marital satisfaction, and even those who had been together for a relatively short time found gratitude predicted increased relationship satisfaction for both partners. In a series of studies, researchers found that individuals who were appreciative of their partners became more responsive and committed over time. Consideration of how much one's partner has invested into the relationship, both materially and emotionally, triggers feelings of gratitude, which, in turn, may lead to a deeper commitment.¹⁶

Expressing gratitude and being appreciative of one's partner is critical in maintaining a relationship, as it helps people to recognize the value of what they have, and promotes a desire to maintain the relationship. Gratitude helps to detect partners' selfless intentions, responsiveness and efforts at maintaining a close relationship. This reappraisal of a partner's positive qualities encourages relationship-enhancing motivations and actions. Perceived responsiveness to one's wishes and needs is crucial for the processes that are fundamental in close relationships, including intimacy, trust, and commitment.

At the heart of a Christian understanding of flourishing lies relationship with God. There has been some research about the impact this relationship has on gratitude, but there has been little research into the impact of gratitude on relationship with God. Drawing on the insights and resources that Positive Psychology provides, it seems feasible that activities that have been successful in improving interpersonal—or “horizontal”—relationships, may also be beneficial when applied to a “vertical” relationship with God. To this end, the author is currently researching whether gratitude, and specifically activities that have been shown to increase gratitude, enhances the perception of our awareness and relationship with God.

GIFTS

The purpose of this book is to explore the friendship between Positive Psychology and theology. Although there are clearly areas of disparity, and we need to maintain an awareness of these, there are also gifts that both fields can offer. Theology can offer Positive Psychology a deeper, more complete understanding of gratitude, as well as contributing to the wider notion of flourishing. Theology also offers a third type of gratitude for consideration,

16. For an overview, see Ford, *Gratitude Interventions*.

namely agent-triggered gratitude, where the benefactor *is* the benefit. Positive Psychology explores ways in which humans relate to one another, an important motif within Christian thought. Taking this concept of horizontal relationship and applying the findings to a vertical relationship—that is, a relationship with God—may open up new and exciting avenues of exploration that reignite and invigorate our faith. The following gifts are reflections on this theme and are written to stimulate discussion.

Gift 1: Gratitude in Adversity

Giving thanks to God when things are going well and then becoming angry or ungrateful in times of adversity does not appear consistent with the Christian life. St Paul spent a significant proportion of his ministry imprisoned for teaching the gospel (Acts 22:29; Col 4:3; Phil 1:7) and wrote to the persecuted church in Thessalonica, “Rejoice always, pray continuously, give thanks in all circumstances.” Positive Psychology literature indicates that gratitude reduces the impact of negative emotions¹⁷ and enables individuals to cope better with stress and trauma.

Even after a highly challenging life crisis, such as a cancer diagnosis, it may still be possible for individuals to experience positive change, known as posttraumatic growth (PTG). Although PTG is a relatively new term, the idea that great good can come from great suffering is timeless. Christians are encouraged to trust that “in all things, God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom 8:28) and the evidence indicates that positive outcomes can arise from an experience of adversity, leading to an increased appreciation for life in general. Not everyone experiences PTG, but the eschatological hope of a life beyond this one is promised to all who believe (John 3:16; Luke 23:43).

Gift 2: Indebtedness and Gratitude

McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson¹⁸ posit that people are most likely to feel grateful when (a) they have received a particularly valuable benefit; (b) high effort and cost have been expended on their behalf; (c) this expenditure was intentional rather than accidental; and (d) the expenditure

17. McCullough, et al., “Gratitude.”

18. McCullough, et al., “Grateful Disposition.”

was beyond what was expected. They also suggest a main characteristic of gratitude appears to be the desire of the recipient to return the favor to the benefactor. If we take these findings and apply this line of thinking to our relationship with God, we may find ourselves asking how we can repay such a valuable, costly, intentional, generous gift.

But is it about repayment and is that different to being grateful? Whilst some researchers have argued that gratitude and indebtedness are synonymous and that indebtedness is the essence of gratitude, most people experience indebtedness as an unpleasant psychological state. The focus of indebtedness is on (a) one's obligation to repay someone who has acted intentionally on their behalf, (b) fear of being unable to repay, and (c) concerns about how one might actually go about repaying. As Christians, we know that "it is by *grace* [we] have been saved, through faith—and this is not from [ourselves], it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8–9). It seems we are unable to repay our benefactor.

Researchers have suggested that feeling indebted to someone leads to resentment, a sense of owing and an expectation to pay back. A person who feels indebted is less likely to be altruistic, compared with someone who feels grateful. Gratitude is more powerful than indebtedness as a motivation for future altruism and high pro-social behavior towards others. In addition, those who feel grateful, as opposed to indebted, have a better relationship with their benefactor.

Without wishing to make too big a presumption, these findings may prompt us to consider how we perceive and relate to God, and how we communicate him to others.

When Isaac Watts penned the final stanza to *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, he had in mind a grateful response to God's love and not an obligation to repay: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all."

Gift 3: Increasing Gratitude

In seeking to understand a flourishing life at a personal and interpersonal level, Positive Psychology has developed practical interventions—intentional activities that lead to positive outcomes through the cultivation of positive feelings, behaviors or cognitions. These interventions facilitate wellbeing, positive emotions, creativity, growth, relationships, and other positive outcomes, underpinned by key theories within Positive

Psychology. Many of Positive Psychology's practical interventions align with biblical concepts of pro-social behavior such as kindness, forgiveness, and, of course, gratitude.

Positive Psychology interventions (PPIs) are empirically based, drawing on scientific research, and using both qualitative and quantitative methodology. PPIs do not all work the same way on everyone and in her book, *The How of Happiness*, Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky¹⁹ describes the Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic. This twelve-question survey is designed to help you assess which interventions will be of most value to you.

Of the PPIs targeting increased wellbeing, gratitude interventions demonstrate the largest effects. Although wellbeing may not necessarily be an end that Christians seek in and of itself, these interventions, when viewed through a theological lens may serve as scientifically-based spiritual disciplines. The following encompass some of the most commonly recommended gratitude strategies.

*The Gratitude Journal*²⁰

Keeping a gratitude journal is considered a popular and straightforward practice. In many studies people are simply instructed to record five things for which they are grateful. This should be done regularly (once or twice a week) and focus on recent experiences. The following strategies are recommended for greatest benefit:

- Being deliberate. Making a conscious decision to be grateful and being motivated to see positive changes.
- Quality not quantity. Spending time reflecting in detail on one or two experiences, rather than skimming through a list.
- Being people-focused. Focusing on people to whom you are grateful has a bigger impact than merely focusing on things.
- Life without good things. Imagining life without some of the blessings that we often take for granted is a good way to stimulate gratitude.
- Surprise! Surprise! Recalling events that were unexpected tends to generate stronger levels of gratitude.

19. Lyubomirsky, *How of Happiness*.

20. Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens," 377.

- Enough is enough! Journaling once or twice a week, and keeping it fresh and enjoyable, is better than journaling every day.

*The Gratitude Letter*²¹

This involves thinking back into your past and remembering someone who did something for you for which you are extremely grateful. This could be a family member, friend, teacher, employer, coach, or a colleague, someone whom you have not expressed gratitude towards before. You may try selecting a person that you haven't thought about for a while or perhaps consider selecting God. Typical advice regarding gratitude letters is as follows:

- Write in the first person, as if you are directly addressing the individual.
- Grammar and spelling are not important.
- Be specific about why you are grateful to this person and how they have affected your life, giving concrete examples.
- Describe what you are doing now and how often you remember their efforts.

Some people may wish to visit the person and read the letter to them, or mail it. Others may wish to not deliver it at all. Either way, this intervention has been shown to raise gratitude and temporarily increase wellbeing.

*Savoring*²²

Savoring is defined as “the capacity to attend to, appreciate, and enhance the positive experiences in one’s life.” It is a process, not an outcome, and it requires engagement on the person’s behalf. It enables the individual to slow down and pay attention to their surroundings, feelings and experiences. Often we fail to stop and notice the good things we have. Grateful people may possess the cognitive habit of savoring their life circumstances, and so savoring interventions help build the capacity to notice what, or whom, contributes to life’s positive outcomes. A typical savoring intervention may involve suggesting that, o

21. Seligman et al., “Positive Psychology Progress,” 410.

22. Seligman et al., “Positive Psychotherapy,” 774.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Once a day, we take the time to enjoy something that we usually hurry through or take for granted (e.g., eating a meal, taking a shower, hugging a loved one). The effect can be enhanced if we then take notes on what we did, how we did it differently, and how it compared to our usual experience.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has begun to explore the multi-faceted nature of gratitude from both a psychological and theological perspective. A central theme within both fields, gratitude is a complex concept, with many nuanced understandings and elements. Evidence has shown that gratitude can be both measured and built through Positive Psychology interventions. These interventions, when viewed through a theological lens, can be referred to as scientifically-based spiritual disciplines. Theology contributes to a richer understanding of gratitude, whilst Positive Psychology equips believers with practical tools to live out the Christian faith.

More than four hundred years ago, St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order, encouraged prayer-filled mindfulness by introducing what has been called the Daily Examen. This five-step practice encourages believers to review the day with gratitude, walking through the events in the presence of God, focusing on the gifts, large and small. It would appear that modern science has begun to study and uncover ancient wisdom. Now, with everyone talking about gratitude, it is an ideal opportunity for our faith to make a valid contribution to this discussion.

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