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2 Chronicles 20:1-22  
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### Intentional Gratitude<sup>1</sup>

I must confess that on most days, I love working out in the gym. For me going to the gym is spiritual. I feel God restore my broken pieces and parts to make me whole again. But there are times when I struggle even wanting to go. If you're like any of us, we can find a multitude of excuses for not going. Such as...

I'm too tired to exercise.

I'm too busy.

I need to be more motivated.

I'm already healthy, so why bother?

I can't afford it.

I get bored easily or I don't like going.

I'm too old, fat, or uncoordinated to exercise.

I don't like to sweat or have to shower or put on more make up.

I've tried before and just can't stick to a program.

But here's the scoop, even for us avid gym rats, there are days when waking up and going to work out comes down to an intentional choice. Do I want to get stronger and healthier now so that I can be strong and healthy down the road? Do I want to pay the cost for a gym membership now, or more expensive medical bills in the future? If so then I am going need to put some practices into place, that once done repetitively over time, they will lead to better habits and ultimately a higher quality of life. It's all a matter of choices we make.

I am so grateful for the ability to work out and to have the health now that allows me to be really enjoy my time at the gym. I am also deeply grateful for the community that I've found there. Wonderful friends who share my passion for fitness and who are dedicated to making similar life choices.

Ironically, practicing gratitude is much like working out at the gym. There are going to be days when we feel hard pressed by all that we have to do. Or when we feel too tired to express it. Or when we just get lazy and don't stick to an intentional practice of gratitude. Some days giving thanks just seems like hard work.

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<sup>1</sup> This series is largely influenced by two books, Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018) and Janice Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries: How a Year Looking on the Bright Side Can Transform Your Life* (NY: Penguin Random House Publishers, 2015).

But what we find is that the more we put it into practice even when we don't feel like being grateful, the more gratefulness gets woven into the very fabric of our lives.

Today we are back in the Old Testament and looking at the Book of 2 Chronicles which recounts the stories of Judah and Israel's kings and their faithfulness to God. After each story the Chronicler tells us whether or not the kings lived out their lives in faithfulness.

The story on our radar this morning is of Jehosaphat, King of Judah. His heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord and he destroyed the pagan influences within his kingdom. He became more powerful, building forts, cities, and great storehouses throughout Judah. As a result, the Lord established the kingdom under his control and he prospered in all he did.

Jehosaphat also encountered many challenges particular in the form of neighboring enemies who wanted some of Judah's prosperity. So they came to make war against Jehosaphat and to take some of his blessings. Now it would have been really easy for Jehosaphat to say "I'm just too busy fighting off all these marauders to express my gratitude to God. And yet, as it was, King Jehosaphat remembered to keep the main thing the main thing. And God rewarded him for his faithfulness.

Join me as we read the story for ourselves from 2 Chronicles 20:1-22 and hear about King Jehosaphat's intentional practice of gratitude.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Diana Bass Butler in her book, *Grateful, The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* wrote, "We can intentionally practice gratitude - through greater awareness, through specific techniques, by developing new routines, and by strengthening habits of gratitude. As we do these things, gratefulness becomes part of who we are."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>3</sup>

Last week we talked about some practices that we could try to cultivate a spirit of gratitude. I said that if we did those practices over a period of sixty six days, they will become our habits of gratitude.

That is all fine and good when life is going well. We can sail along in our gratitude boat all day long. But what about when life isn't so good or we feel hard pressed by many tough battles most days of our lives? Can we still nurture a spirit of gratitude? If so, how?

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<sup>2</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 89.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:21

We turn to King Jehosaphat and look at his intentional practices that led to gratitude.

In the story that we just read, we see that even though he uncertain about what to do, first and foremost, he resolved to inquire of the Lord. He cried out, “We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us, O’ God. We do not know what to do next, but our eyes are upon you.”<sup>4</sup>

When we don’t know what to do...we ask God.

Proverbs 3:5-6 confirms this wisdom saying, “Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, and lean not on you own understanding, but in all of your ways acknowledge him and he will set your footpaths straight.”<sup>5</sup>

Next, we see how Jehosaphat brought the issue in prayer before his community of faith.

In the same way, the Apostle Paul encouraged the church in Philippi amidst their struggles to get along with one another to “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

Jehosaphat was not alone in this battle but he relied upon his community of faith to join him as he sought the Lord’s wisdom and help.

We also see how he was not shy to publicly express his gratitude before the entire assembly. Remember what I said previously, “Gratitude begets gratitude, but negativity breeds negativity and discontent.” When we share our gratitude with one another the congregation erupts in more gratitude and praise.

Jehosaphat did not doubt God’s faithfulness to his prayers. He stood firm upon the knowledge that God was good and that his love endured forever. Regardless of how he felt that day at battle, he knew that God would work all things out for his good.

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”<sup>7</sup>

James, Jesus’ brother, said, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to them. But

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Chronicles 20:12b

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 4:4-7

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 21:21-22

when one asks, they must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not think they will receive anything from the Lord; they are a double-minded, unstable in all they do.”<sup>8</sup>

Notice how the Lord answered Jehosaphat when the Spirit of the Lord came upon the community. God said, “Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. This battle belongs to me. Just prepare yourself and stand firm, knowing that I am with you!”

Then Jehosaphat responded by falling down in worship before the Lord and giving thanks to the Lord even though I’m sure he wasn’t feeling the emotions. But he trusted in God’s word. And that was good enough!

The last thing Jehosaphat did before going into battle was that he had the entire army sing to the Lord and praise God for the splendor of his holiness, saying “Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.”

In summary, Jehosaphat asked for wisdom. He prayed. He involved his community of faith. He did not doubt God’s faithfulness. He worshiped. He was grateful. And through this intentional practice of gratitude, the Lord defeated all enemies that threatened the Kingdom of Judah.

This leads me to wonder, what enemies do we feel hard pressed by today? Is it the battle against homelessness? Is it a relationship that seems to be in peril? Is it the results from a medical test? Is it the toxicity of our nation’s political climate? Is it the global war against terrorism? Is it the fight to turn back global warming? Is it the struggle to find stable employment? Is it the ability to reach a balanced budget? All of these are big and legitimate issues.

But let me propose that the fight to overcome these enemies does not belong to us. But to the Lord, our God. Our job is to ask for wisdom. To pray. To involve our community of faith. To not doubt God’s goodness. To keep worshiping. And to be grateful. What was that last one? Oh yes! To be grateful.

“Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast, who had been teaching gratitude for years, [said], “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It’s gratefulness that makes us happy.”<sup>9</sup>

Epictetus said, “If any be unhappy, let him remember that he is unhappy by reason of himself alone.”<sup>10</sup>

I want to close with sharing a gut wrenching story of one woman named Jackie who’s intentional practice of gratitude literally saved her life.

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<sup>8</sup> James 1:5-8

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries*, 235.

<sup>10</sup> Epictetus quoted in Kaplan’s, *The Gratitude Diaries*, 238.

Jackie's three young daughters were tragically killed in a car accident by a person driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Needless to say, Jackie and her husband were devastated for years. It took every ounce of energy for Jackie not to intentionally join her girls in heaven.

First she consulted with her local priest from her faith community. To seek wisdom and comfort.

Then several friends of hers made it their personal mission to walk alongside her day by day, week by week. "They cooked and cleaned, took her on morning jogs, brought her to therapists, enrolled her on a bowling team, and insisted that she join them on shopping trips. In their fierce loyalty and devotion, Jackie found a crack of light in the impossible darkness."

Author Janice Kaplan recounting this story tells about the first time Kaplan met with Jackie about eighteen months after the accident. She was still deeply shrouded in grief but as she began talking about her friends, Kaplan noticed that her whole demeanor changed.

"I have the most amazing friends. I feel so incredibly lucky. I'm grateful to them every day."

Sometime later, Kaplan checked back in to see how Jackie was doing. Jackie shared, "I still try to find reasons every day that I'm grateful," she said, "I write a list in the morning and keep it with me all day."

Jackie had intentionally developed a specific routine of practices that fed her attitude of gratitude. She got up early to run with friends. When she got home by 6:30am, she would take a few minutes to herself to cry and grieve the loss of her daughters. After that, she would sit down to write a list of what she was grateful for that day.

Her intentional practice...even though she didn't feel like it was...run, cry, be grateful, and get on with life. Every day until it became a habit.

Kaplan asked, "Does being grateful come naturally to you now?"

"No!" Jackie said with a laugh. "It's a decision to do it every day. Writing a gratitude list takes work for me, and I have to keep reminding myself not to skip it. But the feeling lasts, so it's worth it."<sup>11</sup>

Kaplan further wrote, "Gratitude helps you find meaning - and some version of contentment - in the chaos."<sup>12</sup>

So may we see that we can nurture a spirit of gratitude even among the most God awful circumstances such as losing a child. May we put some practices into place that we can do even on those days when we don't feel like like. And may we

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<sup>11</sup> Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries*, 238-243.

<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries*, 256.

know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Lord our God will be with us wherever we go.<sup>13</sup>

“O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!”<sup>14</sup>

Amen!

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<sup>13</sup> Joshua 1:9

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 95:1-2