

# Instilling Gratitude in Your Family

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Written By:

**Julie Lowe**

Faculty

With the approach of Thanksgiving, I am often struck with how people—young and old alike—lack an important attribute: gratitude. I'm not looking for a warm fuzzy thank you for a gift, but a deep rich appreciation for life and what we've been given. Why is this? What gets in the way of gratitude?

Here are two thoughts.

First, our society cultivates discontentment. Consistently, we hear a message of want. Mass media, advertising, and holiday seasons all capitalize on the misconception of necessity and the hungering for more. There are quite literally thousands of images, commercials, and marketing ploys that are meant to create a sense of need. I “need” this new phone to be satisfied, or this new product to be fulfilled. Advertising develops a feeling of deficiency within us. It seeks to convince us that without the latest beauty product, invention or gadget, we are lacking. In Philippians 4:11-12, Paul rebuffs this message by challenging us to be content in any circumstance—in plenty or in want.

Second, discontentment is easily triggered in us because we have an underlying sense of entitlement. We believe that we are inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment. I deserve that new electronic device, or that vacation, or peace and quiet when I come home after working all day. Entitlement justifies whatever self-focused response pours out of my mouth or actions. Entitled desires quickly become demands that excuse putting myself first and the needs of others last (if at all). These things, no matter how much I desire them, are not innate human rights but wants that have risen to a level of necessity in our hearts and minds. In contrast, Scripture tells us that our goal is not to look for what we deserve but to be poured out as an offering to others (Philippians 2:17). We are to “walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

Discontent and entitlement are strong pressures, but there are still ways to cultivate gratitude in your home. The more I teach my children to love God, enjoy each other, and to serve others, the more they come to realize that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

Here are some simple, but practical, ways to facilitate this in your family:

1. **Perspective.** Life is about who God is, not what we own. His presence is always the answer to every need, every fear, every suffering. This is true not because it removes the challenges of life or gives us what we want, but because it gives us perspective. Teach your kids about the value of God's personal presence in their lives. This is done by watching you live it out before them. The way kids see you talk about God, talk to God, and engage with life and God, all shape a perspective that *he* is what satisfies.
2. **Remembering.** Instill in young people a regular ability to look for and notice good things, to value them. Psalm 77:11 is one of a multitude of passages that call us to remember the deeds God has done. The practice of looking for and treasuring the good in everyday life deepens the pleasure in what we already have. It reminds us that God is our provision and has provided for our every need. This kind of gratitude is invaluable. Remembering can be done in a variety of ways: lists, journaling, creative expressive exercises, memory boxes, gratitude jars, etc. Gratitude itself is not the end goal, but we aspire to gratitude that points to the Lord, our Provider. He is enough. He is our source of contentment, pleasure, satisfaction. All else is icing on the cake.
3. **Expression.** Give voice to what is good and lovely in your life. Remind yourself and speak it out loud to others. Write it down; thank someone. The

more we encourage kids to express appreciation and gratitude, the more it takes root and deepens. They benefit by giving voice to their thoughts, in seeing the pleasure they bring to others, and by living as an example to those around them. Encourage them to see what is good and to outwardly name it.

4. Service. There is immense benefit to focusing on the needs of others. We all need to see the world outside of ourselves—a world that needs our care. To find satisfaction in caring well for others is deeply rewarding. It is loving others in ways that image Christ and makes him known. There are multitudes of ways to serve. To bring gifts, offer your time, or engage in acts of service (such as babysitting, yard work, an unexpected meal) to the disabled, elderly, disadvantaged, lonely, homeless, or overwhelmed parent serves Christ but also generates gratitude for what you already have. An awareness that others live with far less materially, and sometimes with far more suffering, brings greater perspective and remembering of what we do have.

As you instill these ideas in your home, you will find that your gratitude grows and it will become easier to encourage your kids to follow your lead.

Gratitude does not come naturally to us, but it can be cultivated. It helps to switch us from a perspective of need to one of contentment. It acknowledges that no matter my condition, my possessions, my sufferings, or my blessings, we are rich in ways the world can not quantify.