

CHRISTIAN *School* COMMENT

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A HEART OF THANKSGIVING

Gratitude: it's one of my favorite topics because it has such power to effect change in our hearts, in others, in our communities, and even in our schools. I've invited Jay Ferguson, headmaster of Grace Community School (Tyler, Texas), to write about gratitude as we enter the Thanksgiving season here in the U.S. —Dan

A friend recently asked me an insightful question: "What do you feel when you're in the stadium on a Friday night and you see your daughter dance, or you see the football team or the drumline perform?" I thought about the football and basketball guys I refer to as "my boys" (since I don't have my own); parents in the stands—people who are my friends, with whom I have done life, had conflict and resolved conflict; little kids from the elementary school running around the softball field.

How do I *feel*? I feel intensely *grateful*: grateful for the work of our precious teachers in the life of my girls and their friends. Grateful for 14 years of families, people who have become my best friends as we have had the privilege of building something great together. I'm grateful for God taking our acts of sometimes-faltering yet continuing obedience to build a great community, a great school.

I know the realities, as you do. I know that, for whatever reason, kids today are different than they were years ago. Parenting and teaching are, in many ways, more difficult than ever. I understand society has changed, that the rest of this Judeo-Christian nation that most of us grew up in isn't very Judeo-Christian anymore. I get that the world seems to be a more violent place, which makes us all more scared and immobilized and xenophobic, just like Satan wants. It seems we're more geared toward ungratefulness than ever before.

Which is why Thanksgiving is so awesome. Thanksgiving is a great opportunity to cultivate gratefulness in our hearts. First, it's an opportunity to remember that gratefulness is not primarily a feeling, but a discipline. Gratefulness is a spiritual discipline—a means of grace like Bible study or prayer or fasting. Making the decision to be grateful and to consciously see the opportunities in the life and mission you've been given is a spiritual practice. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

The default, fleshly mode is always discontent. I can always find something to complain about, something I don't have. That's easy—and dangerous. I have to pray every day that the Holy Spirit will quicken my heart toward the things I've been given.

When you really think about it, all of us are born into sin. All of us are rebels against God. Like I tell my daughters, if we all got exactly what we deserved, we would die immediately and spend eternity in

hell. Now, from that starting point, look at your life. What do you have? Everything that is not death and hell is a beautiful, gracious, spectacular gift from a God who loves you so much that He thought you were worth dying for, and also showered you with all these other gifts. Kind of a perspective-changer, isn't it?

When my sophomore, Ellen, was in second grade, we were coming back to Tyler on December 23. We got stuck overnight in Denver due to a freak snowstorm. My older kids and I were sulking about being marooned overnight at the airport hotel. Not Ellen. She was excited about her new adventure. She was excited that the only restaurant around our hotel was Pizzeria Uno. She was excited the kids' menu had "make your own pizza." And, to top it all off, she got free cookies! "This is turning out quite nicely," she concluded. As we marveled at her unbridled enthusiasm, the rest of us couldn't help but break into smiles and laughs. That cold night became warm indeed. Ellen changed the course of our evening, as she's done so many times since.

When I grow up, I want to be Ellen. I love people who are generous, grateful, and gracious, and whose lives are a blessing to other people—even through challenges much more intense than freak snowstorms. I'm praying that God will make me into one of those people, and that my kids will see it and become those people, too.

Maybe this holiday season, as you sit around the table, you all can take turns sharing with each other those things for which you are grateful, including your own great Christian school—you know, cultivate a little gratefulness. Because gratefulness is the pathway to both joy and righteousness, and it starts with thanksgiving.

—Jay

WHAT
ARE YOU
THANKFUL
FOR

