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***WEEK 1  
LESSON GUIDE***

BIG IDEA

Be thankful for each other.

BIBLE

Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15–23; John 13:34

WHAT? What are we talking about today?

ACTIVITY **| Present Roulette**

* Welcome to the first week of our new series, *Grateful.* The holiday season is here! From Thanksgiving to Christmas, we anticipate traditions, good food, and no school.
* The holiday season is filled with encouragement to "be thankful." This thankfulness sometimes feels conditional, "If I get what I want, *then* I'll be thankful." Or it may be a hard season to think of *anything* to be thankful for. Thankfulness doesn't always come easy to us. Let's talk about it!
* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *To play this game, you will need a few cardboard boxes and four prizes worth about five dollars each, like a coffee shop gift card, full-sized candy bar, or canned beverage. Prepare to scale up similar gifts, like a regular-sized candy in Week 1 might become a giant candy bar or a whole bag of candy in Week 4. Wrap each gift similarly. To play, think hot potato. Ask eight to twelve volunteers to stand in a small circle with their backs to each other. Play festive Christmas music and instruct students to pass the present around while the music plays. When the music stops, the contestants holding a gift are out of the game. After a few rounds, the last people with presents win those gifts. Keep it simple this week; the complexity and gift value will increase each week.*
* There is value in every gift we receive, but not all the value comes from the gift itself. There is also value in the gift giver. We can become more thankful for each other when we learn to be thankful for the person, not just the item.

QUESTION **| "What is your most memorable gift?"**

* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Ask the following questions to get students thinking about their most memorable gifts. Allow a few students to respond out loud.*
* **Think back to some of your past Christmases. What was one of your most memorable gifts? What made it stand out?**
* **Now, let's think about the people in our life. What are some of your favorite Christmas memories with those people? What makes this a favorite Christmas memory?**

IMAGE **| Awkward Christmas Family Photos**

* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As you teach, show the image of an awkward family Christmas photo like* [*this*](http://sycu.org/Grateful_Awkward)*,* [*this*](http://sycu.org/Grateful_Awkward2)*, or* [*this*](http://sycu.org/Grateful_Awkward3)*. You can also ask your volunteers to share awkward family Christmas photos they might have..*
* The holiday season is supposed to be a time of thankfulness for the things we have and the people in our lives. It's a time to be thankful for our close and not-so-close family, even if we're not feeling it.
* You may look at the people around you and think, "They are so weird! They're so awkward!" Kind of like these Awkward Family Christmas photos. But what if we change our perspective and look below the surface? Maybe we'll discover a new appreciation for our families and loved ones.

VIDEO **| A Clip of Parents Giving A Terrible Present**

* Whether we like it or not, this is a season of gift-giving and receiving, even if we don't know the people very well. Have you ever had to fake enthusiasm about a gift to avoid hurt feelings? It could look like these home videos.
* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As a teaching tool, play a video clip like* [*this one*](http://sycu.org/Grateful_Gifts) *(from 1:39*–*3:39) of parents filming reactions to their kids receiving terrible gifts. For more information on legally using copyrighted material for educational purposes,* [*read this*](http://stuffyoucanuse.org/copyright)*!*
* Those kids didn't hold anything back when letting their parents know how much they didn't like the gifts. Should they be thankful that their parents remembered them? What do you think? Should they force thankfulness?
* We don't only have this experience with gifts. Even if we don't like admitting it, people in our lives can sometimes fail to live up to our expectations. But how can we respond to people who feel like burdens, don't know us well, or seem to not care about us? We want to be grateful for them, but sometimes we don't know how.

DISCUSSION

* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
  + **What is the worst gift you have ever received?**
  + **\*How frequently in a day do you feel grateful for something that happened or someone in your life?**
  + **Are you grateful to go and be with friends and family for the holidays? Why or why not?**

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

SCRIPTURE **| Psalm 100**

* The book of Psalms is full of songs and poetry written to express life's full range of ups and downs, including disappointment. We know life is full of all kinds of experiences, and the psalms reflect these many of these emotions, thoughts, and realities. There are two types of psalms that can help us with this problem of gratitude in the face of disappointment.
* There are psalms of lament, which express struggles and trials to God. There are also psalms of praise, which are about thankfulness.
  + The psalm writers intentionally included a variety of messages to and about God. There are good days, and there are bad days, right? When families get together for Christmas, we can feel blessings *and* burdens.
  + We can't change the types of people around us, but we can change our hearts when we interact.
* The Psalms weren't written for perfect situations or perfect people; they were written for people just like us. After a season of struggle, the writer of Psalm 100 knew that a thankful attitude starts with praise.
* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Psalm 100.*
* The psalmist writes about being grateful for the gifts we’ve received and entering God's presence from a place of thanksgiving.
* Thankfulness doesn't start with receiving exactly what you want; rather, thankfulness comes from being in God's presence.
  + In challenging situations, it's not easy to be thankful, but we can look around at the people in our lives and be thankful for how they show up for us and are with us.
  + Thankfulness does not mean pushing away difficult emotions or just "looking on the positive side." It's a moment-by-moment decision that helps us during tough times.
  + The Bible helps us understand what choosing thankfulness looks like and how we can develop ways to choose thankfulness, even when it is hard.
* The writer of this psalm says we can still be thankful even when things aren't perfect. No matter what, we can be thankful for God's goodness, love, and faithfulness. These characteristics of God never change, so when things in our lives seem tumultuous or unstable, we can look to God's constant stability.
* God creates everything, including the people we sometimes take for granted.

DISCUSSION

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  + **What surprised you in Psalm 100? Why?**
  + **\*What do you think about the idea that things don't have to be perfect for us to feel grateful for them?**

SCRIPTURE **| Ephesians 1:15–23**

* You might wonder, "But how important is it to be thankful for the people around me? Isn't it enough just to tolerate them? Can I just be thankful for the people in my family? I mean, look at how hard they are to deal with!"
* Relationships are complicated outside of our families, too. Is it possible to only practice thankfulness with the people we're "supposed" to love? Let's take a look at what the Apostle Paul, a leader in the Early Church, had to say about this.
* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Ephesians 1:15*–*23.*
* Paul was in a tough spot at this point. He was persecuted for talking about Jesus — people even wanted him dead. When he wrote this letter, he was sitting in prison!
* Paul had a lot to be ungrateful for, but he didn't talk about any of that. Instead, he chose to be thankful. He is consistently thankful for this church in the city of Ephesus. He was thankful for the people who loved God, loved each other, and loved him. How do you think Paul was able to be so thankful during these circumstances?
* Part of changing our perspective on thankfulness is acknowledging what we are thankful for in each other. Not thankful for what they do for us, but for who they are. In times of uncertainty or chaos, we see who stays around and who really has our backs. Perhaps we notice who we take for granted in good times.
* Sometimes, we fail to recognize how people show us love. Maybe the way they show love isn't flashy or exactly what you're expecting, but it can be consistent and faithful.
  + It might look like that cringe note your parent or caretaker leaves in your backpack telling you they love you. But then, one day, the note isn't there, and you realize how much of an impact it had on you.
  + Maybe a friend has always saved a spot for you at lunch, even though you've occasionally wanted to sit elsewhere. Then, one day your friend doesn’t save you a spot, and now you feel lonely.
* It can be easy to overlook the importance and influence of the people in our lives. We can unknowingly take their presence for granted. When we choose thankfulness and gratitude, we really see people.
* God has placed people in our lives for a reason. These are people who we can lean on during difficult circumstances. When you feel alone, look at who is in your life and be thankful for them. There are many reasons to be upset, frustrated, or disappointed with the people in our lives, but if we see them the way God does, we notice their care, value, and love. Although difficult at times, let's **be thankful for each other.**

NOW WHAT? What does God want us to do about it?

QUESTION **| "What is Christmas dinner like at your house?"**

* Sharing a meal over the holidays looks different in every household. Some of us have very clear traditions. For others, holiday meals are like any other in the week.
* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Ask the following questions to the group. Highlight answers about families having different personalities and what happens when things get tough.*
  + **What is Christmas dinner like for you?**
  + **Does everyone always get along? Is it sometimes stressful?**
* Many of us have been with our family or people close to us and thought, "How can I be thankful for them?" You might even have a mental list of how they annoy, frustrate, and make your life miserable. It's easy to overlook the importance of the people around us, especially when they're getting on our nerves.
* How can we set our minds on thankfulness this season with all the busyness that comes with the holidays? How can we pay attention to thankful moments, even in chaos?
* Scripture help us see two ways we can choose to be thankful this season.
  + **CHOOSE TO SEE PEOPLE AS GIFTS.** We don't have to be perfect to be thankful for one another. Being genuinely thankful means we are grateful despite each other's imperfections. When you are annoyed with someone close to you this week, take a breath and think of one thing you like about them. This will be tough, but what an incredible opportunity to learn to be grateful in small moments. When the season of extra family and people time mixed with gift-giving and forced jolliness arrives, you will be so ready!
  + **CHOOSE THANKFULNESS IN HARD TIMES.** Being thankful is not a one-time thing that happens for a couple of months a year. Intentionally choosing gratefulness year-round allows us to notice the great parts of people and life more easily. You can see why thankfulness is a big part of following Jesus. We can't force ourselves to feel gratitude when we don't, but we can take daily steps to practice being thankful so it becomes a habit. Like an athlete training certain muscles or a musician practicing the same song, our daily habits prepare us for big moments.

DISCUSSION

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  + **What stands out to you about Paul's letter? What motivated him to write something like that while in prison?**
  + **\*What would it look like for you to choose to see people as gifts this Christmas?**
  + **\*What would it look like for you to choose to be thankful even when it is hard?**

REFLECTION **| Each Person Is A Gift**

* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *For this response, create a giant present or purchase a large gift box, and bring index cards and writing utensil for each person. Set the present in the teaching area, and hand out cards and pens. Play reflective Christmas music in the background as people write.*
* This gift is to focus our thoughts and writing for the next few minutes.
  + On the slip of paper, write down a list of people in your life. Next, write why each one is a gift to you. Then, silently thank God for each person on your list.
  + After a few minutes, place your card in the big gift up front as a sign of thankfulness for how God created that person to be a gift in your life.
* If you want to take it a step further, tell the people on your list why you are thankful for them this week.

DISCUSSION

* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
  + **Read John 13:34. What is one way you can love someone like Jesus loved you this week? How can you show them that you are grateful for them even if they are not perfect or let you down?**
  + **Who is one person you will be grateful for this week? What is one way you will show them you are thankful God put them in your life?**

RESPONSE **| If Every Day Could Be . . . Thanksgiving?**

* **INSTRUCTIONS:** *For this response, bring scissors and a gift ribbon. Before your program, cut strips of ribbon that fit over an average wrist. Cut enough so each person in your group gets one. Invite students to go to a leader and have the leaders tie a ribbon on each student's wrist and cut off the excess ribbon with scissors.*
* When you look at this ribbon on your wrist this week, take a moment to choose thankfulness and think about a person you see regularly. It could be people in your house, your school, on your teams, or in your activities.
* Take a moment and ask a simple question to guide your prayer. The question could be something along these lines.
  + **What is one thing you notice about them that you are thankful for?**
  + **What is one thing you appreciate about each of them that reminds you of God's goodness, faithfulness, and love?**
* When we approach life and others with an attitude of thankfulness, we see what is best in the world. We start to realize people offer wonderful gifts that can't be bought or wrapped nicely under a tree. God gives everyone gifts through the presence of other people; that's why we can **be thankful for each other.**