2447 PRODUCTIONS

THE BLESSED MESS

EPISODE 3

"Gratitude"

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Gratitude · Contentment · Comparison

Adult Small Group | 30–45 Minutes





Before You Begin (Leader Notes)

- Watch Episode 3, "Gratitude," together as a group, or ask members to watch it before you meet.
- Bring a Bible (or Bible app) for each participant.
- This episode touches on money and what a family can and can't afford. Be sensitive, some in your group may be in a tight financial season, and no one should leave feeling their car, house, or paycheck was being judged.
- For the closing activity, bring a jar (any clean jar works), small slips of paper, and pens.
- This guide includes more material than most groups need in 45 minutes. Choose the questions and sections that fit your group's pace, and don't feel pressure to cover everything.

Opening (5 minutes)

Icebreaker: "Tell us about a gift, purchase, or plan that didn't turn out the way you pictured it. How did you respond in the moment?"

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to open in prayer, asking God for grateful hearts, honest eyes to see what He has already provided, and freedom from comparing our lives to anyone else's.

Episode Recap (3–5 minutes)

In Episode 3, Michael has been saving his hardware-store paychecks and is counting down the minutes until his first car arrives. Matthew pulls into the driveway with a 2013 sedan: 253,000 miles, new tires, cold air, complete maintenance records, paid for with no monthly payment, and one exterior door handle that doesn't match the paint. Michael's excitement disappears. He's hurt that his dad bought it without him, embarrassed to send pictures to his friend Zachary, and his "I'm grateful" doesn't sound grateful at all. Grandma Charity reminds him he can be disappointed without being disrespectful, and Sarah and Lydia walk him back to Pastor Luke's Sunday verses on giving thanks and learning contentment. Michael goes to his dad in the garage, apologizes specifically, and Matthew in turn owns his part, leaving Michael out of a decision that felt personal. When Zachary finally sees the car, he admits his newer car comes with a monthly payment and two trips to the dealership this month: "I only post the parts that are perfect." The episode ends around the family gratitude jar, and two weeks later, with a $17 replacement handle that arrives in the wrong color.

Ask: What stood out to you the most watching this episode?

Teaching Segment (10–15 minutes)

1. Disappointed, Not Disrespectful

Michael's problem wasn't really the car. The car was safe, dependable, and debt-free. His problem was the picture he had built in his head, and when reality showed up "driving something else," as Lydia puts it, he could only see the mileage and the mismatched handle. Grandma Charity names the issue gently: *because what arrived didn't match the picture in your mind, you couldn't see what your father brought home.*

> ***1 Thessalonians 5:18*** *In everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Notice Paul says "in" everything, not "for" everything. As Michael later realizes, "in all circumstances" includes the ones we didn't choose.*

Psychologists Dr. Robert Emmons (UC Davis) and Dr. Michael McCullough (University of Miami) ran one of the best-known experiments on gratitude. They randomly assigned participants to regularly write down either things they were grateful for, everyday hassles, or neutral events or comparisons with others, and a third study included adults living with neuromuscular disease. Across the studies, the gratitude groups showed higher well-being on several (though not all) measures than the comparison groups, with the clearest effect on positive mood. Gratitude isn't just a feeling that shows up after good things happen; it's a practice that shapes how we see what's already in front of us.

Grandma Charity also refuses to let gratitude become pretending. Michael asks if he's supposed to lower every expectation and act excited. Her answer: no. Gratitude tells the truth. Michael gets there by the end: "I can say the handle is wrong. I just can't make the handle the whole car."

2. The Comparison Trap

Michael's disappointment had a scoreboard behind it: Jordan got a two-year-old car, Kyle has a three-year-old truck, Zachary just got… When Sarah and Lydia press him, the real fear comes out, that people would think his family couldn't do better. Elizabeth's quick reply in the kitchen says it plainly: *we are not Jordan's family, or Kyle's, or Zachary's*.

> ***2 Corinthians 10:12*** *Paul warns that those who measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another are not wise. (See also Galatians 6:4 test your own work and take pride in it without comparing yourself to someone else.)*

University of Pennsylvania psychologist Dr. Melissa Hunt tested this directly. In a 2018 experiment, 143 college students were split into two groups for three weeks: one kept using social media as usual, and the other limited Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to about ten minutes per platform per day. The group that cut back showed significant drops in loneliness and depression compared to the group that didn't. Less time looking at other people's highlight reels left people feeling more connected, not less.

That's exactly what Michael discovers in the driveway. Zachary's newer car comes with a monthly payment, a sensor problem the dealership can't fix, and a mom who keeps reminding him what it costs. "I only post the parts that are perfect." Both boys had been comparing their real lives to a version the other one edited. Pastor Luke sums it up: *Comparison is good at showing you what someone has. It's terrible at showing you what it costs them.*

3. Learned Contentment, Spoken Thanks

Sarah catches an important word in Pastor Luke's Sunday verse: *learned*. Contentment isn't a personality type some people are born with. It's an acquired character trait, and the James family admits they're all still learning it.

> ***Philippians 4:11–13*** *Paul writes that he has "learned" to be content whatever the circumstances, in plenty and in want, because Christ gives him strength. (See also 1 Timothy 6:6 — godliness with contentment is great gain; and Hebrews 13:5 be content with what you have, because God has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you.")*

Gratitude also isn't finished until it's spoken. Michael doesn't just change his mind on the patio; he goes to the garage and names exactly what his dad did: four Saturdays, five cities, a safe car with no payment. Relationship researcher Dr. Sara Algoe (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) developed what she calls the "find-remind-and-bind" theory of gratitude. Her research suggests that expressing gratitude reminds the other person they are valued and acts like glue in close relationships, drawing people back toward each

other. Michael's specific thank-you didn't just fix his attitude; it repaired something between him and his father.

And notice that Matthew models something too. After receiving Michael's apology, he owns his own part: he left Michael out of a decision that felt personal. *Gratitude doesn't cancel accountability*. (Sound familiar? It's the same humility the family learned back in Episode 1 with the laminated map.)

Discussion Questions

Choose the questions that best fit your group and your time.

On Disappointment and Gratitude

1. Grandma Charity tells Michael, "You can be disappointed without being disrespectful." Where's the line between the two? When have you crossed it?
2. Michael said "I'm grateful" in a voice that said the opposite, and Lydia called him on it. Why do our words of thanks sometimes ring hollow? What makes gratitude sound real?
3. Michael realizes he saw "the year, the miles, and the wrong handle" before he thought about everything his dad went through. What's a "wrong handle" in your life right now that keeps you from seeing the whole car?

On Comparison

4. Michael's disappointment came with a list: Jordan's car, Kyle's truck, Zachary's car. Who's on your comparison list? What do they tend to have that you notice?
5. Zachary admits, "I only post the parts that are perfect." How has social media changed the way we compare ourselves to others? Do you ever post an "edited version" of your own life?
6. Pastor Luke says comparison shows you what someone has but never what it costs them. Can you think of a time you envied something, then later learned what it really cost the other person?

On Contentment

7. Sarah points out that Paul *learned* to be content. If contentment is learned, what are some of the ways God teaches it? What has He used in your life?
8. Elizabeth says gratitude usually lives "between what we wish had happened and what mercy still provided." Where are you living in that space right now?
9. Matthew tells Michael, "God somehow keeps assigning homework until we start passing His tests," and moments later Zachary texts that he's coming over. What "test" of gratitude or contentment keeps showing up in your life?

On Healthy Relationships

10. Michael's apology in the garage is specific: four Saturdays, five cities, no monthly payment. Why does naming exactly what someone did for us mean more than a general "thanks"?
11. Matthew responds by owning his own part: "gratitude does not cancel accountability." Why is it hard for parents, leaders, or anyone in authority to admit their part after someone else apologizes? What does it do for the relationship when they do?

12. Sarah and Lydia go to Michael on the patio and tell him the truth, and Sarah later says she's grateful "truth can be direct without being cruel." Who in your life tells you the truth in love? Are you that person for someone else?

Activity: "The Gratitude Jar" (5–10 minutes)

Place a jar in the middle of the group with slips of paper and pens. Just like Grandma Charity's "new plan," ask each person to write down **one thing they're grateful for that did not happen the way they wanted.** (As Grandma Charity says, "family" and "food" have been carrying the jar long enough.) Fold the slips and drop them in. No one has to share what they wrote.

Then discuss as a group:

- Why is it harder to be grateful for something that didn't go the way we pictured it?
- What did you see in that situation once you looked for the good in it, rather than at the "wrong handle"?

Close by inviting anyone willing (no pressure) to read their slip aloud, or to name one person they need to thank specifically this week, the way Michael thanked his dad in the garage. Consider keeping the jar and adding to it each week your group meets.

Closing (2–3 minutes)

Michael's car didn't change between the driveway and the dinner table. It was the same car with the same miles and the same handle. What changed was what he chose to see. As he puts it in the garage: *My gratitude doesn't erase disappointment. But it keeps disappointment from erasing everything else.* Most of the things we're tempted to grumble about don't need to be replaced. They need to be seen with grateful eyes.

Closing Prayer: Close in prayer, asking God to help us see what He has already provided, to free us from comparing our real lives to someone else's edited version, and to teach us the contentment Paul learned, "in everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."