

What Do You Have to Be Thankful For?

Jesus showed his gratitude all the time. He didn't ever forget to give thanks before a meal. When he miraculously fed a crowd of thousands, Mark says,

He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. (Mark 8:6)

For Jesus, giving thanks was always part of sharing bread. Even at the last supper with his disciples, Luke tells us that

he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

After the transfiguration, when the disciples Jesus had sent out came back to tell him all about their successes, Jesus rejoiced with them. He knew how much of his ministry was directly empowered by his Father, and he gave thanks for it all. We hear from Luke that

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. (Luke 10:21)

Jesus was a living example for those around him of expressing thankfulness and giving glory to the Father.

Healing from Jesus could be an unexpected gift

One group of lepers that Jesus met in his travels was in a bad situation. As people with a skin disease, they had lost everything. They lost their homes and families, and they were forced to live outside of normal human habitation. The Law of Moses in Leviticus 13 says

The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45-46)

Lepers had to let everyone they saw know their condition, so that others would not come near and be infected. Their only companionship was with others as miserable as themselves. They had no hope and nothing to look forward to. Even appealing to Jesus was grasping at a straw. They might have heard that Jesus was a healer, but only desperation would give them any hope of a cure.

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (Luke 17:11-13)

Jesus was headed south toward Jerusalem. Instead of going out of the way and around the Samaritan territory, he chose to go straight through. This village was in an area of a mixed population, with Jews and Samaritans living together as neighbors. We don't know how many

of the ten in this group of lepers were Jews or Samaritans, but there were probably some of each. As was required, they kept their distance while they called out for mercy to Jesus.

There wasn't a lot of conversation in this encounter. Their need was obvious. Jesus simply told them to go and have the priests inspect their skin. In those days, you didn't make an appointment with the doctor. There are detailed instructions in Leviticus about what to do:

The priest is to examine the sore on his skin, and if the hair in the sore has turned white and the sore appears to be more than skin deep, it is an infectious skin disease. When the priest examines him, he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. (Leviticus 13:3)

If I were one of the lepers, I'd have wondered why Jesus said to go to the priests. After all, I could have gone there yesterday or last week. Why didn't he say or do something dramatic that would heal my skin?

These lepers didn't have much hope, but they could at least follow instructions. They set out to see the priests, hoping that seeing Jesus had somehow made a difference. They acted in faith, even if it was faith borne of desperation. And as they went in obedience, the miracle of healing happened, and they were made clean.

For the lepers, everything could suddenly be as it was before the disease. They could be welcome back in the village, welcome back into their old homes. They would be treated like real people again. They were very busy celebrating and putting their lives back together.

How do we remember to say thanks?

One of the lepers had an insight. This healing was a great and miraculous gift. His gratitude pours out of him in a loud voice, praising the source of miracles, the Most High God. He doesn't forget to come back to Jesus, the one who made this healing possible, to bow in appreciation and to thank him. Samaritan or Jew, he knew where his thanks belonged.

Of course Jesus noticed that he was the only one to come back, the only one to express his joy and gratitude.

Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (Luke 17:17-18)

Samaritans were considered bad guys by the Jews in those days. As in the case of the good Samaritan, Jesus makes a point to say that some who were part of God's chosen people didn't appreciate what God had done for them. This Samaritan showed that you don't have to be one of the in-group to behave faithfully. And Jesus points out that it's praise to God, and not thanks to himself, that was the appropriate response.

How does it feel to receive a gift from God and recognize it for what it is? How do you think the Samaritan felt when he realized what had happened? How would you feel if, for instance, you had the world's worst case of acne, and suddenly it went away?

You wouldn't have to hide your face any more. You wouldn't have to be really careful to hang out with people who knew you and could see the person inside. Suddenly you could go out in a crowd and not be embarrassed. You could even go up to a stranger and start a conversation. What freedom! What a weight taken out of your life! I hope I'd be wanting to sing and dance and hug anyone I could reach. I'd be bubbling over with joy, and I'd be totally grateful to the one who made it happen.

How do you recognize a gift?

A while back I went to a conference that was held in Houston. To get there I needed to leave Boston on a flight that left at 7:00 am on Sunday morning. Getting up at 3:30 in the morning before a flight is not fun, and while I like many people from Texas, somehow there is just too much of Texas itself for me. Texas is big and flat, and I feel more at home with New England's cozy hills. I did survive the trip, and I came back to Logan on Thursday night, touching down at 11:00 pm, completely exhausted. As I struggled down the long hallways to baggage claim, I happened to knock my front tooth, not very hard, but there was a clicking sound and the whole tooth broke off.

As you can imagine, I was not very happy. Why me? Why when I was so tired? Why add another obstacle when I only want to get home safe? I don't know if any of you have found yourself in a bad situation, and then gotten one last straw that seems to add insult to injury. I felt that someone (God or Satan) must have had it in for me.

Once I was safely in the car with my husband driving us home, I was able to see things differently. That tooth had only been hanging on by a thread. It could have broken any time in the last week. What would I have done if it happened on the plane? It could have broken in Texas, where I had so much to do and didn't know (or want to know) any Texas dentists.

It turns out that I was really lucky that the tooth waited until I was safe on the ground in Boston to have its crisis. I thank God that I was able to see the wonderful dentist I've trusted for years, first thing the next morning. The X-rays showed that the tooth was going to break sometime soon anyway, and the blessing was that it didn't break until I was in a position to deal with it.

In my experience, daily life is a mix of some good stuff, some clearly bad stuff, and a whole lot of stuff that is a little of both. Almost everything that happens to us has a good side and a not so good side, and we have the choice of which side to focus on.

At the conference we had a meeting for the churches in the New England and metropolitan New York area. One of the churches, Pilgrim Mission Church of Paramus, New Jersey, was denied dismissal from PCUSA, even though they had done everything according to the procedures for dismissal.

They decided to disaffiliate anyway, and their presbytery sued the church leaders for the full value of their property. Just before Christmas they walked away from their property and bank accounts, and took the new motto, "Jesus, only Jesus."

This was a church of more than 2000 members with 700 children. They had bought a warehouse building and made a campus with offices and multiple worship and fellowship spaces. They're mostly Korean, but they were hoping to become more multicultural.

The senior pastor told us that in spite of losing everything, the church was focusing on a new vision—renting space for worship and education in schools and only having some offices to handle logistics. This would make it possible for them to reach out into the neighborhoods around them, and move beyond their identity as a purely Korean congregation.

We all had tears listening to his story, and we thanked God as we prayed for him, for the way the Holy Spirit had brought new vision and hope out of the horrible situation. This faithful congregation is in God's hands and knows to be thankful for it.

How does it feel to receive a gift?

Of course there are small gifts as well as really big gifts. Receiving a gift always has a glimmer of joy, even if you don't like the gift itself. Getting a gift means that someone cared enough about you to give it, and that alone should put a warm feeling in your heart. The key to feeling that joy and warmth is to take care to notice and appreciate all our gifts, especially those we usually overlook.

One of the reasons that I loved serving a black church was that so many of the folks there were ready to pray at a moment's notice. Some of the pray-ers, especially those who've been around for a while, would always begin their prayers with thankfulness.

What would they thank God for? They'd thank God for the gift of life, for waking them up in the morning to another new day. They'd thank God for food, and shelter, and family, and friends, and all the things that make our lives possible. We're really surrounded by blessings, from our first waking breath in the morning to our last breath before we go off to sleep at night. I loved to be reminded to be thankful, at the beginning and end and all through the day, for all the good works of God that make life possible.

I know that I often forget to be thankful. My most frequent failing is not saying grace before meals. When food is served and it smells so good, I just can't wait to take the first bite. Tasting the first bite, I usually think, "Oh thank you, Lord" for this taste. Oops. I was supposed to do that before the first bite, and I'm late again.

Paul showed his gratitude a lot

Paul was a living demonstration of a life of gratitude in good times and bad. Even when he was brought to Rome as a prisoner in chains, he found grounds to be grateful. Acts reports:

we came to Rome. The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. (Acts 28:14–16)

For Paul, even the opportunity to live by himself under guard, rather than in a crowded and vermin-filled cell, was a blessing.

Paul often thanked God for his ministry, and for its successes. To the Ephesians, he wrote,

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. (Ephesians 1:16)

In his letter to the Colossians, he wrote,

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel (Colossians 1:3–5)

To the Romans he said,

I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; (Romans 1:8–10)

The people of his churches were family for Paul, and he often expressed his thanks to God for them.

Paul also knew that the work of conversion is a gift of God, calling for thanks and praise. Paul says,

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel (Colossians 1:3-5)

In the same way, writing to the Philippians, he gives thanks for their ongoing growth in faith.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, (Philippians 1:3–5)

Paul even sees the trials that the Corinthians have faced and the grace they've received from God are good reasons to give thanks:

Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:13–15)

Why do grateful thoughts matter?

Modern neuroscience has learned a lot about the way our brains actually work. It turns out that the connections in our brains are like roads—those we travel a lot get big like interstates, and those we don't visit much turn into dirt roads that disappear over time.

If we think about things that make us angry, the angry paths get very strong. If we think about things that make us happy, the pathways will grow to take us to more happy places. Hate and anger even turn off working parts of our DNA, while love and gratitude and kindness physically encourage healing and strength. We get to choose what grows and what kind of person we become, by where we direct our attention and energy.

The way we think, and especially the times when we are thankful, have real physical effects in our brain and our character. There was an Indian story once that said that inside each of us is a wolf spirit as well as other animal spirits. Someone asked, "Which ones will grow?" The wise man answered, "The ones you feed."

Paul advises us to use our minds and our attention to continue our transformation into people who are more like Jesus. He says,

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

How do we actually do this? Paul might not have been a scientist, but he was exactly right. He said,

whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)

The things we think about, the places where we direct our attention, really do shape us and help us grow.

Gratitude is for everyone, regardless of who you are and which side of the current controversies you happen to be on. Paul is clear that where you stand on the issues doesn't matter. He says,

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. (Romans 14:5–6)

Giving thanks to God is the constant, wherever you come down on the issues of the day. Paul's advice is for all of those who are brothers and sisters in Christ:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:15–17)

If you look, you'll see that we're surrounded by blessings, and many things that aren't fun at the time, actually work for our good. Take a minute sometime to think about the things you have to be thankful for. What things do you have to be thankful for today?

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds us to pray and give thanks all the time, whatever happens to be going on. He says,

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)

God has given us so much that we have more reasons for gratitude than we can even imagine. Some day you might want to write down a list of blessings, just so you can be reminded on a dark day. We are often so busy that bright spots are hard to remember.

The list should always include the thought from John:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

And then there is our ultimate hope and promise:

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54–57)

All that God has done for us through Jesus inspires our thanks and praise. How could we not be overflowing with gratitude?