

The Power of Gratitude

11/19/17

Psalm 100:4 Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise, give thanks to Him and praise His name.

Jesus knew the power of giving thanks. In Matthew 15:35-37 he told the crowd to sit down. *36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. 37 They all ate and were satisfied.*

In this case, as in many cases, thanks precede the manifestation of what we desire. Jesus taught that it was right to give thanks for things before they come to us. This may be the beginnings of why we say a grace before a meal: we thank God for the food prior to consuming it so that it will strengthen and nourish our bodies.

In John 11:38-42, Jesus was at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He raised his tear-stained eyes upward and prayed, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” He then asked Lazarus to walk out. Again, prior to the desire Jesus gave thanks.

There seems to be a pattern developing; a formula of sorts. It is again demonstrated in The Lord’s Supper. He took the cup and gave thanks, then took the bread and gave thanks. He gave thanks that his broken body and the shedding of his blood would produce

the New Covenant with God. In Jeremiah 31:31, 33, we read: ““I will put my law in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”” The old covenant was written in stone and the new covenant would be issued in by Christ, whose message and life would be within us, written on our hearts and minds.

So again, Jesus gave thanks before the desire was fulfilled. The power of gratitude, thanksgiving, cannot be overlooked as an essential part of our relationship with God. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 teaches: ¹⁶ *Always be joyful.* ¹⁷ *Never stop praying.* ¹⁸ *Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.*

This is one of the many reasons Christ came to earth: to demonstrate that thankfulness should be a way of life for us, naturally flowing from our hearts and mouths.

In 2007, Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough began researching gratitude from a psychological perspective. They found that expressing gratitude improves mental, physical and relational well-being, and that expressing gratitude expands our happiness. Science has learned that there are several important benefits that make developing gratitude a worthwhile project. They include:

1. Improved physical well being
 - a. Get sick less often
 - b. Strengthens heart, immune system, and decreases blood pressure

- c. Improves self-care and greater likelihood to exercise
 - d. Sleep better and awake feeling more refreshed
 - e. More energy, enthusiasm, determination, and focus
2. Improved emotional well-being
- a. Greater optimism and happiness
 - b. Improved feelings of connection in times of loss or crises
 - c. Increases self-esteem
 - d. Decreases stress, anxiety, depression, and headaches
 - e. Feel better about our lives as a whole
 - f. Feel more optimistic about the future
 - g. Experience greater levels of joy and happiness
 - h. Feel stronger during trying times
3. Improved social well-being
- a. Improved emotional and academic intelligence
 - b. expands capacity for forgiveness
 - c. Heightens spirituality, ability to see something bigger than ourselves
 - d. Make greater progress toward achieving important personal goals
 - e. Enjoy closer family ties
 - f. More likely to help others and offer emotional support

One of the best ways to cultivate gratitude is to consciously bring to mind something or someone that has made us feel grateful. And one of the best ways to remember these people or experiences is to write them down, create a journal, or in some way record them. Research has shown that just two weeks of recording positive

experiences is sufficient to create up to six months of the positive effects.

As we begin our “Thanksgiving Journal”, the goal is to write down at least three things we are grateful for each day. They can be simple things like: noticing a beautiful sunset, or enjoying a good cup of coffee, or enjoying the time spent with friends or family members. It could be the hugs you get from church...anything that you are thankful for. Even things that are absent or invisible: the absence of pain after healing from an injury; the absence of ants after they finally leave.

How easy this is depends upon our personalities. Some people are quick to feel appreciation. These people easily accept the sweet new moments that are created by delayed plans, schedule mishaps, and unexpected challenges that occur during the day. Others of us struggle, and need practice learning to be grateful.

I often fall into this last category, but I believe I am getting better. In addition to a “Thanksgiving Journal”, here are some exercises to try that may aid us in growing our gratitude muscles.

1. Say, “Thank you,” often, especially to those who serve us or help us in some way.
2. Say, “Thank you, God,” frequently no matter what the situation, positive or negative. Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.”

3. When something happens that makes you grateful, linger on that for a few minutes until gratitude fills your entire being.
4. Write a note or a letter of thanks to someone who has made a difference in your life. Send it to them or take it to them in person if possible.
5. Express gratitude at meals while alone or with loved ones. It can be simple; Thank you God for this food and the hands that prepared it.
6. Attempt to release the negative of the day and practice not gossiping about, complaining about, or judging anything that happened this day. Go back to exercise three and focus on the good, positive and worthwhile things that happened.
7. Write down what you appreciate about yourself. If nothing else, write down that you appreciate that you are making an effort to become more grateful by writing down that you appreciate that you are trying to become more grateful. Kind of a self-fulfilling loop.
8. Express or show appreciation to your spouse, partner, a friend, family member, or associate. You can keep it simple if that helps: “I am grateful for you in my life.” “I appreciate you and all you do for me.”
9. We can take a gratitude walk. Setting aside 20 minutes, as we walk we can list the many blessings that we are grateful for: our bodies, our nurturing relationships, the material comforts in our life, the mind that we have, the Christ within and our essential eternal soul. We can pay attention and be mindful of what we are seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting, and smelling. This is a powerful means to change our mood and become open and accepting of the abundance that surrounds us.

10. Take a minute or two every morning to think about what you are grateful for. Do it again at the end of the day.

Last of all, we can incorporate a gratitude meditation as part of our prayer time. The Bible says that we are transformed through the renewing of our minds. Scientific research shows that our thoughts have the power to shape our minds. The challenge is that negative experiences are like double-side tape: they easily stick to our minds, and effectively trap other negative ideas.

Positive thoughts tend to slip away readily, which is why we need to write them down and reread what we have written; we are trying to get them to stick to our minds and become part of our consciousness.

A gratitude meditation effectively helps the positive and worthy thoughts to stick around. It is done like this: during prayer time, we remain seated and relaxed with our eyes closed. Take a few deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth is the traditional method, but whatever is comfortable.

When we are ready, ask: “Beloved God, reveal to me what I am truly grateful for.” Take whatever comes into our heart and mind first without judgment or comparison or commentary and accept it. Build on that thought. See the details of the experience or person. Touch it, smell it, taste it, feel it, hear it. Savor that experience and let it fill our body, mind and entire being. Keep this experience in mind long enough to embed it deeply into our mind. Finish with, “Thank you, God.”

This can take just a few minutes, but as we develop a greater repertoire of positive experiences, it will become easier to move into a feeling of thanksgiving and more quickly recognize and accept the blessings in our lives. And truly, we have an abundant life, and gratitude is not only a form of abundance but it is a powerful key to recognizing the other areas of abundance in our life.

Denis Waitley, author, speaker, and researcher, said, "Happiness cannot be traveled to, owned, earned, worn or consumed. Happiness is the spiritual experience of living every minute with love, grace, and gratitude."

Dutch priest and author Henri Nouwen wrote, "Perhaps nothing helps us make the movement from our little selves to a larger world than remembering God in gratitude. Such a perspective puts God in view in all of life, not just in the moments we set aside for worship or spiritual disciplines. Not just in the moments when life seems easy."

When we are thankful, our focus moves off small egoistic selfish desires and off the pain and fear of our current circumstances. When we are living through a consciousness of gratitude, we can be uncomfortable, afraid, and in pain, and feel grateful for the lessons we are learning at the same time.

There are times when we look upon things as burdens, but when looked at through the spirit of gratitude are really blessings. "I just got home from work, and my children want to play with me and

show me what they made at school today. I'm soooo tired. Oh well, I guess I have to spend a little time with them. Maybe if I turn on the TV, they'll get distracted, and I can at least look at my iPad while they play." Blessing or burden?

A minister went to a remote island to serve the people there. Many people were poor, impoverished, and some were lepers. During a church service he provided one woman in the back wore a hood to cover her face. At one point, as they were singing hymns, the woman uncovered her face, and the minister later said it was the most hideous face he had ever seen; the disease had removed her eyes and nose. The woman then raised her hand and asked, "May we sing the hymn Count Your Blessings?"

Expressing gratitude helps us remember that God is in control. So my prayer is that we can be thankful not only for "every good and perfect gift", not only for the people, places, and situations within our lives and absent from our lives, but for existence itself; just for the gift of being. We can be grateful for our oneness with the Divine Presence, and the oneness with all that is. We can give thanks that we are more than these bodies, our thoughts, our personalities, or experiences. We are unique expressions of God, given this moment in time to exist, serve, love, and feel the joy of being.

Happy Thanks giving!

Let us pray....