

“Thanks – In Everything”

November 14, 2021

Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Prayers series

It happens every year. November comes right on the heels of Halloween, and it's easy to skip over Thanksgiving. This year, there's so much buzz about how Covid is affecting holidays and gift giving - how much it will cost, how will we get what we need - that there's a danger in forgetting about this call to gratitude.

I've taken on a practice over the past few years of a daily post about thanksgiving and gratitude in November. This year, I'm using a form of "30 days of gratitude." There are many of them around, and this one really is stretching me to think with questions like: *What sound are you grateful? What taste or smell? What place are you grateful for?* It's made me focus more directly.

And I love this season. Thanksgiving is one of my favorite days of the year. I have great memories of extended family time and delicious meals, but it's also because there's something more holy and worshipful about it. To stop and focus on giving thanks is powerful, and every time it comes around, I notice. I feel differently when I take time to give thanks.

In August of this year, Harvard Health posted an article online titled, "Giving thanks can make you happier." Being grateful can lift our spirits. "Gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships." In short, grateful people are happier people. We can be grateful for something that happened in the past, or living in the present moment with thanksgiving, or having a positive attitude toward the future - that there will be reasons to be grateful and thankful.

The article cited studies to show the impact of gratitude. One study followed a group of people - one part of the group was told to write down reasons for gratitude, one part was told to write down reasons for irritation and aggravation, and the other part was told to write things that affected them (neither positive or negative). It's not a surprise that after ten weeks, the group that had focused on gratitude were more optimistic and felt better.

Another study invited people to write a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked (by them or in general), and the results were powerful. There was a huge increase in how good people felt as they participated. Just like showing gratitude matters, hearing words of gratitude has a positive affect on relationships - not a surprise. Whether it's a marriage or committed relationship or in the workplace, it feels good to be thanked, and we respond more graciously when we are.

Beyond the research, there's the faith connection. Scripture is filled with people

thanking God - sometimes in circumstances that are incredibly challenging. We heard this word from I Thessalonians 5: 16-18, and a powerful reminder to us **(SLIDE): Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

These verses come from the end of a letter to the early church, probably one of the earliest writings in the New Testament (50 AD) - 20 years after Jesus and 20 years before the Gospel of Mark was written down. The apostle Paul is writing to a congregation of probably mostly Gentiles that he formed on his missionary journey to Thessalonica (modern day Greece), and these words come at the close of his letter—advice from a church leader to other followers of Jesus Christ.

The call to be joyful, pray, and give thanks is not surprising, but the instructions on how and how often are powerful! We can't just be joyful in the Lord when we feel like it because joy is deeper than happiness. It's not just about when life is going great for us. Our joy is deeper than our circumstances. We don't pray just when we "need to," when there's a specific situation that drives us to ask God for help. And we don't just give thanks on one particular Thursday in November.

Giving thanks is a way to live "in all circumstances." We give thanks "even when..." We give thanks because sometimes we learn or discover something that we needed to know - even when it's hard. We give thanks because we find some blessing in the mess.

Perhaps you've heard verse 18 misquoted before. I've heard it read: "give thanks for all circumstances..." but that's not the right word or the spirit of the Scripture! It's not "for," but "in." That small word makes a big difference! God's Word doesn't call us to give thanks for the difficulties we face or the struggles we have, but to give thanks and recognize God's presence in the midst of all of life.

In his letter to the people in Philippi, Paul appeals to them to rejoice – a directive, not a suggestion! Paul wrote to them from prison – surely not a place where joy would be a common theme. Yet, he calls them to be confident and even bold in God's power to bring salvation. And it's important to know that the church in Philippi had some conflicts, so Paul wrote to a community in conflict. Whatever situation they faced, Paul encouraged them to be gentle in spirit and to trust God in prayer. Can you imagine if we took that to heart? Be gentle in spirit. Trust God in prayer.

Anne Lamott says that her prayers of thanks to God have changed over the years - from *thankyouthankyouthankyou* to the more formal "Thank you, God" to now a more familiar "Thanks." Yes, a simple prayer, but according to Paul, important, necessary, and transformative.

Can we be thankful where we are? That doesn't mean we can't have goals and dreams, but there's something to be said for giving thanks right now. "Gratitude helps people refocus on what they have instead of what they lack." And if we're honest, there are times when we're just sure that we'd feel better and more satisfied if we just had

this or that, or if things were different.

Perhaps it's a challenge to express thanks more often. What might it be like to get up and thank God every morning? How could it change our perspective? I'm not advocating that we ignore the difficulties we're facing, but we can hold it all open to God in prayer - remembering that giving thanks is a powerful witness, a powerful motivator, and a powerful tool in our spiritual lives. Ultimately, we want gratitude to become a habit in the best sense of the word.

Paul's call to is to think on - focus on - meditate on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. That helps us to be thankful. It doesn't mean we avoid what's tough (remember that Paul is in prison!) or ignore what's going on. Even today, we may be troubled by Covid or division in our country and uncertainty. Maybe we're anxious about world problems - justice for those who are oppressed, climate concerns, or the economy.

Some of us may be just tired of it all or heavy with personal struggles or grief, financial worries, or worrying about our loved ones. All of that stuff is real, and it matters. Prayers of thanks in the midst of it don't make it go away, but they do help us to remember that God is good, and that God with us.

Paul's words are for us right now in the midst of all that we see, hear, and experience - and call us to believe that whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy is worth thinking about! It's worth focusing on! It's worth taking time to celebrate, give thanks, call it out, and respond to with glad and generous hearts.

Last week, we started on *Help!* prayers, and *Thanks* may be the obvious follow-up. When we ask for help and receive it, giving thanks is a proper response. Prayers of thanks remind us that grace is real - and a part of our daily lives. We have a myriad of reasons to thank God every day - and some days we do a better job than others.

What's it like when prayers of thanks don't come quickly? Have you ever been around someone who is ungrateful? It doesn't happen often, but it's hard to be around people who can't speak of anything to be grateful for. If I'm honest, it's energy-sucking. I'm not advocating for the "good vibes only" stuff. I want people to be real and honest, and yet the ability to call out thanksgiving is vital to our spiritual lives. God's presence, grace, and mercy are reasons to be thankful, even when other things aren't going well.

Anne Lamott writes, **(SLIDE)** "Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides." She goes on to say, "It means you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and in the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back." Actions follow feelings, and perspective makes a difference.

When we truly allow thanksgiving to shape us, we serve others because we know about grace received from being served, being loved, and being helped. We give

because we've received. We find a place of humility and gratitude that shapes our lives. Lamott says that "saying and meaning 'thanks' comes with this thought: What more can I give?"

Thanks. Simple, yet packed with power. **(SLIDE)** Meister Eckhart, a German mystic and theologian who lived in the 1200s and 1300s, offers a challenging reminder: "If the only prayer you said was 'thank you,' that would be enough." Maybe he said it because it's the prayer we sometimes don't pray - or maybe it's because prayers of thanks can be so transformative for us. These prayers remind us of God's love and care - and our call to love and care for others.

So you have a slip of paper. You're invited to write on it - something you're thankful for or a prayer of thanks. And I'd challenge you to make it specific. Is there someone who has gone above and beyond for you? Do you see the beauty around you and give thanks? Did someone show up when you needed them? Did you get help at just the right time? Did you make it through a hard time by God's grace? What is it that makes you say, "Thank you, God!" today?

Write it down and drop it in the basket before you leave today. If you're online, write your reflection in the comments, and we'll make sure to fill one out for you. These will be put together in a paper chain - a witness to God's goodness and grace - as we journey through Advent to the joy of Christmas.

Just like praying for help, offering prayers of thanks - honest ones - even if they seem insignificant or unimportant - help us to grow in a deeper relationship with God. I love the video we watched - some of those simple prayers are good to hear because I like the chair in our living room and the first drink of coffee in the morning. And those prayers can lead us to the deeper prayer. Thank you, God, for loving us so much that you sent Jesus to show us just how much.

They make a difference in the world, too, as we thank God who is good, gracious, generous. There's always a reason to give thanks, always something to be grateful for, always a prayer of thanks from our heart that will glorify God and witness to how good God is.

What's your *Thanks* prayer? Write it down. Offer it up, and know that it matters. *Give thanks in everything...*

Thanks be to God! Amen.