

The Anatomy of Gratitude

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Psalm 103:1-6, 13-22

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1 Corinthians 1:3-9

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Psalm 103: 1-6, 13-22

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—

³who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

⁴who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

⁶The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

¹⁴For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

¹⁵As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;

¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

¹⁷But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,

¹⁸to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

¹⁹The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

²⁰Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word.

²¹Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will.

²²Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul.

"Don't worry, if it's cloudy, you get your money back." I heard these words as I boarded the small jet in Katmandu. The hum of the engines quickly filled the cabin. Eventually, the flight attendant motioned to me that it was my turn to have a look from the front of the cockpit. Making my way forward, I saw it. Getting in full view, there it was in plain sight. The tallest mountain on earth was right before my eyes. On my last day in Nepal, I had this chance to take a flight of the Everest mountain range. When I first saw Mt. Everest, the sheer beauty of it was breathtaking. I marveled at this majestic mountain, along with my other mission team members. In the experience of seeing Mt. Everest, I was at a loss for words. Yet from within my soul I felt a profound feeling, a real sense of gratitude.

Though we may experience the deepest sense of gratitude on the mountain tops, in the peak moments of our lives, it's not as much what happens beyond us, but rather what is within us that matters most.

Today we ascend Psalm 103, which may be the "Mt. Everest" of thanksgiving psalms. One commentator says, "It exalts the soul to breathtaking heights."

What is unique about this Psalm is the way it begins, and the way it ends. When reading these parts of the Psalm, we are met by the repetitious phrase "Bless the Lord." Like our eyes being focused to a peak on the horizon, we are drawn to this phrase in the text. "Bless the Lord" is a powerful phrase that brackets the middle verses of the psalm. Psalm 103 begins and ends with blessing the Lord.

Seeing this rhythm of the text is all well and good, but what does it actually mean to "Bless the Lord"? Have you thought about this before? It's not as if there is a Blessing the Lord for Dummies guidebook, not even in the Princeton Seminary bookstore. I confess that I have never considered with sustained attention until preparing this sermon what it means to bless God. I have more often thought as maybe you have, "Is not God the one who blesses us?"

Psalm 103 is attributed to David. In fact, many Psalms of blessing are attributed to David, the second King of Israel. It is safe to say that David knew what it meant to bless the Lord, since it is he who is given

credit for the phrase. According to David and our faith tradition, to bless the Lord is to give thanks to God.

As we read in the first verse of this Psalm, David believed that blessing the Lord, giving thanks to God, begins within. "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Blessing the Lord comes out of the depths of our soul, the very fabric of our being. Gratitude comes from within because that is where real truth is found. Each of us can say one thing and think or feel another. With our words, we can pay lip service to God or other people. But in the depths of our soul, we can only be truthful. On the inside, there can only be one truth. Gratitude is a truth-filled response to God.

When we understand that gratitude begins within, we may naturally wonder how what is on the inside can be put into action on the outside, in the rhythms of our daily lives. This is essentially the very question of Christian discipleship and spiritual formation - the learning how to live what we believe. You can see this at places like the Barnes and Noble bookstore, where this subject takes up most of the space on the bookshelf in the the faith and Christianity section, which is right next to self-improvement. Even beyond the church, as a culture we yearn to live more fully and to get advice on how to do it.

In our Christianity, we not only have many wonderful thinkers, but also many inspiring practitioners of the faith who have deeply understood gratitude; some you can find on the Barnes and Noble bookshelf and some you can't. Have you heard of the 14th century theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart? Eckhart was a German priest in with the Dominicans, a monastic Church order. In German, the word "Meister" means "Master." Though a challenging figure in his day, Meister Eckhart was truly a master of showing gratitude to God. In one of Meister Eckhart's most well known quotations he says, "If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is 'thank you,' that would suffice."

I wonder what would it look like if our lives were a continual prayer of thanks to God? One way we can deepen our understanding of living with gratitude is by looking at the liturgical songs of another monastic community, the Taizé Community in France. I had the blessing of spending a week in Taize earlier this year, an experience I'm truly grateful for. Taizé is an ecumenical Christian community that is a pilgrimage site for thousands of people each year, especially young people. Days at Taizé are ordered according to the three times of worship and prayer: morning, noon and night. During Taizé prayer services, the soul of worship is singing songs from the Taizé songbook. These songs are what Taizé has become most known for. Each song is composed of memorable lyrics inspired by or taken directly from lines of scripture, many from the Psalms themselves.

One of the more popular Taizé songs actually comes from Psalm 103. The lyrics of the song, "Bless the Lord, my soul," are repeated in a melodic and meditative way. During worship, participants are invited to practice contemplative singing. Since the lyrics of the songs are short and can be remembered after sung only a few times, the lyrics are sung many times over. It is in singing and repeating these prayerful lyrics that they can enter into our being. This is essentially what David is doing with the phrase "Bless the Lord" in Psalm 103. In moving within us, words of gratitude are not just spoken, but can become an actual part of our soul.

The process of something becoming a part of us is how blessing the Lord, giving thanks to God, becomes part of us. But exactly how much a part of us? We can probably all recall some form of saying what we are thankful for around the Thanksgiving table once a year. But we may feel that it is only the Meister Eckharts in our bookstores that can be in a continual place of gratitude. The truth is, we do not need to be grateful all the time. We need only flip through the rest of the Psalms to know that other emotions and actions are a part of the human experience of faith, such as crying out to God for deliverance. When we experience, loss, challenge, or disappointment, God would not expect gratitude to be flowing from us. But the hope is that gratitude is the deeper part of us, part of our spiritual anatomy.

There is an old story that can help us put gratitude into perspective. The story is a West African folk tale called The Traveler. There was once an elderly and wise woman who lived in a village. She would often spend her days sitting in the shade of a big tree near the village, reading books and talking to passersby. One day, a traveler came upon her village and stopped and said, "Old woman, I have been traveling across the countryside, and I have seen many things and met many people. Can you tell me what kind of people I will find in your village?" The elderly woman replied, "Certainly I can, but first tell me what kind of people you have found on your travels." The traveler scowled and said, "Old woman, I have met people who cheat, steal, and aren't kind to strangers, and people who don't look out for one another." The elderly woman looked up and, with a faint look of sadness in her eyes, said, "Oh my dear, those are the people you will find in my village." The traveler kicked the dirt under his feet, scoffed, and marched off towards the village.

By and by, as the elderly woman continued to enjoy her day, another traveler came walking towards the village. Once again, the traveler stopped and asked, "Please kind madam, I have been traveling across the countryside, and I have seen many things and met many people. Can you tell me what kind of people I will find in your village?" The elderly woman said, "Certainly I can, but first tell me what kind of people you have found

on your travels."The traveler replied, "I have found people who are kind and welcoming of strangers, people who care for one another, and people who love. Those are the people I have found on my travels." The elderly woman looked up and, with the faintest smile in her eyes, said, "My dear, those are the people you will find in my village."

Just as the traveler in this folk tale experiences, what is inside us shapes the way we live. We are all travelers on the journey of faith, seeking to live faithfully. The more we are formed by gratitude, the more we can live authentic and faith-filled lives. When gratitude is a part of us, it can change how we see and experience the world around us.

(Smile) How do you put gratitude into action in your life? In my life, taking time daily to give thanks to God has been one of the most transforming parts of my spiritual journey. Most days I take 4 minutes to offer thanks. I call it 4 minutes of gratitude. In this time, I thank God for all the blessings in my life that day.

If daily gratitude seems like a challenge to remember, even a time for gratitude once a week can have a dramatic effect. According to a New York Times article, researchers call this "gratitude lite." A University of California experiment instructed people to keep a journal listing five things for which they felt grateful, like a friend's generosity, something they'd

learned, a sunset they'd enjoyed. The gratitude journal was brief - just one sentence for each of the five things - and done only once a week, but after two months there were significant effects. Compared with a control group, the people keeping the gratitude journal were more optimistic and felt happier. They reported fewer physical problems and spent more time exercising. And as any good study does, these reports were verified by observations from their spouses. These grateful people also fell asleep more quickly at night, slept longer and woke up feeling more refreshed. One of the leading researchers said, "If you want to sleep more soundly, count blessings, not sheep."

For the church, the benefits of gratitude may be most noticeable during the season of Advent, which marks a new church year. As we begin Advent, we prepare again for the birth of the Christ light in the world. What if throughout Advent, gratitude was renewed within you? What would it look like to prepare in Advent not passively, but actively in gratitude? Not only can we prepare for Jesus the Christ, son of David, we can embody a life of gratitude, about which David wrote in Psalm 103.

With our lives, we can live into a Psalm of thanksgiving as we prepare for Jesus, our Emanuel. How will you complete the phrase, "Bless the Lord", in your life?

Bless the Lord, from the inside out.

Bless the Lord, and don't forget to count your blessings.

Bless the Lord, in Advent and always.

God blesses us, and we can bless God in return, by living with gratitude. When we give thanks to God, we bless the Lord. Amen.