

Gratitude:



One Key to Recovery

By Brad Jersak

As a toddler learning my first prayers, my parents taught me the importance of gratitude. Not that they explained exactly why gratitude was important—just that it was. And so, at every meal and every night at bedtime, I made a habit of identifying ways that I experienced God’s goodness and I thanked him.

While we’re all prone to reducing gratitude to a lifeless exercise in inane religiosity, I now notice that others religiously avoid it. I’m intrigued when other Christ-followers scorn prayers of thanks as a show of their non-religious spirituality.

I find this odd in the context of a high-stress, grumpy world after modern psychology has confirmed Paul’s instincts about the two-fold importance of fixing our minds on positivity and giving thanks to God in all circumstances:

Positivity: “...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).

Positivity is not naive optimism. Rather, it is attentiveness to the quiet melodies of God’s goodness in a cacophonous world. As a realist prone to jadedness, I know the value of spotting signs of hope and using them as anchors for my mental health. I have much to grieve and much to celebrate every day, so it’s important that I feed my soul with nourishing spiritual

thoughts, words and images as often as I eat actual meals.

Gratitude: “... *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

I don’t give God thanks for evil and tragedy as such, but through every trial of life—in every circumstance—I can be grateful that I’m never alone. I can surrender my life to the care of a loving God. I watch for both the surprising and the unremarkable ways that care plays out, especially through those Christ sends as angels of mercy, whether they realize it or not. An encouraging message from someone who cares can change the course of my day and lift me from despondency to gratitude. Often, these boosts come through friends who are extending their own practice of gratitude to bless me.

Faith Practice

One might regard the simplicity of giving thanks to God and others as *banal*. “Banality” is defined as “unoriginal, obvious and boring.” But after 30 years of walking with others drowning in the symptoms of extreme trauma and/or addiction, I see gratitude as a *first-order necessity* for a life of recovery. Gratitude (along with surrender and forgiveness) is a daily stepping stone on the pathway to wholeness. Often, gratitude is the best lifeline for those tottering on the brink of insanity or relapse—even if they can only “act as

if” they are grateful in the beginning.

For that reason, I’ve come to believe gratitude is an essential *faith practice*. No, it doesn’t earn us points in heaven or make God love us more. We’re way past that, right? Then what do I mean by “faith practice”?

First, thanksgiving sometimes springs naturally from a full heart. But far more often, especially for those passing through dark valleys, expressing gratitude requires a leap of faith. When life is hard, praying “God, thank you for your goodness” is not hypocritical. It’s a prayer of faith like the “even though” prayers of the prophet Habakkuk:

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Second, gratitude is a *practice*, because developing a habit of giving thanks when we’re doing okay gives us the spiritual muscle memory to reach out when we’re struggling. A consistent faith practice of gratitude is not “religion”—it’s a mark of Christlike maturity amid volatile times. Gratitude doesn’t open the taps of heaven’s mercy—it opens our hands to heaven’s already flowing mercy. Gratitude orients receptive hearts to our all-merciful God! □

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