

Thanksgiving in Prayer

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Introduction

Saying “thank you”! How hard can it be? It ought to be a most natural and readily expressed sentiment in our daily activity, both towards others and towards God. For most of us, from a young age we are taught to say “thank you” when someone gives us something or does something for us, with our parents being concerned to instil this within us as a principle of courtesy and in having a sense of gratitude towards others in response to their kindness to us. Yet, this seems to be something that we do poorly, and certainly is not something that we do with sufficient frequency or sincerity. How often do we fail to say “thank you” at all, or when we do it is done casually, more as an habitual response, with little thought or care and not from a heart that is genuinely grateful? How often is it that our actions contradict our words in this regard?

This is likely to be even more so when we examine our giving of thanks to the Lord. Consider how much of our prayer is focussed on asking the Lord for things or about ourselves - our wants, concerns, and desires - compared with how much we acknowledge the Lord for who he is and express our gratitude for what he has done. Whilst it is appropriate to ask the Lord for appropriate things,¹ our prayer so often is self-centred or self-serving, even if done with what might otherwise appear to be the best of intentions, and not centred upon or requested as part of our serving the Lord. It is often as though we treat the Lord as owing us something or that he has an obligation to do as we ask, rather than our having the unmerited privilege of being permitted to come into the presence of the all-holy, almighty, all sovereign Yahweh. The extent to which we offer genuine, thoughtful, and heartfelt thanks to the Lord is a good measure of the extent to which we truly understand and appreciate who the Lord is and what he has done for us.

It should not surprise us that there are numerous references to thankfulness and thanksgiving in the Bible, the Old and New Testaments alike.² Consider, for example:

- *Genesis* - Thanksgiving is integral to the principle of the “sabbath.”³
- *Leviticus* - Thanksgiving was incorporated as an integral element of the worship practices of the Israelites, specifically in the form of the thank offering in response to the Lord’s blessings.⁴
- *Psalms* - Thanksgiving is a principal component of the prayers of the Israelites.⁵
- *Gospels* - Thanksgiving is a part of the teaching and practice of Jesus.⁶
- *Letters* - Thanksgiving is a key aspect throughout the letters of Paul.⁷

¹ The Lord’s Prayer itself shows us this, although it also shows that the priority in our prayer must first be in acknowledging who the Lord is and our concern for his will and his kingdom, such that what we ask for in prayer is understood and requested in the light of these things. For example, a suitable prayer might be, ‘Lord, we know that you are the great provider and we thank you for your many blessings to us, but if it be your will, please ...’. Consider Matt 26:39.

² For example, the NIV Concordance has in the order of 150 direct references to “thanks” and its associated forms, but the idea of thanks is also associated with words such as “praise,” “grace,” and “bless.”

³ The sabbath is the regular time that people are to dedicate, pausing from their weekly activities, to reflect back upon what the Lord has done in creation and in redemption and, looking forward, to consider what the Lord is yet to do in completing his plan of redemption when Jesus returns, and to respond accordingly including, inter alia, with thanksgiving. Consider, Ge 2:1-3, and 1 Tim 4:4-5.

⁴ Lev 7:11-15; 22:29-30.

⁵ For example, Pss 9:1-2, 75:1, 105:1, 106:1, 107:1, 108:1-4, 111:1, and 136. Consider also, Col 3:16.

⁶ For example, Mt 15:35-6; Lk 22:14-20; and Jn 11:41, 17:1.

⁷ Each of Paul’s letters, except Galatians and Titus, contains a point of thanksgiving. In each of Galatians and Titus, the absence of a point of thanksgiving (which might otherwise have been expected) has the effect of emphasising the gravity or significance of the issues being addressed in those two letters. Consider Rom 1:8, 1 Cor 1:4-8, 1 Cor 1:3-5, Eph 1:3-23, Phil 1:3-5, Col 1:3-5, 1 Thes 1:2-3, 2 Thes 1:3, 1 Tim 1:12-17, 2 Tim 1:3, Phm 4-7.

The meaning of “Thanks” and “Thanksgiving”

There are a few different words used in the original biblical languages that are translated as ‘to thank’ in English, but there are two principal words, one in each of the Old and New Testaments, that are to be considered. These are:

- ‘*yadah*’ (Hb) - to praise, give thanks, confess. The core idea here is the expression of an acknowledgement of some sort.
- ‘*eucharisteo*’ (Gk) - to thank, give thanks. The core idea here is that of ‘grace’ (‘*charis*’ (Gk)), with thanks being the response to the unmerited favour that has been received from God. This is why the Lord’s Supper is referred to by some as the “Eucharist” being a ceremony in which the grace of God in sending his son is remembered and acknowledged. This is also why we say “grace” in connection with our meals, this being a mark of acknowledgement of the Lord’s gracious provision for us and the expression of our gratitude to the Lord.

These core ideas of the original biblical words carry through into the English word “to thank” which means to express gratitude towards another for a benefit or favour and showing an appreciation for a kindness they have done.

Accordingly, as the verb “to thank” is used in general parlance, it bears the following key elements:

- thanksgiving is based on and requires an acknowledgement of some benefit or blessing received, and of from whom or where it came,
- it is done as a response to what another has done (it is something that has impacted one’s mind, will, heart, desires, senses - and prompts a response),
- it is expressed towards someone else, and
- it must be voluntary and come willingly from the heart; it cannot be demanded or commanded, for otherwise it would not be genuine.⁸

But the question we now need to consider is how does this apply in regard to thanksgiving in prayer? What does it mean to give thanks to God? How do we do this? What does thanksgiving involve? This will be approached by looking at five elements of our thanksgiving:

- The **object** of our thanksgiving - Who we give thanks to
- The **subject** of our thanksgiving - What we give thanks for
- The **reason** for our thanksgiving - Why we give thanks
- The **manner** of our thanksgiving - How we give thanks
- The **timing** of our thanksgiving - When we give thanks.

⁸ This is the reason why, it is suggested, that thanksgiving is not expressly referred to in the Lord’s Prayer; rather, it is to be the voluntary response - that is, willingly and with heartfelt gratitude - that is made to each element of the Lord’s Prayer. Similarly, the “thank offering” in Leviticus was a voluntary offering (although when offered it had to meet the requirements for such an offering that the Lord set out, in order to be acceptable to the Lord; this is why we today pray “in Jesus’ name.”)

The object of our thanksgiving - Who we give thanks to?

The short and immediate answer to this question is that we give our thanks to the Lord, to God our father. We see this, for example in the Psalms (“Oh give thanks to the Lord ...” in Ps 105:1, 106:1, and 107:1), in Jesus’s own prayer (Jn 11:41) and in the Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6:9), and in the letters of Paul (Rom 1:8, 1 Cor 1:4, and 1 Thes 1:2). Our prayers, including those of thanksgiving, are not to be directed toward anyone or anything else, such as prayers to other gods, idols, or to Mary, the mother of Jesus; true, genuine thanks must be offered to the Lord himself.

While this may seem to be stating the obvious, for as it is with all aspects of prayer our prayers are to be directed towards God, we need to consider this further. In directing our prayers to the Lord we are acknowledging:

- that the Lord as the creator, provider, and sustainer is the source of all the blessings and benefits we receive, from life itself and our redemption, through to the small and seemingly incidental things in life, and that it is through him and his creation that we have meaning, purpose, and hope in our lives,
- that the Lord is therefore rightfully due our thanks for it is only from him that we receive any blessing or benefit, and
- our own position as creatures, but also sinful creatures, and in the absence of God’s grace are unworthy and unentitled to any such blessing or benefit.

That is, in giving our thanks to the Lord we must come to him as the almighty creator and our thanksgiving must recognise and reflect the creator/creature distinction. This is reflected, for example, in David’s Song of Thanks - 1 Chron 16:8-36 (and its parallel in Ps 105) - and also in Ps 100.

The subject of our thanksgiving - What we give thanks for?

The short and immediate answer is that we are to give thanks for everything and in every circumstance! For example consider Phil 4:6, Eph 5:20, Col 3:17, and 1 Thes 5:18. All that we have and all that we are, are the provision of the Lord; there is nothing that we receive or experience we encounter, all things in this life are to be the subject of thanksgiving to the Lord, even in what may be considered adverse or unfortunate we should still be giving thanks to the Lord (for example, Jas 1:2-4). All that we experience in this life must be viewed and understood in light of the Lord’s providence, his relationship with his people, and that our ultimate hope and joy is yet to be fulfilled in the kingdom yet to come (for example, consider Rom 8:26-30, and Heb 12:28-29).

In giving thanks for everything we are acknowledging:

- the basis on which we receive all blessings and benefits from the Lord is his covenant relationship with his people,
- that the Lord’s covenant blessings are many and great - all that we have and all that we are the gracious gifts of the Lord,
- that this requires obedience to the law of the Lord, recognising that he is the ‘lord’ (Master) and we are to obey and serve him, and
- that our perspective has to be that the ultimate fulfilment of our covenant blessings comes when the Lord returns.

That is, our thanksgiving must recognise and reflect God’s covenant with his people and the master/servant distinction within the covenantal relationship between the Lord and his people, and that blessings and benefits come to us through faithfully serving him and waiting upon him to fulfil and complete his covenant promises. This is reflected, for example, in Deut 7:6-16, 28:1-12, and Ps 106 (especially vv.44-48). And we see examples of the many and various things that Paul gives thanks for in his letters.

The reason for our thanksgiving - Why we give thanks?

The short and immediate answer is that the reason we give thanks is our gratitude for what the Lord has done for us. For example, Pss 95:1-3, 138:1-3, Lam 3:22-24, and Dan 2:23.

Again, this may seem to be saying the obvious. However, the question needs to be considered, why be grateful, why is a response of gratitude required at all? What is the basis for our gratitude? What is it that drives or motivates our being grateful? In giving thanks to the Lord we are also acknowledging:

- we in fact are not worthy of any blessing or benefit in and of ourselves, and that it is only by the Lord's grace that we receive any mercy, kindness, or blessing, including, fundamentally his saving grace,
- but that it is in respect of something we cannot demand or otherwise claim as of right, or procure for ourselves, and
- that we deeply appreciate the kindness extended to us or the benefit we have received, it has pleased us.

That is, our thanksgiving must recognise and reflect God as the gracious saviour, our own unworthiness to receive any good thing, and the saviour/sinner distinction, that all that we have and all that we are comes entirely through the grace of God. For example, Pss 50:23, 107:21-22, 147:7-11, Mt 8:8, and Lk 3:15-16.

The manner of our thanksgiving - How we give thanks?

The short and immediate answer is that we must give our thanks humbly - in all humility.

This does not necessarily mean that we cannot be joyful, rejoice, and the like in our thanksgiving, but it does require we have a correct understanding of our own position, where we stand in the scheme of things, and of our place in our covenantal relationship with the Lord. We must not be proud.

In the manner in which we give thanks we must acknowledge:

- we are coming before a holy and sovereign God - the almighty creator, the covenant lord (master), the gracious saviour,
- that only the righteous are entitled to come into his presence and to do so is a grace and mercy, a privilege, and comes only through the sacrifice and mediation of Jesus Christ, our great high priest, and
- we must - and can - only approach the Lord with all humility - not proudly, not arrogantly, not discourteously or disrespectfully, recognising who it is that is providing us with these blessings and benefits.

That is, our thanksgiving must recognise and reflect the holiness of the Lord. Consider - Pss 66:13-20, 96:7-9, 100.

The timing of our thanksgiving - When we give thanks?

The short and immediate answer is “always”! For example, Eph 1:16, 5:20; Phil 4:4-6; 1 Thes 2:13, and 5:17.

This does not mean that we are always to be engaged in the physical activity of praying, but rather that our hearts are always open to God in all things. Prayer is, first and foremost, an attitude of heart, a disposition of will, and an intelligent commitment dedicating all of one's life to the Lord. Consider, for example, Noah who “walked with God” (Gen 6:9). We are to be persistent in our prayer, repeatedly bringing matters back before the Lord, in our thanksgiving as much as in our requests. This is why, for example, we should thank the Lord daily for our “daily bread”, for his daily provision and protection of us, for delivering us day by day (and moment by moment) from evil.

In regard to when we give thanks we must acknowledge:

- our covenant relationship with the Lord is eternal - he will always be our God and we will always be his people,
- we are forever in the Lord's loving care and we are always receiving his gracious provision, and
- our lives must always be ones of an attitude of prayer, and this includes thanksgiving.

Our thanksgiving must recognise and reflect that we are unceasingly and eternally in the Lord's loving care and gracious provision and that we must always be living in an attitude of thanksgiving. Consider - "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love endures forever" - 1 Chron 16:34; Ps 100:4-5, 106:1, 107:1, 136. Also, refer to Phil 4:6-7; Col 2:6-7, 3:15-17; and Heb 13:15-16.

Two case studies

We can see these principles at work in the following two examples from Luke:

- The thankful leper - Lk 17:11-19
- The Pharisee and the tax collector - Lk 18:9-14.

The thankful leper - Lk 17:11-19 (read from v.7)

In this account of Jesus healing ten lepers, we seen the principles of thanksgiving at work in the comparison of the response between the one Samaritan leper who, immediately upon noticing that he had been healed, returned to Jesus to give thanks to God, and the nine Jewish lepers who did not. There are three things to note from this account regarding thanksgiving.

Who owes what to whom?

Often the approach by people to prayer is as though they consider that God owes them an obligation to do as they ask, and how often is it that people are dissatisfied with what the Lord has done for them. How often is it that people think that the things they do for God amount to something, earning God's favour and therefore imposing a duty on God to do something for them? But if this is the way we think, however, we are deceiving ourselves. We see this from Lk 17:7-10, where the rightful place of the servant is made clear. Even if we do everything that God wants us to do, all we are doing is fulfilling our duty towards him, that which we are required to do in any event. Absolute obedience and allegiance are what God requires and expects. There is nothing that we can do to gain any favour from God or which will earn us any merit. Whatever favour we gain from God comes entirely by his grace. God owes us nothing; we owe him everything. This is the fundamental basis of thanksgiving in prayer; that is, acknowledging that all that we have and all that we are is only by the grace of God.

The one who returned – a Samaritan

Of the ten lepers, who returned? It was the Samaritan (11:16). A "Samaritan" was considered to be a 'foreigner' (11:18), one of a group of people who lived within Israel but was not a Jew, and that there was some hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews. To some extent, however, the Samaritans lived under and in accordance with Mosaic law. The implication from the text is that the other nine lepers were Jews.

The other nine, being Jews, should have known better. They were the ones who would have understood the Mosaic law regarding lepers, the reason for their isolation, the reason for being referred to the priest (and the significance of that), of what had happened when they were healed on their way to see the priest. Yet, they did not even realise, or certainly appreciate, that their healing came through the grace of God. The nine lepers had every reason and every opportunity to understand and to give thanks, yet they didn't. Sadly, how often is it, that the ones who should know better, and have every opportunity to know better, are the ones who don't! Isn't it the case so often that the least thankful, are those who have the most. Genuine thanksgiving comes from a heart and mind that recognises and acknowledges the Lord's hand in all the blessings that we receive, that it is to the Lord that we must respond, recognising and acknowledging that there is nothing that we can demand or otherwise claim as of right or procure for ourselves.

Acknowledging the source of mercy – the essence of thanksgiving and the evidence of genuine faith

It was only the Samaritan who recognised that it was the hand of God in his deliverance - he “turned back, praising God with a loud voice” (11:15). It was not merely physical, outward healing that he obtained (as the others did) but he recognised his need for atonement, and to which the Lord’s mercy also extended to his spiritual condition - “Rise and go your way, your faith has made you well” (11:19). God, in his mercy, does many good things for people generally, believer and non-believer alike. For example, as human beings, in the way he has created us, we have the capacity to be healed, wounds close, broken bones knit together again, natural biological processes, sometimes aided with medicines, can deal with diseases, vaccinations can contain pandemics (!). All ten lepers were healed, physically and this was a mercy from God to all of them. The critical question, however, is how the ten responded to this mercy. This is a matter of the mind and heart - a mind that understand and acknowledges the hand of the Lord, and a heart that is filled with gratitude for what the Lord has done is the one that will be truly thankful. The nine were no doubt happy to be cured of their leprosy and rendered ‘clean’ but they did not see themselves as being the recipients of God’s grace. They asked for mercy and received it (for no other reason than the grace of God), yet they did not acknowledge or respond to it. If they had seen themselves as being the recipients of God’s grace, they also would have returned to thank Jesus. Genuine thanksgiving comes from a repentant heart.

The Pharisee and the tax collector - Lk 18:9-14

In this parable, we see two important contrasts between one who is superficially thankful and one who is genuinely thankful.

How they approached - self-righteous vs humble

Pharisee - “*standing by himself*” (18:11). We can understand what this means from Mt. 6:5 - “For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.” In v.9, this Pharisee is being described as self-righteous and treating others with contempt. The Pharisee was manifesting a heart that was proud; this was not the one whose mind, heart, and disposition recognised that he was coming before the holy and sovereign Lord.

Tax collector - “*standing far off*” (18:12). This tax collector, aware of his sinfulness and unworthiness, was not able to approach, not able to lift his head and look towards heaven, beating his breast. He was coming before the Lord with a repentant heart and with all humility.

What they said - “Thanks” vs contrite

Pharisee - “*God, I thank you ...*” (18:11). He ‘thanks’ the Lord, in the sense that he utters the word. But note what he thanks the Lord for - it was all “I” (three times). Even in giving thanks, it is all about him. It is all pride. Yet, notwithstanding his external zeal and apparent devotion, it was meaningless and pointless. His words of thanks were of no consequence, for his words (and his actions) revealed the true disposition of his heart. His thanksgiving was a sham. He went home unjustified. What he demonstrated was that he did not understand salvation, for him it was a matter of works; he did not understand grace (18:14).

Tax collector - “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner*” (18:13). No word of thanks here! Yet, in what he did say he demonstrated an understanding and heart that knew it was only by the grace of God that he would be saved. He was acknowledging that his sinfulness, and as a tax collector he was very sinful (see the Pharisee’s description). There was nothing that he could do except submit himself to the mercy of God. In contrast to the Pharisee, however, he went home justified (18:14). This is the heart (and the actions) of the one who is truly thankful; this is the heart that is required for true and genuine thanksgiving in prayer.

Self-righteousness and thankfulness are mutually exclusive.