

Gratitude

For almost 4 years now, I've been feeding a feral black cat that comes every day to my front door. I feed her (or him) outside, of course. Egg omelet with salsa plus a handful of cat food for breakfast, and cat food again later for a late lunch. Does she (or he, not sure) ever say "Thank you"? No, never. Yet . . . I continue to feed her (or him, still not sure), even when it's bitter cold and snowy, even when I have lots of other things to do, and even though the cat benefits me not at all. So why do I need to hear "Thank you"? Why do I even raise this issue? *Because the cat needs to say "Thank you."* The cat needs to be grateful and to express it. It would, of course, be gratifying if the cat says "Thank you," but I feed her regardless.

Let's think about gratitude for all that God has done for us. Those who are in heaven repeatedly, as John witnessed in his Revelation vision, give thanks to God (Revelation 4 and 7, for example). That's probably going to be our song for an eternity. When we're there in heaven, transformed and supremely blessed in God's presence, thanksgiving will be spontaneous and sincere. But what about in the here and now?

I find few verses in the N.T. in which Paul or other writers give thanks to God for their own salvation. That may be deliberate, so as not to call attention to themselves. Thus Paul repeatedly gives thanks for the salvation of others (Romans 1, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, and 2 Thessalonians 2, for example), but not for his own salvation. But in 1 Corinthians 15, as Paul is reflecting on the victory Christ obtained for us by the resurrection, he concludes with an outburst of thanks to God (see v. 57).

Nevertheless, Paul does state that one of the essential qualities of a believer is giving thanks: **“. . . that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light”** (Colossians 1:10-12). Paul lists here in brief what the Christian life should be like, viz, pleasing Christ; fruit-bearing; knowing God; being mature so that we can endure; and this: Giving thanks. It's an intrinsic and necessary component of a believer's new life in Christ.

And in Ephesians (5:15-20), Paul compellingly writes that we're to be wise, not foolish, in how we live. Our lives, he writes, are to be according to the Lord's will, which is filled with the Spirit, rejoicing in our hearts *and giving thanks*. **“Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (v. 20). Notice: “always . . . for everything.” And it's because of who Jesus is. We're exhorted to be thankful also in Philippians 4:6 and in Colossians 2:7 and 4:2.

Paul also, in another place, writes this: **“We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God”** (2 Corinthians 4:14-15). The purpose of salvation, as it's expressed here, is that God is glorified by our giving thanks for His grace, for all that He has done for us. Our thanksgiving glorifies God.

“Thank you” is what we say when we receive a gift, something that we didn't merit or earn, or even deserve. In Bible times, gifts were to create or maintain a relationship. (Today, we suppose that gifts are unconditional, once received to do with as we please. That's not biblical, though.) So our gratitude for the gift of grace, of having been elect, of having received the blessings of the redemption Christ obtained, is within a personal relationship between us and God. But a “Thank you” can be insincere. It can be half-hearted, forced perhaps by culture and tradition. When I was little and my Aunt Rita would send me a birthday or Hanukkah gift, my mother would demand that I call her to say thanks. If my mother didn't make an issue of it, I probably would never have bothered. So . . . How do we say “Thank You” to God? And why?

Let's first understand that God doesn't *need* our thanks. He is *a se*. That means that God is self-existent, fully independent of His creation. He is an infinitely self-sufficient Person, and He therefore cannot be made greater than He already is. He is already infinitely glorious and He cannot be made more glorious by anything we say or

do. Nothing in His created cosmos can add to His already perfect Person. He provides for us, meets our greatest needs and more, He blesses us with wonderful goodness, all this out of love. He willingly shares goodness with creatures He made because of His ineffably good Person.

So how should we respond to God? When God speaks, how should we respond to Him, or to what He has said? The answer to that is so important, it's right there in the opening pages of Scripture. We respond by trusting that what He said is absolutely true and that it reflects His Person, who has supreme moral integrity and cannot lie, so He is fully trustworthy. So we obey Him. Because to refuse to obey His voice is not only folly, it's dangerous. But, just as essential as responding to something that God has said is trusting obedience, is showing gratitude for something good that God does for us. Our *necessary* response to something that God does for us is to acknowledge it, in humility, with thankfulness. *Especially* if God does something for us that we don't deserve! Ah, there's the problem.

What we deserve is condemnation. We're sinners, unworthy of God's goodness and blessing. And worse, we're firmly in the grip of that wicked one, Satan, who uses us to carry out his evil. We obey Satan gleefully and proudly. So all we can do with this life that God has granted us is to offend Him. We offend Him in small ways and large. We offend Him in what we do that we shouldn't and in what we don't do that we should. We offend Him in our thought life. We deserve to spend an eternity in hell, far, far away from a holy God. All of us.

We live in a society that's forcibly secular. Most of us – believers – conduct our daily life no different from the lives of all the unbelievers and atheists around us. We're "Christians" on Sunday mornings. But we have little or no awareness of the sin nature that enslaves and controls us. We have little awareness of how we offend God by presuming on Him, by being indifferent, etc. We have little or no awareness of the pull of our "self," nor of the influence of the many demons that surround us. We go thru life with the Spirit mostly quenched; and that's tragic, because it's the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8), which we *must* have in order to respond to God in an appropriate way. In bizarre self-righteousness, we suppose that we're basically good people. We have but a superficial awareness how offensive we are to God.

The result of all this is sad. We only weakly acknowledge the absolutely superlative, extreme goodness God has gifted us with by the redemption that Christ effected. Our gratitude for what Christ has done, for what God in grace has put on offer, reflects how much (or little) we understand and appreciate in our hearts what we've been saved from and to. How much do we value what Christ did at Calvary? How much do we welcome the gift of the Spirit? The extent of that is expressed by our thanksgiving.

Does this make sense? Consider an example. If, when I was little, for Hanukkah my Aunt Rita had given me a pair of socks, which I didn't need or want . . . trifling thanks. If however she had given me some new game or toy . . . Yes! Much thanks. Thanksgiving is how we express to God how much we value His gift of grace. Indeed, it expresses how much we value a relationship with Him.

And let's now go further and say this: Thanksgiving is as thanksgiving does. Sure, after all, love is as love does. Same with thanksgiving. Words are cheap. Sacrifices are not.

We express our thanks to God the same way we show love for God, viz, by how we live and what we do according to His will. Gratitude shows how much we value all that God has done and will yet do for us. A life that's indifferent to God, to His Word, to the importance of obedience, to sanctification and mortification, to being Christ-like, to serving Christ as He commissioned – hey, that's a life not much in love with God and (dare I say it) devoid of gratitude. I'm sure that such a person is not gripped by the reality of sin and its grievous consequences. I need to say it again: Gratitude is as gratitude *does*. We express our gratitude to Christ for the sacrifice He made for us by the sacrifices we make for Him.

A life that overflows with gratitude expresses love for God, honors God by obeying Him, and is a life of faith and a life based on truth. May we all reflect God's glory by pursuing such a life, regardless what it may cost. That's how we worship God (see Luke 17:16-19). It's how we show God that our faith is real.