

Along the track

The Perfect Prayer

One of the fondest memories I have of my father is of him kneeling in prayer by his bed first thing in the morning and last thing at night. I never thought of him as an especially holy man but his faith obviously meant a lot to him, even though in many ways life had dealt him a pretty tough hand. But, as he often said, he was always grateful 'for many blessings'.

Gratitude reminds us that everything we have is gift. That probably isn't all that fashionable today, expressing appreciation for what one has, rather than a consumer-driven emphasis on what one might want or what one feels one needs for happiness. On the other hand, the 'Positive Psychology' movement is also becoming more fashionable. Its studies show that gratitude can increase our well-being and happiness and, if we work at developing this positive attitude, it is associated with increased energy, optimism and empathy. Even happiness!

Gratitude doesn't come easily. Do you remember the Gospel story of the ten lepers – all were cured, only one came back to say thanks. Not even the priests to whom Jesus had told them to go. Jesus was surprised:

He fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine-- where are they? Luke 17 16-17...

It is easy to take things for granted or to feel that we deserve this or that, that we earned this, that people owe us. None of that is true.

Basically, gratitude is an acknowledgement that we have received many gifts and blessings. This doesn't mean that life is perfect; it doesn't ignore complaints, burdens, and hassles. But when we look at life as a whole, gratitude encourages us to identify the goodness in our life. The second part of gratitude is figuring out where that goodness comes from. Gratitude helps us to recognise the sources of this goodness as being outside of ourselves - parents, friends, family, teachers, work mates, mentors and so on. It didn't stem from anything we necessarily did ourselves. We can appreciate positive traits in ourselves, but true gratitude involves a humble acknowledgement of our dependence on others, not the least of them God. We acknowledge that we have been given many undeserved gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.

The 'undeserved' bit is the hardest to acknowledge. It is easy to think that we did it ourselves, that this or that success is all down to me – we may have had a hand in it, but ultimately a lot of others had a hand in it too. Genuine gratitude challenges our tendency to reward ourselves exclusively.

We can't feel envious and grateful at the same time. They're incompatible. If we are grateful, we can't resent someone for having something that we don't. But we have to work at that. That doesn't come easily, especially when belief in God is not an option. Gratitude journals, for example, have become very popular – recording every week for at least three weeks, five things we should be grateful and how we've been supported and affirmed by other people. It can be a very powerful tool. This practice works because it consciously, intentionally focuses our attention on developing more grateful thinking and on eliminating ungrateful thoughts. It helps guard against taking things for granted. My father's daily prayer involved counting his blessings on a regular basis, first thing in the morning and then in the evening.

Gratitude is a very basic element of belief in God. We can't do without it. Gratitude helps us to understand that God has given us life, God has gifted us with talents. In Pope Benedict's words: 'Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed. Each of us is loved. Each of us is necessary. If we accept that we are not here by random chance, that God wanted us to live, that each of us is loved dearly, that each of us has a purpose in life, if we believe that, what an extraordinary difference that would make to our lives!' So cultivating gratitude is important in our growth as human beings and as people of faith.

Gratitude acknowledges the creative work of God in our lives. We recognise that we cannot save ourselves. We need God's free gift of grace, we need others. Gratitude helps us to recognise the ongoing presence of God with us and within us even now. Gratitude saves us from the sense of self-sufficiency that leads to forgetfulness of God.

Generous God,
Thank you for the new day,
For the gifts and challenges which lie within it.
Thank you for this work.

It is my way of answering Your call to be a co-creator of our world.

Thank you for the gift of this family, for the many joys and blessings that have come to us, the challenges that make us grow, that bind us together.

Thank you for our daily bread and for those who have made it possible.

Thank you for the necessities that keep me aware of your generous bounty in my life.

Thank you for the corrections that bring me to growth.

Thank you for the gift of hope.

The famous theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that, if the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.

What are you grateful for today?

Regards
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