

Living Thankful Lives (Part I): An Easy Resolution for Everyone

Think of Five Things A Day You Are Thankful For

We now have science pointing out the health benefits of living with a strong sense of thankfulness. The Wall Street Journal published a recent article ("Thank You. No, Thank You- Grateful People Are Happier, Healthier Long After the Leftovers Are Gobbled Up." November 23, 2010, by Melinda Beck) that affirms the blessings that come from just becoming a person who lives with an attitude of thankfulness. The author writes, "Adults who frequently feel grateful have more energy, more optimism, more social connections and more happiness than those who do not, according to studies conducted over the past decade. They're also less likely to be depressed, envious, greedy or alcoholics. They earn more money, sleep more soundly, exercise more regularly and have greater resistance to viral infections."

A question to explore is what connection exists between this growing body of evidence that links health with being thankful and the life of a Christian. What is particular to the way and reasons why Christians give thanks to God? In what sense is being thankful a virtue, as something that reflects the presence of God within? Finally, what about the absence of being thankful and the negative consequences – what connection is there between that and sin?

A Starting Point: A Daily Exercise

At a recent clergy retreat the Abbot of St. John of San Francisco monastery, Archimandrite Meletios, shared that he instructs his monks to think of five things they are thankful for prior to getting out of bed. He pointed one very positive aspect of thankfulness ~ it banishes all other emotions. It is a good starting point especially if we desire to change how we are feeling or we are trying to help another person become more positive in their outlook. In either case, hidden beneath ungratefulness is a brokenness that needs healing. In addition, as Christians, thankfulness is also a gift that waits to be poured into our hearts as we enter into the joy of God's kingdom.

The Giving of Thanks to God by Christians Implies the Existence of a Relationship

Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California-Davis and a pioneer in gratitude research says, "The key is not to leave it on the Thanksgiving table...with the realization that one has benefited comes the awareness of the need to reciprocate." The key difference for Christians is that the experience of being benefited comes from the All Mighty God, Himself. The task for Christians is not to *leave it at the altar table* but upon re-entering the world after partaking of Communion, to pray at home and live the week with a thankful heart.

It is impossible to know with certainty what God has done for each of us without opening up a conversation with Him in prayer. The Liturgy uses profound poetic words, spiritual hymns and melodies, other worldly art which all work together to begin to convey all that has been done for us.

At the same time, there is also a very personal side to this dialogue that is intimate, private, between only us and Him. Inevitably in conversing with God we will be confronted with some things that are not good for such as illnesses, hardships, personal trials, struggles with temptations, conflicts and afflictions. Yet herein lies what is particular about thanksgiving done by Christians – we give thanks for everything, both the good and the bad because we are in a relationship with God. Saint Gregory the Great speaks about the command to love one another: “Why does He speak of love as if it were a special commandment? It is because every commandment is about love, and they all add up to one commandment because whatever is commanded is founded on love alone. As the many branches of a tree come from one root, so do *many virtues* come forth from love alone. The branch which is our good works has no sap unless it remains attached to the root of love.”

The Special Gift of Christians: Give Thanks In All Conditions

There is a close connection between living in the Spirit through prayer, worshipping God and thankfulness. “And cease being drunk with wine, in which is recklessness, but keep on being filled with *the Spirit*, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and chanting in your heart to the Lord, *giving thanks always for all things* to the God and Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, subordinating yourselves to one another in *the* fear of Christ (Eph. 5:18-21).” Blessed St. Jerome comments how Christians are granted the unique quality to give thanks for everything. “This is to be understood in a double sense, both in adversity and in good times to *give thanks always for all things*. Even the heathen, the Jew, the publican, and the Gentile give thanks in good times. But the second sense of giving thanks is seen in the special gift of Christians to give thanks to God even in seeming adversity....The greater virtue is to give thanks to God precisely amid those very dangers and afflictions.” To be thankful is a *virtue* because it is the result of our willingness to put forth an effort that requires great struggle, pain and humility.

Thankfulness is a Process: Keep on Becoming Thankful

“Put on for yourselves, therefore, as elect of God, holy and beloved, compassion from *your* inward parts, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, bearing with one another, and graciously forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against someone; even as the Christ graciously forgave you, thus also *do* you. And over all these things, *put on* love, which is *the* bond of perfection. And let the peace of God be presiding in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; *and keep on becoming thankful*. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom, teaching and

admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual odes, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord. And everything, whatsoever you may do in word or in deed, *do* all in the name of *the* Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the God and Father through Him (Col. 3:12-17)." This means that we cannot strive to perfect love between one another unless God's love is found within us so as to produce a spirit of forgiveness and compassion towards others. The foundation from which this action is born is finding peace with God and living joyfully and thankfully in Christ. Saint Chrysostom puts it in simple terms - "This is to be thankful...to express gratitude for all things, even though one insult or beat him. For he who gives thanks to God for what he suffers will not avenge himself on him that has done him wrong, since he that takes revenge expresses no gratitude....They who seek revenge are ungrateful."

Being in relationship with God through prayer keeps us growing in Thankfulness
There is nothing stronger than finding peace with God in one's life. The consequences are immense. Saint Chrysostom identifies our inner thoughts as the battlefield and the peace of God as the referee. "If two thoughts are fighting together, set not anger, set not spitefulness to hold the prize, but peace....If the peace of God stands forth as arbitrator, it bestows the prize on that which bids to bear or to endure, and puts the other to shame....He has represented an arena within, in the thoughts, and a struggle, and a contest, and an umpire....But why said he not, 'Let the peace of God be victorious,' but 'be presiding'? He made her more trustworthy. He would not have the evil thought to come to wrestle with her, but to stand lower."

The Dark Side of Living Without Gratitude

Ungrateful people are not very pleasant to be around for very long. Sometimes life throws some very difficult trials our way - divorce, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a life-threatening illness they all have the potential to destroy our faith in God and all sense of thankfulness. This opens to the door to allowing negativity to become a source of security and wellbeing. "For *the* wrath of God is being revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold back the truth in unrighteousness... having known God, they glorified *Him* not as God, *nor were thankful*, but were brought to nought in their reasonings, and their heart, void of understanding, was darkened; asserting to be wise, they became foolish...(Rom. 1:18-23)." Foolishness follows and a host of various forms of sin. "But know this, that in *the* last days difficult times shall set in; for men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, *unthankful*, unholy, without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, incontinent, savage, not lovers of the good, traitors, reckless, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of piety, but denying the power of it. Turn thyself away from these (2 Tim. 3:1-5)."

The research on health and thankfulness is part of the "positive psychology" movement, which focuses on developing strengths rather than alleviating disorders. Cultivating gratitude is also a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy, which holds that changing

peoples' thought patterns can dramatically affect their moods. The significant difference for Christians is that adopting positive thought is not an end in itself but may serve to help us diagnose the "disorder" that lies underneath and is the cause of living ungratefully. Unless our hearts have found peace in God through prayer and worship there will always be a "dis-order" – without God we are *out-of- order*. The reward Christ promises is not just a healthier and happier life - these are dim reflections of *Life-Eternal* being joyfully entered into here and now because He has become my life and salvation!

Give thanks to God – Always!
Fr. Andrew