

Introduction

How many of you remember the first prayer you learned? If so, what was it? My mother taught me two prayers as soon as I was old enough to learn them. One was: **"Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."** That was the second one she taught me. The first was this: **"God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food"** (or fewd as I said it to make it rhyme).

We call praying that prayer **"saying grace."** The word **"grace"** in that context means a short expression of thanksgiving to God. It may be short but it's insightful as well, teaching us several life altering truths. Let's dissect this particular **"grace"** and learn what those truths are.

God Is Great; God is Good

We begin with Romans 1. In verses 18-32, Paul describes first century pagans who worshipped false gods, verse 23. They have their counterparts today – those who either ignore or deny the person and works of the one true God. They include atheists, agnostics, new agers, and secularists to name a few.

Notice what Paul teaches about them in verse 19, **"that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them."** He teaches the same thing in Acts 14:17, **"and yet He (God) did not leave Himself without witness."** God witnesses about Himself to everyone, in other words. He does so in two ways.

The first is found in verse 20. It's through **"the world and what has been made."** The nature and order of reality, inside us and outside us, reveal that God exists and that He is **"divine"** (spiritual), **"eternal,"** and **"powerful"** – and, I would add, smart.

The inner universe of the human brain illustrates this. The number of synapses in a human brain equals roughly the number of stars in

1,500 Milky Ways. And each synapse contains 1000 molecular-scale switches. A human brain has more switches than all the computers, routers, and Internet connections on Earth. I don't understand all of that, but I do understand what it implies. The inventor of the human brain, God, is utterly smart.

God witnesses about Himself in a second way. It's found in Acts 14:17. Paul declares to a crowd of pagans, "**and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.**" His second witness is the consistency and abundance of good things He gives human beings.

Paul mentions several of those in that verse, but there are countless others. How many of you are excited about Thanksgiving dinner this Thursday? Almost all of us are. We'll fill our plates with turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, and the staple of any good Thanksgiving dinner, cream style corn. But imagine something and it'd be dreadful. We can't smell or taste any of that. How excited about Thanksgiving dinner would we be? The answer is "**not very.**" The One who gives us the phenomenal food we're going to eat, also gives us the abilities to thoroughly enjoy it. He must be incredibly good.

Those then are God's witnesses – the nature and order of reality on the one hand, and all the good things we experience, have, and do every day on the other. They teach us two things about Him. As the grace we say expresses it, "**God is great. God is good.**"

Let Us Thank Him

Now let's go back to Romans 1, verse 18. Notice what the people Paul describes do. They "**suppress the truth in unrighteousness.**" Or as verse 25 says it, they "**exchanged the truth of God for a lie.**" The idea in both verses is that they're deliberately ignorant of God. They should know from His witnesses that He's great and good, but don't. They "**dishonor Him**" instead, verse 21. They either ignore or deny the

existence of an utterly great and utterly good God.

That's their posture toward Him, and verse 24 reveals its inevitable result, moral impurity. They do the evil and disgusting things of verses 26-31. But there's another result, verse 21. They **"don't give thanks."** We need to come to grips with what that result in the context of Romans 1 implies. Thanklessness is a sin and as much a stain on our character as other sins are, including the ones in verses 26-31.

The reference point of thanklessness is God. James 1:17 says, **"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."** Every good thing we experience, have, or do is a gift God gives. Thanklessness, therefore, means we don't thank Him for them, which is perverse. It's a denial of reality and an affront to the Giver of all good things.

Thankfulness, on the other hand, is good. Almost everyone intuitively knows that don't they? I saw a grandfather in a restaurant lobby give his little grandson four quarters for the gumball and prize machines. Almost instantly, the grandson's father asked him, **"What do you say?"** To which he replied, **"Thank you Paw Paw."** Good parents try to instill common courtesy in their children. One of the first things they do in that regard is teach them to say **"Please"** and **"Thank you."** They teach them that it's appropriate, sensible, to say **"Thank you"** when someone gives them something, and inappropriate, rude, not to.

That's true, especially when it comes to the ultimate Giver of good things, God. As Psalm 92:1 proclaims, **"It is good to give thanks to Yahweh."** **"Give thanks"** means thank Him for the good things He gives us. We express our gratitude to Him through thoughts or words. I read an article titled **"40 Ways to Say Thank You."** They include the following: **"Words are powerless to express my gratitude," "Please accept my best thanks," "I thank you from the bottom of my heart," "All my love and thanks to you," "Words can't express how thankful I am," "What would I do without you," "I can't thank you enough,"** and **"Your generosity and goodness overwhelm me."** You

get the idea. We sincerely and thoughtfully express our gratitude to God.

That's thankfulness and I repeat. It's good. First, it glorifies God. It pleases and delights Him and causes other to hold Him in higher regard. Second, it makes us better people. Thanksgiving is one of the central activities by which we engage God. Each time we thank Him, it deepens our relationship with Him, which in turn makes us a little bit more like Him. God is great. God is good. **"Let us thank Him."**

For This Food

But thank Him for what? Paul tells us in the other text we read, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, **"in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."** The word **"everything"** is obviously all-encompassing.

First, it encompasses the bad things. Don't misunderstand that. We don't give thanks *for* the bad things before us but *in* them. We can because there are good things in all bad things. There are always positive realities no matter how negative what we're facing is.

My wife went through colon cancer surgery, a hideous post-operative infection, and six months of chemotherapy. I didn't thank God *for* those things. But I did thank Him *in* them. I thanked him that He would work those things out for our good; that His presence was sustaining us; that it was an opportunity to witness; and that **"Now is not forever."**

A seminary bulletin published a letter of thanksgiving that a woman wrote to Jesus after the death of her husband Don and two subsequent cancer surgeries. She gave thanks *in* all of that, which she expressed in the letter. Listen to a paragraph in that regard about Don: **"Thank you for taking Don home to be with you. Now I'll never be concerned with what the future holds for him. His days are guaranteed. Thank you for giving him such a wonderful Christmas. Thank you for making his birthday last Sunday his best ever. The kids are sorry they couldn't be with daddy on Father's Day, but we're glad he could be with both his earthly and Heavenly father this year."**

Her letter illustrates how we give thanks *in* bad things. We identify all the positive realities that exist right along with them, especially Romans 8:28, and then thank God for those positive realities.

But the word “**everything**” also encompasses good things. The dynamics here though are different. As the grace we say expresses it, “**Let us thank Him for**” We thank Him for the good things. That grace reveals one of those. It’s “**this food.**” Stop for a moment and think about the variety and quality of the foods we have. It’s literally mind-boggling. I imagine God resurrecting a medieval peasant and placing him in the middle of an American grocery store. I also imagine his reaction. He’d be so overwhelmed by the variety and quality of foods, he’d probably pass out. I don’t know about you, but I rarely enter a grocery store without saying grace, “**Oh, God, I can’t even begin to thank you enough for the privilege of what’s before me.**”

It isn’t just food though. We are of all the people in all the places and all the times of history most blessed. Economist Robert Heilbroner identifies luxuries a typical American takes for granted that half of the world doesn’t even have. Four of those are fresh water available 24 hours a day, unlimited electrical power, telephones that work, and a remarkable network of paved roads. Those things and countless others are part of the “**everything**” for which we should routinely give thanks.

An Attitude of Gratitude

But as always, what we are directs what we do. There’s something that always precedes thanksgiving. It’s gratitude. When we’re grateful, we give thanks. When we aren’t, we don’t. It’s as simple as that. If we are going to be thankful people, therefore, we must first of all be grateful people. So let’s cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

The best way I know of to do that is to think. The well known motto of Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore reflects that, “**Think and thank.**” To think means to look *through* things and not just *at* them. I’m speaking metaphorically of course. We look *through* things by

examining and analyzing their nature or order, which enables us to identify how they add value to our lives. Recognizing their value, we're then grateful for them.

I was shaving one day, for instance, and began thinking about safety razors. In early history, men used tweezers to shave (ouch). Eventually, tweezers were replaced with sharp pieces of copper or bronze (ouch again). By the modern era, straight razors – which require considerable effort to use safely, hone, and strop – replaced the copper and bronze. But then safety razors were invented, and developed into the one I was shaving with that day. It's a valuable thing that enables me to shave quickly (three minutes) and safely every day. I looked *through* safety razors and am grateful for them because I did. And because I'm grateful, I'm thankful as well. I routinely thank God for them.

There are two other methodologies I use to cultivate gratitude. One is contemplating what my life would be like without a particular benefit or blessing, like eye glasses. I take them off and imagine seeing things that way the rest of my life. Another methodology is contemplating that there will be a last time for every benefit or blessing, like driving my car. I imagine I'm driving it for the last time. Those methodologies cultivate gratitude. No one is more grateful for eye glasses and the ability to drive a car than I am, which is why I routinely thank God for both.

Conclusion

I close with a question. Most of us say grace before we eat. But do we also say it before we shave, shower, take a run, watch television, use the internet, make a phone call, take a pill, drive the car, go to work, and much more. If we don't, we should. Discipleship to Jesus requires it – that we say grace pervasively and habitually. So let's do just that! Let's cultivate an attitude of gratitude. We'll say grace **"in everything"** if we do.