

Learning to give thanks

How is thankfulness engendered? By giving thanks in all circumstances.

by [Martin B. Copenhagen](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue



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No one is born thankful. Thankfulness doesn't come naturally to us, and sometimes it doesn't come at all. Rather, thankfulness is a quality that must be fostered and nurtured. But how? How do we teach our children to be thankful, and how do we lead ourselves in the ways of thankfulness? That question, though seemingly simple, is not easily answered.

We are enjoined in a variety of ways to count our blessings. Survey all that you have. Take stock of all you've been given. There is value in that, to be sure, but such an exercise does not in itself prompt thankfulness, because thankfulness has no direct correlation to abundance. If there were such a correlation, if we were given some abundance, we would be somewhat thankful, and if we were given more abundance, we would be more thankful. But it doesn't work that way, does it?

In fact, every Thanksgiving holiday we confront an irony: the more we have, the less likely we are to thank God. Continuous bounty doesn't always create thankfulness; sometimes it actually seems to stamp out thankfulness.

We live in a time of extraordinary abundance, but that hasn't led us to greater thankfulness. In fact, another defining characteristic of our age is that we live with an extraordinary sense of entitlement. We have much, and for the most part we have concluded that we deserve all that we have and probably more.

Let me put it another way: Who is tempted to claim that he is a self-made man or she is a self-made woman? Is it the person who has few of the world's goods and has known little of earthly success? Or the person who has been given much, owns much?

I once heard of a man who consistently boasted that he was a self-made man until an exasperated friend finally declared, "Well, sir, that relieves the Lord of a terrific responsibility."

Such an attitude also deprives the Lord of thanks. True thanksgiving begins with humility, the humility to recognize that we did not create ourselves, that everything we are and everything we have is a gift.

On *The Simpsons*, when Bart is asked to offer thanks at a family meal, he says, "Dear God, we bought all of this stuff with our own money, so thanks for nothing."

Bart Simpson's prayer summarizes the reigning sentiments of our age. Often the more we have, the more likely we are to say, "Thanks for nothing." After all, the implications of thanksgiving are greater when we have much. The stakes are that much higher. There is more to protect. Those of us who have much and desire more feel the need to isolate ourselves from the realization that ultimately we really own nothing, that everything is from God and is God's. So those of us who have substantial abundance fence in our accumulated goods and tell ourselves that everything we have is earned or deserved.

No, abundance doesn't necessarily lead to thankfulness. The very magnitude of what we have can numb us. I learned when my oldest child, Alanna, was very young that a visit to a toy store can be overwhelming for a young child. Not understanding money, she assumed that she could have anything she wanted. So she bounced about like a ball in a pinball machine, wanting this and that so frantically that she didn't pause long enough to want anything very much at all. There were so many toys in the store that she couldn't begin to appreciate any one toy.

We adults can be similarly numbed when we're bombarded by bounty. Give a person one square meal a day, and he or she will find time and reason to give thanks. But give a person an opulent feast every night, and it won't be long before he or she begins to quibble over whether the meal really deserves that three-star rating. Isn't this the way with us? We can have so many blessings that we fail to note any of them.

The apostle Paul's urging to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18) is a reminder not just to those who are experiencing hardship, where blessings are few. Those same words are also a reminder to us who live amid bounty, where the blessings are easily taken for granted. We need the reminder no less than others, and in many ways we need it more. "Give thanks in all circumstances" when we seem to have so little and, yes, when we have so much.

Here I think Paul gives us the beginning of a response to our original question: How is thankfulness engendered? By "giving thanks in all circumstances," by continually offering thanks. The psalmist even commands the people to give thanks: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 136:1-2). Notice that the psalmist doesn't tell us to be thankful, but to offer thanks. Offer thanks. Bless God's name. You may not feel like doing it but do it anyway.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We might be familiar with this pronouncement, but if we don't read it with care, we might reverse the statement through a kind of scriptural dyslexia. We might read it to say, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." That would make sense to us, because much of the time our dollars follow our heart's lead. We give to what matters to us.

But that isn't what Jesus said.

That's the appeal we hear from, say, public radio or our alma mater: if you care about this institution, you will write a check. In other words, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." But Jesus didn't say that.

Jesus is speaking of a different dynamic. Give and spend where you want your heart to be, and then let your heart catch up. Don't just give to those things you care about. Give to the things you *want* to care about. Ask yourself, "If I were the sort of person I long to be, then what would I do? How would I spend my money?" Then do

what you would do if you were that sort of person. Put your treasure where you want your heart to be. If you do, says Jesus, your heart will go there. If you want to care more about the kind of car you drive, buy an expensive one. If you want to care more about property values, remodel your house. But if you want to grow in your faith, bring an offering to God.

Wherever your treasure is, your heart is sure to follow. Here as elsewhere in the scriptural tradition, we are not told to feel a certain way, but enjoined to act in a certain manner. After all, feelings, unlike actions, cannot be governed by simple will. For instance, Jesus doesn't ask us to feel charitable toward our neighbors and our enemies. That would be asking something that's not in our control. We can't feel on command. Instead, Jesus asks us to act.

Turn your cheek. Give to those who beg from you. Pray for your enemies. Give thanks to God. Don't wait until you feel like it. Nike could have borrowed its motto from Jesus: "Just do it."

Here we come upon another irony: it's by continually expressing thanks that we can come to be thankful. Day in and day out, in and out of season, we are to offer thanks, perhaps at first just to get the feel of it and then because we feel it. So sometimes, especially at first, we don't come to worship to offer our thanks to God because we are thankful.

Rather, we come to worship to offer our thanks to God so that we might some day be thankful. Sometimes words of thanks need to be on our lips before, by some slow and largely imperceptible process, they can take up residence in our hearts.

I think we have some understanding of this. We say to our children, "Say 'thank you' to the gentleman," or "What do you say to the nice lady?"

We continually prompt, coax, urge, and demand that thanks be offered. Do we put our children and ourselves through all of that just so they will behave in a polite manner? Perhaps. But we do this also because we have some understanding that continually offering thanks, day in and day out, in and out of season, whether we feel like it or not, helps engender a spirit of thankfulness.

It may begin slowly, because we're so accustomed to receiving God's gifts with callused hands. We begin by saying thanks, not just one day a year, but by practicing thanksgiving every day and seeking opportunities to do so in every

circumstance.

In an intriguing book called *365 Thank Yous*, John Kralik writes about writing a thank-you note a day for an entire year. He didn't resolve to write all of those thank-you notes at a time when he was feeling particularly grateful. In fact, it was at a particularly low time in his life. His small law firm was losing money and losing its lease. He was going through a difficult divorce. He lived in a small, stuffy apartment where he often slept on the floor under an ancient air conditioner. He was middle-aged, overweight, and at the end of his rope.

Then, one day, he got lost on a mountain hike and didn't know how to get home. By the time he found his way down the mountain he had a plan. He would write a thank-you note each day for a year. He writes, "My only problem: Did I have anything to be grateful for? The way my life was going, I hardly thought so."

But he got started, by writing notes to the people close to him, his family and friends. Then it got harder. "One day," he writes, "I just couldn't think of anybody to thank." He stopped at his regular Starbucks, where the barista greeted him by name—"John, your usual venti?"—and with a big smile. Kralik reflected, "I thought, this is really kind of a great gift in this day and age of impersonal relationships, that someone had cared enough to learn my name and what I drank in the morning." So he wrote the barista a thank-you note. And so it went through the year. Each day a thank-you note, each day a day of thanksgiving.

Kralik says the experience of expressing thanks day in and day out changed the way he approached life. It even got him to church:

I had considered myself something of an atheist for years, but I started going to this church [near the end of that year]. The music was plentiful, delivered with . . . genuine enthusiasm. The dominant message was that grace was still available. To everyone. Even to me. I can deal with that, I thought. Through the process of writing thank-you notes, I had developed a notion of being blessed with grace.

There is something about offering thanks that makes us whole. There is something about offering thanks that can make us feel, with Kralik, that we are "blessed with grace." In fact, the word that is translated as *thanks* in the New Testament is the same word that's sometimes translated as *grace*. The Greek *charis*, or "grace," may

define an act of giving or an act of receiving: if giving, the word means “gift or unearned favor”; if receiving, then the word is best translated as “gratitude.” We see a reflection of this double meaning in the prayers that are offered before a meal.

Some families “say grace” while others “give thanks.” It’s the same word (*charis*) in both instances. I like to think of it as the endless echo of grace. We receive a gift in the same spirit in which it is given—it’s all grace. We can even lose track of where it begins and where it ends, for it all seems to be of one piece.

People whose lives are not marked with gratitude—whose lives are governed by a sense of entitlement or grievance—are miserable. No matter how much they have in material wealth, health, or success, their lives are fractured or incomplete if what they have is not accompanied by a sense of gratitude. They are not made whole.

By contrast, those whose lives are marked with gratitude, infused with thankfulness, join in the echo of grace and receive a particular blessing reserved for them. They are made well. They are made whole.

C. S. Lewis observed that grateful people are emotionally healthy people. “Praise,” he said, “almost seems to be inner health made audible.” I believe Lewis would accept this friendly amendment to his observation: words of thanksgiving are something like inner health made audible.