

GIVE THANKS

MATTHEW 14:13–21;
1 THESSALONIANS 5:16–24



From the time we begin to ask for things—typically in early childhood—we are encouraged to say, “Please” and “Thank you.” Maybe you’ve heard a parent or grandparent, or you’ve said to a child, “Use your manners.” There’s a story of a five-year-old girl from a rural community in Pennsylvania whose parents traveled to Hawaii for vacation. Her parents were gone for two weeks, which can seem like a lifetime to a young child. She was filled with excitement when her parents finally returned home, and it was only a matter of time before she cut to the chase: “Mom, Dad, did you bring me anything from Hawaii?” With delight, her mother handed her a white paper bag stamped with orange and pink flowers, like the ones leis are made with. The five-year-old opened her gift with great anticipation only to pull out a white T-shirt that read, “My mom and dad went to Hawaii and all they brought me back was this T-shirt.” The child, clothed in disappointment, mustered up a “thank you,” set the package down, and retreated to her room.

As we mature, so does our understanding of giving, receiving, and gratitude. But even as adults we occasionally get our hopes up, only to be let down, challenging our ability to give thanks. For Christians, gratitude is not confined to a tangible gift, day, or season. Rather, it is an element we are encouraged to incorporate into our daily living that helps us to recognize the goodness that exists all around us.

PLEASE & THANK YOU!

PLEASE & THANK YOU

“When we express gratitude, we experience, however fleeting and brief, a moment of contentment. When we say thank you, we heave a sigh of satisfaction in a world of grasping. Instead of reaching toward more, we pause to enjoy what we have.”¹ Throughout his ministry, Jesus repeatedly paused to give thanks, especially when it came to mealtime.

All four Gospels include an account of Jesus feeding the multitudes (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–13). In the Synoptic Gospels and to some extent in the Gospel according to John, we hear the same language that Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians: Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples to distribute to the people.

In the communion liturgy of many Christian communities, a prayer of thanksgiving or eucharistic prayer is said at the Lord’s Table before the meal is shared. Just as Jesus gave thanks over the meal he celebrated with his disciples, we give thanks over every communion meal we celebrate with our siblings in Christ.



Giving thanks is thematic throughout the Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures and is one of the primary themes in the Book of Psalms. The following litany is inspired by Psalm 100.

All of creation, sing songs of thanksgiving!
Let’s serve God with celebration and shouts of joy!
God made us and we belong to God—**hallelujah!**
Like the shepherd tends to the sheep, God cares for us—**hallelujah!**
God is good—**hallelujah!**
God’s love lasts forever, and ever and ever—**hallelujah!**
God’s faithfulness is from generation to generation.
Thanks be to God!

➤ What do you give thanks for today?



1. Donald McCullough, *Say Please, Say Thank You: The Respect We Owe One Another* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1998), 19.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

The blessing or prayers of thanks we say around our tables—whether they are at home, at a picnic in the park, or in community—are reflections of the prayers we say at the Lord’s Table; we give thanks for what God has done for us, for the gift of food before us, and for God’s continuing care for us and for the world. We remember too, all the ways that Jesus fed people during his ministry. In the foundational essay, the author shares about artwork by Mexican American artist John August Swanson that hangs in her home; it depicts Jesus feeding the multitudes with loaves and fishes. The sea of people stretches on and on into the distance, while people share an abundance of food that comes from the miracle of grace. As they share meals at their own table, it reminds them of all the meals Jesus hosted, and of all the people he fed. It’s a reminder of the meals of bread and wine they have shared with others at Christ’s table. And it reminds

them that every meal at their own table is an extension of the eucharistic meal. For just as Jesus fed people on the hillsides and by the shorelines, he feeds us at his table, and at our own tables, where he is both our host and guest.



To see John August Swanson’s serigraph (silk screen), see bit.ly/FMLoavesAndFishes.

FEEDING THE MULTITUDES

Right before Jesus retreats and feeds the multitudes in Matthew 14:13–21, he receives word from his disciples about the gruesome death of his dear friend, John the Baptist. It is no surprise that he needs time alone to grieve, and he goes to a deserted place. The crowd eventually hear the horrific news about John’s death and are terrified. They look for Jesus, who comes ashore to provide comfort and guidance. After spending the day with the crowd, the disciples are getting tired, and the people are hungry. The disciples urge Jesus to send the people away, but Jesus has other plans and insists the community remain together. He invites the crowd to sit down, then calls upon the disciples to step up and provide a meal. They have only five loaves and two fish! Jesus takes the meager meal of bread and fish, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples, who then offer it to the crowds. There were a lot of people there that day, but everyone ate and was filled; there were even leftovers!

- What does this story say about gratitude in the midst of grief?
- Why do you think Jesus calls upon the disciples to provide the food?
- What happens when we give thanks for the blessings we receive?
- How have you shared the blessings you’ve received to bless others?

“Jesus offers a vision of the abundant life, the kingdom of sharing God’s resources here and now. This passage urges us to bring any small gifts that we have—money, talent, and time to dedicate them to Jesus, because he will multiply what we have as we give it to others.”²

GIVING THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

- How might you remember to give thanks in all circumstances?
- Jesus, on the night of his arrest, gave thanks when breaking bread. What do you think he was thankful for? How do we express that thanks during communion?

Upon hearing or reading these words, we might wonder, “In all circumstances? Even when we are grieving the loss of a job, marriage, or loved one? What if we’ve fallen on hard times?” In Matthew 14:13–21, Jesus and the crowds were grieving John’s death. After a long day together, there didn’t appear to be enough food to feed the entire crowd that evening. Even in these circumstances, Jesus took what he was given and blessed it. Paul doesn’t offer any exemptions to giving thanks, because expressing gratitude to God does not depend on circumstances. Instead, Paul’s words reveal that worship of God is important throughout all of life, not just for an hour or two on Sunday mornings. And, if all of life is worship, then gratitude is the only response. No matter what challenges life may bring—there will be many—Paul invites his readers into the holistic practice of giving thanks.

give thanks

“Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. . . . When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back.”³

2. Grace Ji-Sun Kim, “Proper 13,” in *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A*, ed. Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald J. Allen, and Dale P. Andrews (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 344.
3. Anne Lamotte, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 56.

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW



DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME

1 Co. 11:26

Ever since Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave, and told his followers to do this in his memory, Christians have reenacted the moment. Over time, services of communion have been created and discussions about just what should be included have resulted in liturgies and prayers that pass on from generation to generation. One of the central parts of the Eucharist is the long prayer called the Great Thanksgiving, spoken by the presider. After looking at it, we will mention a few of many other ways Christians offer thanks.

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

If you participate in communion services, you have surely noticed that the leader, usually the pastor, offers a fairly long prayer. Sometimes two pastors share leading this moment. The prayer includes many elements that Christians have agreed over time are important to mention when we “do this in remembrance” of Jesus’ last meal. While some have made it shorter due to decreased attention spans, many find it disrespectful to leave out any of the elements deemed important to include by Christians over time.

Also called the eucharistic prayer, the Great Thanksgiving is trinitarian, offering gratitude to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In this prayer, we give thanks to God for:

- The gift of creation
- The guidance of the prophets
- God’s ongoing care
- The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of his return

With thanksgiving we call on the Holy Spirit to:

- Bind us with Christ and with one another
- Nourish us in the holy meal
- Send us out to be the body of Christ in the world



In the words of our prayers and in the very act of eating and drinking, we give thanks to the God who was, who is, and who is to come. This trinitarian prayer, then, gathers up the memories of the past and brings them into the present moment, calls upon the work of the Spirit in the present moment (*anamnesis*) at the table, and gives thanks for all God will do in the future, bringing the hope in our redeemed and reconciled future into the present moment (*prolepsis*).

Anamnesis (from Greek) can be translated as *memorial* or *remembrance*. It is used liturgically to recognize the presence of the person or event commemorated and in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. As the prayer following the blessing of the elements, it *recalls* the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11:24–25).

Prolepsis (from Greek) can be understood as *an anticipating*, that which anticipates a future event. The resurrection of Jesus Christ may be seen as anticipating the full establishment of the reign of God and future resurrection of humans.⁴

When a prayer or confession is *trinitarian*, it means it is related to the Trinity and the Christian view that God is one God in three persons: Creator (Father), Christ (Son), and Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit).



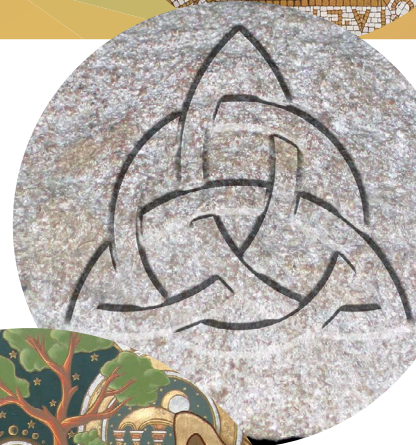
THE DOXOLOGY

The *Doxology* is a familiar hymn written in the late seventeenth century by Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken. He included the hymn as the final stanza for several of the prayers he wrote in a prayer book for Winchester College. Many congregations sing this beloved hymn (to the tune OLD HUNDREDTH) with praise and gratitude in response to the Declaration of Forgiveness/ Assurance of Pardon.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise *him all creatures here below;
Praise *him above ye heavenly host;
**Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

*Or "God"

** Or "Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost"



A SEASON OF REJOICING

Sukkōt (pronounced "soo-kowt") or *Chag HaAsif* (Festival of the Ingathering) is one of the most joyful seasons in the Jewish calendar. The holiday begins five days after Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and lasts for seven days. It is named for the huts (*sukkah*) farmers lived in during the final harvest of the agricultural year in Israel and is a time

4. Donald McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 10, 223.

to give thanks for the fall harvest. *Sukkôt* is also associated with the sukkah or temporary shelters the Israelites lived in during their forty years wandering in the desert. It is common for Jewish households to construct a sukkah at home with open entryways to welcome others in to rejoice, eat, and share. In what ways do you celebrate and give thanks in your household? In your faith community?



PRAYERS AT MEALTIMES

The practice of saying grace before a meal comes from the Latin phrase *gratiarum actio*, meaning “act of thanks.” For Christians, this practice was modeled by Jesus who blessed, gave thanks, and broke the loaves (Matthew 14:19). However, the practice of giving thanks is not limited to the food we eat. Just as we depend on and are thankful for the grace God extends to humankind, we also depend on others—this is part of our shared humanity—and we, too, are encouraged to share gratitude with our fellow humans.

This gratitude might be shown by writing a thank-you note or a verbal thanks for a gift, such as a kind gesture, a ride, time spent together, a tangible item, or a shared meal. If we take time to think about all the ways we depend on others, we may find that there is much to be thankful for and witness how our gratitude for one another is tied into our gratitude to God.

➤ How do you give thanks to God? What about to others?

➤ How have you witnessed gratitude from others?

Creator of the universe,
you give us this gift of food to nourish us and give us life.
Bless this food that you have made
and human hands have prepared.
May it satisfy our hunger,
and in sharing it together
may we come closer to one another. **Amen.**⁵

Holy God, we thank you
for home, family, and friends.
May your love be with us
as we break bread in Jesus’ name. **Amen.**⁶

5. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 908.
6. *Book of Common Worship*, 909.



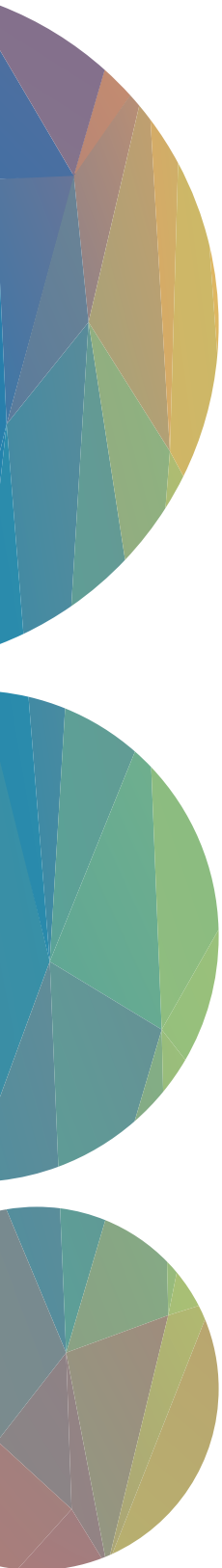
PRACTICING THE PRACTICE



Imagine waking up in the morning at 5:00 a.m. with a full schedule through to bedtime, day after day, never pausing to reflect and give thanks. Society tells us to do more, achieve more, and buy more; it can be tempting to live into the false narrative that we don't have enough. While we may glorify busyness, do you know of anyone whose epitaph reads, "If only I had worked more?" Certainly, some seasons in life can be extremely hectic, which gives all the more reason to intentionally take time and give thanks. By reflecting on all the good things God has done and is doing in the world, and recognizing the good things that people have done and continue to do, we are more apt to create an attitude of gratitude. When we give thanks to God and others, we not only acknowledge God's goodness and our shared humanity, but we are more inclined to experience peace as we savor the gifts we have been given.

GIVE THANKS IN PRAYER

Prayer can encompass many aspects of life. For this prayer, list next to the prompts on the next page who or what you are thankful for and why. Paul writes, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). Begin each morning for the next week by praying the entire prayer. If you find yourself wanting to add to the prayer, write it down and include it every day after.



Creator God,

Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do in this world. Even when life is difficult, my soul is filled with gratitude for so many things, big and small. I come to you this day with gratitude for:

- God's love revealed in

- The person of Christ

- The gift of the Holy Spirit

- Familial relationships

- Interpersonal relationships

- Creation

- Those who have nurtured my faith

- Personal experiences

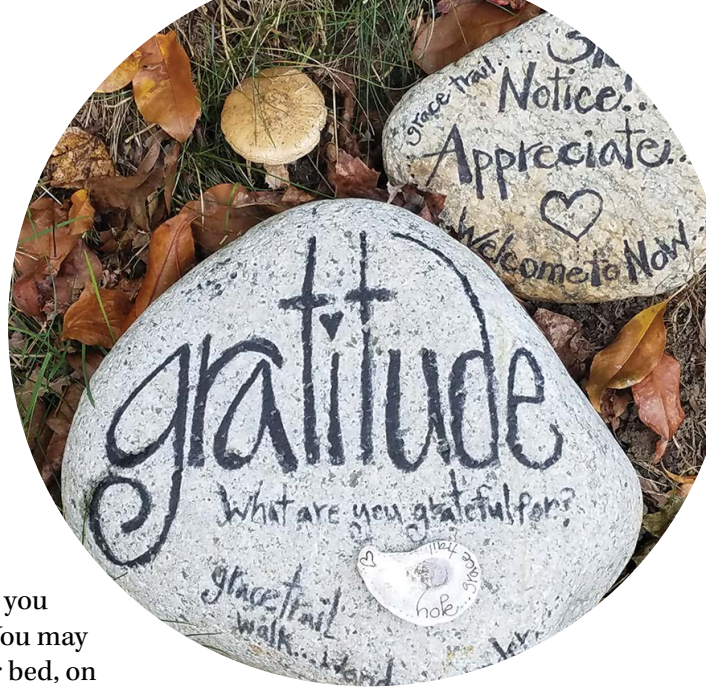
As I live out my days, may I be reminded of your faithful presence, O God, and inspired to give thanks. These things I pray, in the name of your beloved son, Jesus Christ, and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

GRATITUDE ROCKS

It can be helpful, at times, to have visible or tangible objects to use as an anchor. For example, to-do lists can help us to identify tasks that need to be accomplished throughout the day. We might fill up a 32 oz. water bottle and carry it with us to remind us to drink. Smartwatches can tell us when it's time to stand up, exercise, or go to bed. When we receive a gift, we might leave it on the kitchen table to remind us to send a thank-you note. If we are to adopt, however, an attitude of gratitude, and find it helpful to have an anchor, consider creating a gratitude rock.

A gratitude rock is a rock that may fit in your pocket or adorn your workspace or really any place you spend time, which will remind you to give thanks. You may have a stone that fits this description in your flower bed, on your church's campus, or at a park. If not, some craft stores carry them. You'll also need permanent markers or acrylic paints, paintbrushes, or paint pens. Once you've found your supplies:

- Choose a word, phrase, or design that will remind you to give thanks.
- With a permanent/paint marker or acrylic paint, add your prompt to the stone and let dry.
- As you carry your rock with you, set a goal:
 - The first week, hold once a day, maybe as part of your morning routine, and name something you are grateful for.
 - The second week, add it to your evening routine.
 - The third week, include this practice before you eat lunch.



GRATITUDE

FOLLOWING JESUS

Different seasons of life bring different challenges, and sometimes it can be difficult to express gratitude. Both Matthew 14:13–21 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24, however, encourage us to give thanks to God in all circumstances, even when we're grieving, tired, or discouraged. This is because our worship of God should not depend on our feelings. Through all of life's ups and downs, God's faithful presence never wavers, so let us give thanks for:

- All that God has done and continues to do
- All the people Jesus fed and continues to feed
- The work of the Holy Spirit who connects all of this together

As this session comes to a close, remember to pause throughout your day and share your gratitude with God and others. Think about all you learned in this session and how it shapes the ways in which you give thanks. As you do, listen to the YouTube video “Look Who Gathers at Christ's Table’ Performed by the Festival Singers of Florida” (bit.ly/FMLook, 6:03).

Loving God,
Thank you for your abundant blessings.
You feed us in ways we never knew were possible.
Help us to take time each day so that we may be reminded of your faithful presence and give thanks for your work and love in the world.
In Christ's name. Amen.