

# Give Thanks

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

## GOAL

Adults review Jesus' meal-sharing pattern—take, bless, break, give—and give thanks to God.

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.



Visit our YouTube channel, [bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR](https://bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR), for conversation starter videos.

## PRAYER

Thank you, O God, for all you give and all you've done and all there is. Amen.

## THIS SESSION

Saying grace around the family table reminds us to thank God for all things in all things. Giving thanks around the Communion Table allows the faith community to celebrate the abundant gifts of God. We thank God for the gift of creation, for the guidance of the prophets, for God's continuing care. We give thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and anticipate his promised return. We call on the Holy Spirit to bind us with Christ and with one another, to nourish us in the holy meal, and to send us out to be the body of Christ in the world. In the words of our prayers and in the acts of eating and drinking, we thank the God who was, who is, and who is to come.

Communion is a rich and deep ritual that stirs a wide range of emotions. Solemnity and grief accompany the memory of Jesus' Last Supper. We rejoice and celebrate the triumph of Jesus' resurrection recalled in the sacrament. Gladness accompanies communion as we think about sharing this holy meal with saints who have gone before us. Anticipation stirs as we cling to the promise of the great feast set for us in life eternal.

## THE BIBLE STORY

In Matthew's version of feeding the five thousand, the disciples recognize the challenge the people face: it is late; it is a deserted place. They must return to the villages to find food for their late-day meal. Instead of sending away the crowds, Jesus challenges his disciples: *you* do something about it. The disciples speak of their limitations. Jesus takes charge of the situation and ensures enough for all.

The final verses of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians urge the faithful to rejoice, pray, and give thanks in all circumstances. These words remind us of closing benedictions in our worship services. These are parting words for the faithful to carry with them as they live their day-to-day lives: test everything, hold fast to good, abstain from every evil. This is the will of God in Christ Jesus for the people of God.

## SESSION PREPARATION

Depending on the options you choose:

- "Giving Thanks in the Multitudes" (p. 6): Find John August Swanson's *Loaves and Fishes* and prepare to show it.
- "Giving Thanks in All Things" (p. 6), "The Great Thanksgiving" (p. 6), and "Anamnesis and Prolepsis" (p. 7): Obtain hymnals or worship books that include a "Great Thanksgiving" or communion prayer.
- "Gratitude Rocks" (p. 8): Provide palm-sized, smooth stones and permanent markers of various colors.

# GETTING STARTED

## WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Welcome participants and allow time for gathering activities particular to your group (*introductions, offering, prayer concerns, and announcements*). Review the summary of the practice found in the Unit Overview on page 4 of the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Explain that a more detailed discussion of the practice can be found in the foundational essay that begins on page 49 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Encourage participants to read the essay during the course of the next four sessions.

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- This and all sessions require that the leader and participants have their copy of the *Adult Reflection Guide* with them.

## OPENING LITANY

Explain that the theme of this practice is “Celebrate Communion.” Refer participants to the litany on page 7 in the *Adult Reflection Guide* and have them join you in the celebratory responsive reading 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!**

# INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or more options.

## CONVERSATION STARTER VIDEO

Show the “*Celebrate Communion Overview*” video and the “*Give Thanks, Session 1*” video from the Growing Faith YouTube channel ([bit.ly /FMYouTubeGFR](https://bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR)). Lead a brief conversation about participants’ thoughts and questions the videos prompt as you introduce the session.

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- Internet-connected device

## TABLE BLESSINGS

Select from these questions for group discussion.

- ➔ Do you say a blessing before a meal? Do you pray before each meal? Only certain meals? Only when certain people are around?
- ➔ If you pray before meals, what are some of your favorite prayers?
- ➔ What feelings or thoughts do you have during these prayers?
- ➔ Are there table blessings that everyone in this group knows? What are some of these?

## TABLE GATHERINGS

Invite participants to name examples of when people gather around tables and share food. Invite them to tell about their most memorable or meaningful table gathering and describe how they participated in them. Ask what they learn about themselves and what they learn about others when they gather around a table together.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Choose one or both options.

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- Bibles
  - Internet-connected device
  - Equipment to display image (optional)



If you are able, display the art image on a larger screen through an internet-connected device ([bit.ly/FMLoavesAndFishes](https://bit.ly/FMLoavesAndFishes)).

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- Internet-connected device
  - Hymnals with “Let All Things Now Living” (*Glory to God*, #37)

## GIVING THANKS IN THE MULTITUDES

Refer participants to “Finding the Practice in the Bible” on page 8 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Encourage them to use the link provided there to view John August Swanson’s serigraph, *Loaves and Fishes*.

Invite participants to identify what is happening in the art piece. Discuss how the image makes them feel. What is celebratory in the piece? How do you see thanksgiving portrayed?

Continue displaying the image as you read aloud Matthew 14:13–21. Explain that, in Matthew’s Gospel, this passage immediately follows the gruesome death of Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist. It is suggested that Jesus may have been grieving when he took time away from the crowds. Discuss the contrast between the joy shown in Swanson’s *Loaves and Fishes* and the possibility of Jesus mourning his cousin just prior to the feeding event. Invite participants to discuss the questions in “Feeding the Multitudes” on page 8 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*.

## GIVING THANKS IN ALL THINGS

Direct participants to “Giving Thanks in All Circumstances” on page 9 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 printed on page 9 while participants follow along. Discuss the questions that follow the printed Scripture text.

Following their discussion, read the opening sentence and questions in the next paragraph, starting with “Upon hearing or reading these words.” Invite participants to react to what is written.

Distribute hymnals. Direct participants to the hymn “Let All Things Now Living.” Have them read through the lyrics and identify how the hymn reflects Paul’s encouragement in 1 Thessalonians. Show the YouTube video “Let All Things Now Living” ([bit.ly/FMThanksSong](https://bit.ly/FMThanksSong), 3:10). Discuss how the tempo and emotion of the song reflect the message of thanksgiving in all things.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Choose one or more options.

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- Hymnals or worship books

## THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

Turn to “The Great Thanksgiving” on page 10 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Explain that the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving is offered by a pastor before worshipers share in communion. It has a specific structure, but there is freedom within each section. Read and discuss the description and elements included in the prayer that are presented on page 11.

Distribute hymnals or worship books that include a “Great Thanksgiving” or communion prayer. Direct participants to this prayer. Form three groups and assign each one element listed below. Have them read the prayer and identify how the elements weave through it:

- The Trinity: Creator (Father), Christ (Son), Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit)
- Scripture and scriptural allusions
- The community of faith, God’s people

Gather the group and invite them to tell how the prayer includes these three elements. Discuss the words and tone of the prayer that indicate that it is a prayer of thanksgiving.

## ANAMNESIS AND PROLEPSIS

Call participants' attention to the text box in "Finding the Practice Then and Now" on page 11 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Invite two volunteers to read the explanations of *anamnesis* and *prolepsis*; these are Greek terms and theological concepts embedded in our understanding of communion.

Encourage discussion about *anamnesis* and ways that the celebration of communion encourages worshipers to recall Jesus' sacrificial death and its importance to our faith. Then discuss *prolepsis* and ways that communion anticipates the fulfillment of the realm of God and future resurrection of God's people.

Distribute hymnals or worship books that include a "Great Thanksgiving" or communion prayer. Direct participants to the prayer. Have them read it and identify what is included as remembrance of Christ and what is said about the coming of God's realm. Discuss how understanding these theological concepts affects their participation in communion.

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Hymnals or worship books

## A SEASON OF REJOICING

Explain that the call to and tradition of giving thanks to God is rooted in the Old Testament and Jewish traditions. Gratitude is a long-standing practice among God's people. Ask participants to talk about what they know about the annual Jewish holidays Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and *Sukkot* (Booth Festival). Affirm comments offered by participants and direct them to "A Season of Rejoicing" on page 11 in the *Adult Reflection Guide* to clarify their understanding of these Jewish festivals. Read aloud the paragraph while participants follow along.

Invite their responses to the questions posed at the end of the paragraph. Discuss ways that secular Thanksgiving celebrations might resemble these Jewish holidays.

To further explore the Jewish thanksgiving holiday, show the YouTube video "Sukkot: Ecclesiastes Reimagined in Animation" ([bit.ly/FMSukkot](https://bit.ly/FMSukkot), 3:22). Invite participants to respond to what was explained in the video.

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Internet-connected device

# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or both options.

## GIVE THANKS IN PRAYER

Direct participants to "Practicing the Practice" on page 13 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Invite a volunteer to read aloud the paragraph at the beginning of this section as others follow along. Explain that a key theme in this session is Paul's encouragement to pray without ceasing, even in the midst of hectic lives. Encourage participants to use time during this session to pause and pray. Offer a period of quiet when participants can use the prayer and open-ended gratitude statements on page 14 in their *Adult Reflection Guide*. Tell them that you will keep time and signal the close of their prayer time by leading them in the closing words of the prayer on page 14.

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Pens

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- ☐ Palm-sized, smooth stones (craft store river rocks)
  - ☐ Permanent markers of various colors

## GRATITUDE ROCKS

Refer participants to “Gratitude Rocks” on page 15 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Use information from the section to explain the practice of creating and carrying these reminder stones. Invite participants to brainstorm words, phrases, or images that remind people to give thanks.

Provide stones and permanent markers. Have participants select a stone and write on and decorate it to serve as their reminder to give thanks. Suggest the practice of carrying the stone as part of their daily routine. If time allows, they may make additional rocks with gratitude reminders to give away or to leave where others may find them.

## FOLLOWING JESUS ENCOURAGING THANKFULNESS

Direct participants to “Following Jesus” on page 16 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Have them read the first paragraph. Discuss these questions to review the session:

- ➔ What did you find helpful in the session on giving thanks?
- ➔ How might you build upon your current practice of gratitude?

In closing, show the YouTube video “‘Look Who Gathers at Christ’s Table’ Performed by the Festival Singers of Florida” ([bit.ly/FMLook](https://bit.ly/FMLook), 6:03)  
Pray together the closing prayer on page 16 in the guide.

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- ☐ Internet-connected device