

MESSAGE MINDER

November 14, 2010

I love the Lord, because
He hears my voice and
my prayers. Because He
has inclined His ear to me,
therefore I shall call upon
Him as long as I live.

Psalms 116:1-2



Gratitude

By Jonathan Stone

In the New Testament we are told that on at least two occasions Jesus fed a multitude of hungry people with only a tiny bit of bread and fish. As we try to understand what Jesus might model for us in this story we tend to focus on increasing our level of faith or contemplating the power of God. Certainly those are appropriate responses. However, in so doing we miss the simple lesson that is taught to us through the very first thing that Jesus does in each of those stories. Each time the action begins with, “He gave thanks” (e.g. Mark 8:6).

Our tendency is to assess the situation and become bewildered by what appears to be an overwhelming lack of necessary resources. We hear the demands of the circumstances and feel paralyzed by our inability to meet those

demands. Not so with Jesus. He starts in the same place that we need to start. He starts with thanksgiving. Yet, while all of us recognize our need to be more thankful, it is finding the threshold for getting there that often proves tricky. How do we move our heart from the state of grumbling to the state of gratitude?

In Philippians 4 the Apostle Paul gives us what has become a famous exhortation for thanksgiving. He starts with rejoicing, tells us not to be anxious about our circumstances, encourages us to sprinkle our requests with thanksgiving, and promises that the incomprehensible peace of God will guard our hearts. It is truly a beautiful and deeply encouraging passage! However, once again there is a small, basic key in this passage that we tend to

overlook. Right in the middle of the passage Paul pens these simple words “The Lord is near” (4:5).

Joy, thanksgiving, and peace all hinge on the hopeful revelation that God is near. This is the good news of the bible. Genesis begins and Revelation ends with the same unmistakable message that was proclaimed from the heavens at the birth of Christ: Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23). This is the very good news that we carry with us everyday and the door through which we enter into the presence of God and become more aware of his nearness. The psalmist tells us that it is with thanksgiving that we are able to enter into the gates of God (Ps. 100:4). Thus, we see the never-ending cycle. We draw near to God with thanksgiving, and find thanksgiving as we realize that God is near indeed.

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Spiritual Exercises

- 1) Begin a gratitude journal by keeping a record of the "abundances" God has given you. Next to each abundance write what it means to you to have a God who interacts and intervenes in your life. Notice what you have been given that you did not deserve. What do you want to say to God about these things?
- 2) End every day by saying thank you to God for at least one thing. Then tell God what that one thing meant for you.
- 3) Write a letter of thanks to someone who has touched your life in the past year, the past month, the past week.
- 4) Get a current hardship firmly in mind. How do you feel about this hardship? Is there anything you can be thankful for? If you cannot find God in your hardship, spend some time with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- 5) What sorts of things tend to encourage you in thankfulness? Praise songs? Worship? Time spent with friends? Giving and receiving presents? Plan ways of incorporating the things that encourage thankfulness into your life on a regular basis.
- 6) Notice your tendency to make comparisons that result in feelings of dissatisfaction or entitlement. Practice abstaining from comparative statements about what you don't have. Instead give thanks for what you do have.

Reflection Questions

- 1.) When you feel at the bottom of the food chain and dead last in terms of priority, how do you move toward gratitude?
- 2.) When have you found that in retrospect you could have been thankful for something you were not grateful for at the time it was happening? How can this perspective inform your life now?
- 3.) How has a grateful person affected your own vision of what matters in life? How has someone who lives out of bitterness affected your life?
- 4.) How does your disposition influence your attitude toward gratitude?
- 5.) How are you addicted to criticism, analysis and negativity? How might thankfulness be an antidote to a critical spirit?

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:4-7

NOTE: Spiritual Exercises and Reflection Questions come from *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun.

