

Thank God No Matter What

Pastor Morgan Murray

West Valley Presbyterian Church

In the bulletin we've given you some space to reflect on:

What are the things that it is EASY to be grateful for?

What are the things it is HARD to be grateful for?

Gratitude is a critically important part of authentic worship. It is the necessary starting point – and returning point - for any spiritual growth and health. Gratitude is a theme that comes up again and again in Scripture. It is even formalized in the religious practices of ancient Israel. Of the five types of offerings described in Leviticus, the Fellowship or Peace Offering was intended to be a voluntary act of worship that honored God. It often accompanied the burnt offering for the atonement of sins. Leviticus 7 describes how the Fellowship Offering can be an expression of thankfulness, the marking of a completed vow, or simply a freewill offering. In all these situations, the sacrifice would lead to a meal with family and friends. The fat was to be burned unto the Lord, and the meat was to be shared with the community.

In the history of Israel, Fellowship Offerings were observed during times of spiritual renewal. Judah's King Hezekiah offered them at the end of extensive religious reform (2 Chron 29:31). However, a few chapters later in 2 Chronicles, Hezekiah's son Manasseh undid all the good work his father had done, leading the chroniclers to conclude that "Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites (33:9)." After Yahweh's warnings went unheeded, the Lord sent Assyria's armies to Jerusalem and they took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and drug him off to Babylon. I love the way the Chroniclers put it plainly. They write:

In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. 13 And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened

to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God. (2 Chr 33:12-13)

Well I bet he did! So we should wonder: Was Manasseh's forced vacation to Babylon something for which he would look back and be grateful? Apparently so: When he got back to Jerusalem he rebuilt the walls, then he fortified all of Judah's cities, then he got rid of all the foreign gods and their altars. Finally, "he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel (2 Chr 33:16)."

If we are relating to God in a spirit other than gratitude, then we are starting off on the wrong foot. Inevitably, we have to start over.

The New Testament writers continually call for gratitude, as Paul does so emphatically in 1 Thessalonians 5:18. The punctuation in the NIV's translation of verses 16-18 asserts that gratitude is THE solid-rock foundation of any well-lived life. It says:

16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

All circumstances. All of them. Or as we read earlier from The Message: thank God no matter what happens.

This is Paul's sum-up of instructions that – funny enough – relate to people in the church! The NRSV lists them as "those who labor among you," the "idlers," the "fainthearted," and the "weak." Or as The Message puts it: The leaders, the freeloaders, the stragglers, and exhausted.

If you wanted to sum up the people who get on your nerves or who hold up the show, the ones that, "if only they would (fill in the blank), we'd make some progress around here," then this would be a pretty good list.

Thank God no matter WHAT happens, Paul says, and no matter WHO happens.

Lift up the leaders. Coach up the lazy. Cheer up the discouraged. Give a hand up to weak, pulling them to their feet.

In other words, don't complain to God about them. Thank God for them!

If we are relating to God or to each another in a spirit other than gratitude, then we are starting off on the wrong foot. Inevitably, we have to start over.

In the bulletin we've given you some space to reflect on:

Who are the people that are *EASY* to be grateful for?

Who are the people it is *HARD* to be grateful for?

Both types of people have something to teach us. Both types can be used by God to grow us up. For both types of people, God calls us to be grateful.

WVPC "Thank you cards to God"

After the WVPC/OCSJ joint service, a member asked about comments I made regarding the transition work we are doing, and wished that we would take to time to reflect upon and name the things about West Valley that we appreciate and are grateful for.

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