

Gratitude: Responding to God's Goodness

The practice of gratitude is about recognizing, trusting, and responding to God's goodness and abiding presence with us. There is a call and response that names and reinforces this posture:

Leader: "God is good . . ."

People: "all the time."

Leader: "All the time . . ."

People: "God is good."

Gratitude forms us as a people who look with confidence toward God as the One who loves us, who saves us in Jesus Christ, and who will ultimately deliver all of creation from our entanglement with sin and its consequences. More than simply saying thank you, practicing gratitude trains us to respond with all that we are to God's generosity in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Wholeheartedly

The Heidelberg Catechism's first question and answer teaches us: "Christ, by his Holy Spirit . . . makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." This is an essential part of the Holy Spirit's work. Practicing gratitude trains us to recognize and celebrate the Spirit's work in us so that we can more fully and more faithfully love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In [*Radical Gratitude*](#), Mary Jo Leddy extends this perspective further: "In recognizing our original and radical dependence on our Creator, we become freer to live in interdependent ways in which we become more truly who we are" (p. 62). In other words, gratitude forms us to give and receive love more freely with each other so that we become the people God created us to be. Expressing gratitude to God is most fully evident in a community of God's people who love each other.

Debt of Gratitude?

However, here's where we bump into a challenge. Gratitude becomes distorted when we hold self-sufficiency and independence as high values in our hearts.

When our goal is to live independently, gratitude is often seen as something we owe to people who have given us a gift or whom we have depended on in some way. And that can feel like a debt. Sometimes we even feel that way about God's gifts to us.

A shorthand way for describing the three main parts of the Heidelberg Catechism is "Guilt, Grace, Gratitude." I've heard some people explain it this way: "Because we are guilty sinners, we couldn't save ourselves. God, however, chose to save us by grace in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we owe God a debt of gratitude that we can never fully repay."

The “owe,” “debt,” and “repay” language reveal an underlying sense that gratitude is an obligation necessary to prove we are worthy of receiving God’s grace. Gratitude, in this sense, can become another legalistic requirement for staying in God’s good graces. On the other hand, gratitude as thanks-filled trust in God leads us into a freedom that seeks to serve others—not as a burden but as a joyful way of imitating Jesus.

Ripple Effects of Gratitude

In many ways, **gratitude is the first ripple of our response to God’s goodness**, so much so that the other faith practices flow out of and are strengthened through gratitude. For example, gratitude sets the stage for delight. As we get caught up in how deep and never-ending God’s love is for us, delight in our relationships, our work, and God’s very good creation amplifies the gratitude we have for God, even when circumstances are less than ideal.

Moreover, **gratitude encourages generosity**. Rather than a debt to be paid, gratitude leads to imitation. In practicing gratitude, we don’t strive to “pay it forward” or to somehow “repay God.” Rather, we seek to become more like Jesus, through whom God has lavished on us the riches of his grace (see Eph. 1-2) and called us “children of God” (1 John 3:1). Becoming more like Jesus leads us to love others as God has loved us.

Additionally, **gratitude welcomes curiosity and wonder**. James writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). This posture leads us to pray: “God, I wonder how you are going to work through, or even transform, these circumstances,” and, “God, I’m curious how you will transform me (or us) so that we live more like Jesus would in similar circumstances.” With gratitude, trials become an occasion to deepen our trust in relationship with God.

How Can I Take New Steps in Practicing Gratitude?

There are thousands of ways to nurture gratitude in our lives, and we are invited to experiment with different ways that will cultivate gratitude within us, our homes, our churches, and our communities. The goal of the Faith Practices Project is to help you imagine what practicing our faith, including gratitude, could look like in your context.

As you experiment with gratitude practices, we’d love to learn alongside you. Share your practices with #CRCFaithPractices and tag us on Twitter (@crc_ffm) and Facebook (@faithformationCRC).