

How Can I Thank the Lord?

In the name of him who richly and daily provides for all our wants of body and soul, dear friends in Christ: It is especially fitting that a nation such as ours sets aside a special day to give thanks to God for all the goodness he has so abundantly showered upon us. Nowhere else in the world does a population as a whole enjoy the same extensive freedoms, the same overall security and stability, or the same general prosperity as we have here. And so it's right that we take the time to count the many blessings God has given us, and with deep gratitude recognize him as the source of all good things.

And it's even more fitting that we here in the Christian Church respond to the call to give thanks, not only for the material blessings that we enjoy, but first and foremost for the blessings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in which we stand. It's the unbelievably good news that when we were still the enemies of God, nevertheless, the Father sent his Son to bear our sin and be our Savior, to suffer and die for our sins and be raised again; and then how he sent his Spirit to give us this saving faith. And all this, a free gift; without any merit, worthiness, or help on our part. Paraphrasing what we sang in that last hymn, "It was your work alone, Lord. I was dead in my many sins and trespasses ... but, Lord, you raised me up and showed me the way of salvation." It's amazing: we just sort of sit here on the end of a pipeline of God's grace and love being poured out upon us all the time. Can there be any doubt that there has never been another people more blessed by God than we? How much more reason to give God our most heartfelt thanks and praise?

None, obviously; but that does lead us to another question – the same question asked by the hymn, "How can I thank you, Lord?" As the recipients of his ever-flowing gifts, what's the proper way to actually express our thanks to God? *How* does the Lord want to be thanked by us? It's the same question the psalmist was pondering in the section we read earlier. Marveling over the way the Lord rescued him from death and the grave, he asks, "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" In view of all God's gracious gifts, it's only natural to want to do something that pleases him in return. But what is it that the Lord wants from us? How *can* you thank the Lord?

To answer that question, we may have to change our mindset a bit. For most things, we have a tendency to think that thankfulness is best expressed in the form of reciprocating somehow. If you do something nice for me, I'd like to do something for you in return. If you give someone something, they may want to give you something back. If you invite some friends over for dinner, say, the next time you meet it will likely be at the other folk's house because they'll say, "It's our turn to host". Now, in each of these cases, there's really no obligation to reciprocate (at least there shouldn't be, anyway); but still, we feel the way to show our thankfulness is to return the favor in kind if possible. Now, sometimes that can't be done, not at least in terms of any more or less "equal" exchange. People who give their seven-year-old grandchild a nice gift for Christmas, say, certainly do not want the child to express his or her thanks by buying a gift in return. It just wouldn't be right; but they still probably would be offended if the child never expressed any thanks at all. And I suppose, when you think about all the nagging, arm twisting, and suffering the child will have to endure before mom finally extracts a suitable thank you note to send, perhaps it could be said that the child will ultimately make a greater sacrifice than the grandparents ever did in sending the gift to begin with. Yes, I'm exaggerating a bit (I think), but the idea is really still the same. Even a simple verbal "thank you" or a card is intended to return a favor: You did something

that made me feel good, I want to make you feel good, even if all I can manage is a small token that will make you feel appreciated.

But with this whole idea of showing thankfulness by returning a favor we run into a problem when it comes to the Lord. Strictly speaking, God has no needs to fill. No favors can be done for him. Nor does he seek any kind of thankfulness from us for the purpose of making him feel good about himself. He doesn't need our gratitude. That just isn't the way he operates. God is love. And love gives, it sacrifices, it suffers, with no hope or desire of getting anything in return. Love is not interested in serving itself in any way – not even in extracting a word of thanks. Now, it's true that God wants us to be thankful to him; but it's not to satisfy a need that he has. Rather, it's because he knows we need to be thankful. We have names for people who receive gifts and who are never thankful for them: we call them ingrates or spoiled brats. And no one can stand to be around them. God wants us to be thankful for our own good – precisely so that we aren't spoiled brats.

So, then, how do we thank the Lord or repay him? Fortunately for us, the psalmist who asked the same question also gives us the answer; and it comes in three parts. First he writes, to thank the Lord: "I will lift up the cup of salvation ...". That may require some explanation. Lifting up the cup of salvation is part of the ancient Passover celebration in which God's people remembered how the Lord delivered their nation from slavery in Egypt. The cup of salvation calls to mind how the hapless slaves put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts, which, when the Lord saw, he passed over their homes and protected its occupants from the terrible devastation of the tenth plague. That was the one in which the all firstborn died, and it resulted in the freedom of God's people. So "lifting up the cup" means to recognize God's great salvation, and continue to live and rejoice in his blood bought redemption.

Today the cup of salvation finds its fulfillment in the Lord's Supper. That's what the Passover celebration foreshadowed: the true and lasting deliverance earned for us by Jesus, God's own Firstborn, when he bled and died on the cross. Lifting up the cup of his blood, we declare the Lord's death for us to secure the forgiveness of our sins. And now, the greatest thanks we can show to God is to acknowledge him as the source of our salvation and every other blessing, and to receive and use the gifts of grace he's given us: his Word and Sacraments. Think of it this way: God loves us. He wants what's best for us. And so he is most pleased when we take the spiritual medicine he's provided for us to give us life. It's kind of like the grandparents I mentioned before who might say, "My grandchild enjoying the benefit of the gift I gave is all the thanks I need. I'm thanked by the sheer joy of seeing my loved one using what I gave to be alive and happy."

The second way the inspired writer says that he will express his thanks to God is to "call on the name of the Lord." To call on his name means to go to the Lord with your needs, your desires, and all your requests. Now, this may sound strange because it's pretty much opposite to the way we normally think of showing thankfulness by doing something in return; but to show thankfulness to God, instead of trying to return a favor (which you can't do anyway), ask him for more – and don't be shy about it: he'll never run out of things to give. God is thanked by our requests to him because it means we are looking to him to provide us with what we need – and that's what it means to have him as our God. So to thank, ask. But you say, "But I'm already quite content with what I have." Okay, fine; then ask for spiritual gifts that can be used to serve others. Or make your requests on behalf of others, and, if he blesses you beyond your needs, be like him and enjoy giving away what you don't need for yourself. There are plenty of folks who could benefit by God's generosity to you – or rather,

you can be the conduit through which God gives to them; and by so doing, the Lord will give you a share of his joy in giving.

Well, finally, there's a third way we can show our thankfulness to God. *After* we appreciate and use the gifts of salvation, *and after* we ask the Lord to fill our every want and need, the psalmist says, "I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people." The sequence is important, because we can't fulfill our vows to God without first having done the others. But empowered by God's gifts of grace, and with the internal leading of the Holy Spirit we can fulfill them. So, the third way to thank God is to do what you promised him you would do – and especially to do whatever it is in such a way that people know you are doing it, like it says, "in the presence of all his people".

So, ask yourself, "What vows have I made to the Lord?" Now, to be honest, I can't guess what kind or how many vows you may have made to God. I do know that the Scriptures warn us about making foolish or frivolous vows, like saying "I swear to God" when you don't mean it, or the kind of hasty vows made in a moment of crisis when someone might say, "Lord, if you do this for me, then, in return, I will do *whatever*. For these sorts of promises – which are sinful from the start – we need to ask for the Lord's forgiveness and release. What we're talking about here though, are the serious vows to the Lord; the kind made soberly, deliberately, and after having taken time for thoughtful consideration. So, with that in mind, what vows have you made to the Lord?

Again, I don't know everything you may have promised, but I do know that those of you who have been confirmed in the Lutheran church have made at least three solemn vows to God. You might want to go to page 273 of the hymnal for a quick review (turn there now, if you would). There about a third of the way down the page, you promised to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully. Then, next question, you promised to, "live according to the Word of God, and in faith (what you believe), word (what you say), and deed (what you do and don't do) remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit even to death. And then, finally you promised to "continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it." I wonder how many of us actually think about these vows on a daily basis. And again, we show our thankfulness to God by fulfilling our vows publicly. That's how we provide a living witness to our faithfulness to the Lord and also give encouragement to others who have made the same vows.

And there are other sacred vows some have made. If you're married, you have made a sacred promise to the Lord to love, honor, and cherish your spouse. You show your thankfulness to God by keeping that vow. If you are an officer of the church, you've promised the Lord that you would faithfully discharge your duties. As a pastor, I've vowed to teach the Scriptures and administer the Sacraments in accord with God's Word and specifically as explained in the Lutheran confessions. And again, there may be other vows some have made – but the idea is the same: God is thanked when you fulfill your promises to him.

And today, especially, it's thankful that we want to be. So, since God is thanked by our asking, today let's ask him to make us thankful in the way he would have us be: by lifting up and rejoicing in his salvation for us in Jesus Christ, by asking him to provide us with every blessing for body and soul, and by keeping our vows to him in the presence of all his people. May he grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!