

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI (920)261-2570**

“Say Grace”

Rev. David K. Groth
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“Praise the LORD! Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” (Ps. 106:1).

Growing up, there wasn't much variation to the dinner prayers. Before each meal it was the common table prayer, “Come Lord Jesus be our guest . . .” After the meal it was our text, “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, and his mercy endures forever”. Irreverence wasn't tolerated. My brothers and I would never have said, “Here's the bread. Here's the meat. Good God, let's eat.” That one wouldn't pass doctrinal review and may even land you in your room with an empty stomach. So, we stayed with those simple prayers of thanksgiving at dinnertime.

Some have called it “saying grace,” an odd way of putting it. “Would you please say grace” means “Would you pray before we eat?” It's one of those American idioms that completely confuses most foreigners. But it's a wonderful phrase nonetheless, and it makes theological sense. When we say grace, we're giving thanks to God, but it's more than just about food. It's about the grace of our Lord in Jesus Christ.

“O give thanks unto the Lord for he is good and his mercy endures forever.” This prayer is about more than just food too. The mercy of God in Jesus Christ endures forever. The prayer points to the Bread of Life more than it does the basket of rolls. The prayer offers gratitude for the miracle of our redemption in Christ, and the promise of eternal life in him.

Praying that, day in and day out, assures we gave thanks to the Lord for his mercy, at least once a day. And that is very close to the heart of being a Christian, acknowledging and giving thanks for our redemption in Christ.

Before it is anything else, the Christian faith is, first, praise and thanksgiving. Before it is fleeing temptation, or volunteering to serve food at Bread and Roses, or obeying the commandment to observe the Sabbath, before it is anything else, the Christian faith is first giving thanks.

In his explanation of the first article of the creed, Martin Luther wrote, “For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” The “thanking and praising” comes before the “serving and obeying.” We get it wrong, if the Christian faith becomes first and foremost a set of rules, prohibitions against this and that. That's what the Pharisees thought, and Jesus called them white-washed tombstones. The Christian faith is first about gratitude and praise.

At least two hundred times in the New Testament, we are urged to give God thanks and praise. Over and over again, Paul urges us to assume a basic posture of gratitude, no matter what is happening to us. It's almost as if things will be better, if only, you can express gratitude.

He's right, isn't he? To be grateful is to be more whole. Said another way, gratitude is essential for emotional health. Conversely, I believe ingratitude, the inability to say thank you to God or anyone else, is a pretty good sign of mental illness.

A number of weeks ago, the Wall Street Journal interviewed John Donahoe. He is the new CEO of Nike. They were asking him all kinds of personal questions such as “What day do you take off?” “What do you eat for breakfast?” “How do you start your day?” It was very interesting. He said what he has started doing a lot is practicing gratitude. He said your brain becomes more negative over time because negative experiences stick in our brains.”

That's intuitive, right? We may have 100 positive experiences with someone and one negative experience, and the one that sticks to the brain the most is the negative experience. Therefore, over time, as we age, it's very easy for us to become negative people. So, what Donahoe does is try to train his brain to remember the positive. Donahoe starts the day by asking himself, “What am I grateful for in the broad sense of my life? What am I grateful for in the previous day? What am I looking forward to . . . in the coming day?” He said, “For so many years, I was very diligent about physically working out. But what I've learned in my

later years . . . is the importance of what you might call a workout of the mind. [The mind] needs the same kind of discipline and focus that the physical side needs” (WSJ Magazine, Fall, 2021).

Want to avoid becoming a grumpy old man or a grouchy old woman? Keep giving thanks to God for all His goodness, and especially for His steadfast love in Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica, “be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Notice, Paul does not say “give thanks *for* all circumstances.” He says, “give thanks *in* all circumstances.” There’s a big difference between the two. Paul knows, from personal experience, that we can be grateful in all circumstances because God’s amazing grace transcends the immediate situation. No matter what is happening, we can be grateful for the incredible miracle that in Jesus Christ God loves us, and is with us, and has redeemed us, and will forever keep us safe.

Therefore, when problems arise, you can say, “God loves me. Nothing happens to me that is not filtered through His love; therefore, by faith and on the authority of God’s Word, I can say all things that happen to me are for my good and for God’s glory.”

Know that even if you are saying “thank you” to God through your tears and with a broken heart, God honors that expression of faith.

“Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good and his steadfast love endures forever.” We can give thanks and keep giving thanks, in all circumstances, because his steadfast love, can be found in all circumstances. We can give thanks to the Lord, because his death and resurrection transcend even the worst that our broken world can throw at us.

So . . . say your grace, in all circumstances. Give voice to your gratitude. Facing a difficult surgery? Give thanks for the medical team God has sent to take care of you. Dealing with a difficult relationship? Give thanks to God for the good things about the person; surely, he’s at least capable of doing good. Say your grace, out loud in worship. Say grace quietly at work. Say grace silently in service of your neighbor.

Say grace in all circumstances, not only because it’s good for you, not only because there’s grace to be found in every circumstance, not only to avoid becoming a grump in old age, but because the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ transcends and changes the meaning and nature of every circumstance.

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good and his steadfast love endures forever. Amen.