



“Present your needs to God
in every form of prayer,
and in petitions full of gratitude.”

Phil 4:6

Thank you, God.

Petitions Full of Gratitude

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Petitions full of gratitude is an odd expression. It sounds like a contradiction

in terms. Are we asking for something or are we grateful for something? Are we in need or are we blessed? The honest answer, of course, is yes. No matter how contradictory it sounds, both are true on any given day. We always stand in need, and we are always blessed—often outrageously. But when our focus is on the asking, it is hard to remember the blessing, because our imagination is much more easily captured by what we lack than by what we possess.

That’s why a child can sit in a pile of nearly-new toys, begging for whatever gizmo was demonstrated on the last commercial—because obviously, the toy on TV is much more fun than the one on the floor. You’d think adults could see through such marketing

loys, but we are almost as gullible. I remember a department-store ad that ran on summer evenings a few years ago, in which a woman tried on and rejected every single item of clothing in her closet. Then the announcer let us in on a secret: “If it’s not new, it’s not

in fashion!” Apparently nothing takes the sparkle out of something like our possessing it.

As I was writing this, I was interrupted by a call from my cell phone’s service provider. My contract was up for renewal, and in exchange for another two-year commitment, they were offering me a free phone. Now, I don’t need a new phone. I like my old phone. I know how to work my old phone. Less than twenty-four hours before they called, I had finally learned how to program distinctive rings into my phone for the two people in my life whose calls I never want to miss.

I explained all this to the very nice sales representative, who insisted that I could simply take my great new free

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phone to one of their local stores to have all my numbers and ring tones transferred over. But I just couldn't bring myself to say yes. Partly it was guilt: how could I accept an upgraded cell phone for which I had no need or desire in the very same hour I was writing an article on the tug-of-war between gratitude and the lure of novelty? And yet in the end what

convinced me even more was the question of time. I don't want to take a new phone to the local store to have it programmed. I don't want to sit on my couch one evening trying to figure out all the fancy new features. I don't want my cell phone to be the center of my attention, even for a little while. Time is precious and limited, and that's not what I want to do with mine.

Here's another example. About four years ago, I paid off my three-year-old car. I had struggled to make the high payments necessary to maintain a low interest rate, and now I was done. How satisfying it was to sign that final check! The same week that I received the title in the mail, I got a letter from the dealer saying, "This is the time when many people start thinking about buying a new car!" Really? They do? Many people? All I was thinking

about was not having anymore car payments (and I'm still contentedly driving the same payment-free vehicle, by the way). But a powerful message was being delivered: now that the car was completely mine, it wasn't supposed to make me happy anymore. Our culture actually encourages us to be in a constant state of discontent.

Of course, these examples seem rather charming and innocuous now that the nationwide financial crisis has cast such a harsh light on the limitations of our consumer culture. When people stop spending like there's no tomorrow, our economy derails. There was some urgency in that car dealer's letter after all, because apparently the auto industry comes to a crashing halt if people only buy a new car when they really need one. It is easy to sit back and pass judgment on that (as I am on the verge of doing), but it is frightening to realize how much overconsumption is woven into the fabric of our economy.

I heard recently that the corrugated-box industry is in trouble because people aren't doing as much on-line shopping as they did in the past. From an ecological perspective, you'd think it was a good thing for fewer boxes of excessively packaged goods to be arriving on people's doorsteps daily. However, all that packing material included in an order of books from Amazon is produced by real people holding jobs they don't want to lose; the same is true of the people employed to cut the timber used to produce the boxes, and so on. Saint Paul urges us to present our needs to God in petitions full of gratitude, but powerful forces around and within us would prefer we skip the gratitude, focus only on our needs, and find a way to fulfill them ourselves—preferably with a credit card.

The spiritual battle would be easier if it were just about stuff. But the lure of novelty doesn't stop with material goods. The person we met at a one-week conference is much more intriguing than the person slumping

coffee across the breakfast table from us for the two-thousandth morning.

The possibility that the Intriguing Stranger also has annoying habits rarely crosses our minds, because our imagination is much more easily captured by what we lack than by what we possess. What parent hasn't wanted to string up a longed-for child or pondered the exceeding merits of

the kid next door? Who hasn't looked at someone else's life from the outside and imagined it much more satisfying than our own? To present our needs to God in "petitions full of gratitude" is to rescue our prayer from the tyranny of our imagination and to ground us in the real. Our needs are real, but so are our blessings, which are abundant and profound and unmerited gifts from a gracious God.

Although "petitions full of gratitude" is Saint Paul's own aptly phrase, the concept is as old as people's recorded relationship with God. When Jesus first taught his disciples to pray "Give us this day our daily bread," his hearers would have caught the allusion to God's gift of manna in the desert. (See Ex 16 and Num 11.) This was the original "bread from heaven" that miraculously sustained the Israelites during their forty-year sojourn in the Promised Land. How often have we prayed the Our Father without hearing that allusion? Since Jesus was making it, however, perhaps it would be instructive for us to revisit the manna story and see what it has to teach us about petitions and gratitude.

After Moses led his people out of Egypt (a feat which followed God's sending ten plagues on the Egyptians and parting the Red Sea, among other things), it was not long before they began to grumble. Grumbling, we will see, is quite the opposite of gratitude. A mere six weeks into the trek they complained, "Would that we had died at the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you," they accused

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Thank you, God.

Moses, "had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!" (Ex 16:3). Notice that—like the paid-off car—the old miracles did not satisfy the people anymore. They were no longer slaves; they had been dramatically rescued by God's own hand, yet they yearned for the comforts of their former captivity.

And so God responded. The Book of Exodus tells us, "In the morning a dew lay all about the camp, and when the dew evaporated, there on the surface of the desert were fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground" (16:13–15). These flakes, which tasted like "waters made with honey" could be boiled or baked into bread and provided the staple of the Israelites' diet for the next forty years. There were, however, two simple rules: The first was no hoarding. People could gather as much as they needed for their family for the day and no more. Naturally, some people broke that rule and stashed away a little something extra, but it proved

an unprofitable investment: anything kept overnight was found rotten and wormy in the morning. The second rule was the exception to the first: if a double portion was gathered on the morning before the Sabbath, the extra would last throughout the day of rest. Thus God provided for the people's spiritual needs as well as their physical ones.

So as followers of Jesus, when we pray "Give us this day our daily bread," do we mean it as he meant it? Are we really asking God for this day's provision and no more? (Well, a little bit extra for Sunday, perhaps.) Financial advisors warn us that we should have at least six months' income stashed away in savings, just in case. We cannot sever the brain which knows that—the body that doesn't have it—from the spirit trying to pray about it. So how can we ask God for only the bread that we need for today? Why not pray for loaves, racks, or vaults of bread just in case?

The answer to that question goes back to the manna. Jesus could urge his followers to pray for their daily bread because he knew—as did they—that in the days of their ancestors, the manna came faithfully day after day, year after year, decade after decade, until it was no longer needed. Memory of what God had done inspired trust in what God would yet

do. A French proverb says, "Gratitude is the memory of the heart." When we steep our hearts in recollection of God's goodness to us, the memory of the bread of countless yesterdays enables us to trust God for the bread of each tomorrow. Trust grounded in memory is the essence of "petitions full of gratitude."

Jesus was rooted in that grateful trust when he proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount, "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap; they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?" (Mt

6:26). Saint Francis de Sales echoed the same wisdom centuries later when he wrote, “Do not fear what may happen tomorrow. The same loving Father who cares for you today will care for you tomorrow and everyday. Either he will shield you from suffering or he will give you unfailing strength to bear it.” The message is so clear. We sing it in beloved hymns such as “Be Not Afraid” and “You Are Mine.” We come regularly to the table of the Eucharist to receive strength for our own journey. But can we allow gratitude to deepen in us to the point of radical trust?

Awoman named Anne stands out in my mind as someone who lives this wisdom extraordinarily well. Anne is a person of remarkable energy, warmth, vision, and purpose. When we met in 2004, she had just opened a center offering support and hospitality for people with cancer and their families. Anne toured me around the mansion that she was

gradually converting into a place of comfort and cheer for people caught up in the relentless chaos of cancer. As we walked, she told me stories of benefactors wooed, labor and materials donated, lives touched. Near the end of my time with her, she shared her own story.

“Sixteen years, nine months, and twelve days ago,” she said, “I was given three to five months to live.” Anne has had not one but five different primary cancers, and she confided with a grin that she was sporting three “ostomy” bags under her brightly tailored jacket. I don’t know about you, but I think I would find just one bag sufficient reason not to leave the house and three bags more than enough excuse not to get out of bed. I most certainly would not go off and start my own nonprofit organization. But Anne said she counts the days because she is so grateful to God for every single one of them and because she is determined to use each of the extra days she’s been given to good purpose. I am sure that Anne

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petitions God every day, but I am equally certain that her petitions are full of gratitude, and if hers can be, surely ours can be as well.

Our nation sets aside one day a year to be grateful—and schedules the biggest shopping day of the year the very next day; what’s that about? But giving thanks should be a daily ritual, not just an annual event. Recalling the blessings of each day is a lovely tradition, equally suitable for bedtime, dinnertime, or even drive time. But when you have a little more time, consider this exercise. Find a pen and a sheet of paper, as well as a few quiet minutes—which I know may be harder to locate—and start writing. Make some lists: people you are thankful for, blessings of health or wealth you enjoy, experiences you’ve had, challenges you’ve surmounted, even simple gifts of the natural world and daily life. Unless you have an infinite amount of time or paper, I’m willing to bet you run out of one or the other before you run out of reasons to be grateful. Post the list where you can see it regularly, or put it aside for a day when you feel particularly grumbly. Manna happens. Remember.

Our imaginations are much more easily captured by what we lack than by what we possess. But if we present our needs to God in petitions full of gratitude, Saint Paul promises us something incredible: “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7).

Now that is something to be grateful for! ■

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