

Good parents try to teach their children to say “thank you” when someone gives them a gift. The results are sometimes comical. You have Mom or Dad asking the child, “What do you say?” and the little one just has a blank look on their face. It’s like you just asked them a question about theoretical physics. They just want to play with their new toy. But that’s the pattern we learn from an early age. Someone does something nice for you. What do you say? Thank you.

If you follow that pattern throughout your life, it will serve you well. Tonight’s gospel is a rather obvious reminder that we ought to thank God for the ways He has blessed us. It’s almost as if the 9 lepers needed someone to ask them, “What do you say?” after their healing. You get your blessing and then you’re supposed to say thank you. That’s the pattern.

But what if you were told to flip the pattern around? To say thank you before the blessing comes? To thank God before He answers your prayer? Does that seem a little different to you? Well, that’s exactly what the apostle Paul urges you to do. He writes:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Are there things in your life that make you anxious? Lift them up to God in prayer and give thanks. That’s Paul’s message. Lift your requests to God, tell him about everything that’s troubling you, and give thanks at the same time. Give thanks before you lift up your concerns. Give thanks while you lift up your concerns. Give thanks after you lift up your concerns. And then what?

Then “the peace that transcends all understanding will guard your heart and minds in Christ Jesus.” The peace that goes beyond understanding is a gift that comes in the middle of our need. It doesn’t remove every care and solve every problem; rather, it guards your heart and mind in Christ; It keeps you pointed at and plugged into Jesus, so that your problems do not overwhelm you.

That is not the pattern we are used to, is it? You might want to see results before you say thank you. But you see, Paul wants us to learn to thank God just for who He is. He wants you and me to thank God just for being the Giver, no matter what gift He decides to give us. And the candid truth is, we resist that.

Christian author Henri Nouwen put a human face on our resistance when he described an elderly woman brought to a psychiatric center. He writes: “She was wild, swinging at everything in sight, and frightening everyone so much that the doctors had to take everything away from her. But there was one small coin which she gripped in her fist and would not give up. In fact, it took two people to pry open that clenched hand. It was as though she would lose her very self along with the coin. If they deprived her of that last possession, she would have nothing more and be nothing more. That was her fear.”

Giving thanks before we get our blessing loosens the grip of our clenched fist, so that we might let go of ourselves and receive the fullness of Christ.

So I need to ask, is there anything in your fist tonight?

Is your clenched fist clinging to guilt over a long ago sin? As you give thanks to God, you are reminded of the awesome magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Your sin pales in comparison to his self-giving love. Let your coin of guilt fall at the foot of Jesus' cross, and see which is bigger.

Is your clenched fist clinging to bitterness because you have been wronged by someone? There is no undeserved suffering that Jesus cannot identify with. In my suffering, I may get a glimpse of the cross of Jesus. For that, if nothing else, I can give thanks. Let your coin of bitterness fall at the foot of Jesus' cross—the cross that makes forgiveness possible.

Is your clenched fist clinging to possessions or people or the desire for future security? Anxiety about the possibility of losing someone or something leads us to cling even more tightly—but that makes things worse, not better. The more we give thanks for God's faithfulness in the past, the more we come to trust in God's future faithfulness. By reflecting on God's past guidance and help, you may be able to drop your coin of worry at the foot of the cross, where real and lasting security was purchased for you.

And if there is something going on that is preventing you from giving any type of thanks to God, then lift your clenched fists to Him and ask Him to pry them open for you.

When you consider that the Son of God willing went to the cross in your place, is there anything more appropriate than thankfulness? When you remember that the same Jesus rose again and ascended into heaven to secure your eternal future, what else is there but overwhelming gratitude? Living in that gratitude and thankfulness makes you who you are meant to be.

It is gratitude that prompted an old man to visit a broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, as he fed them. Many years before, in October, 1942, Captain Eddie was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But there was an unexpected detour which would hurl Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life.

Somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean. For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. The largest raft was nine by five. The biggest shark...ten feet long.

But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Cherry," that was the B-17 pilot, Captain William Cherry, "read the service that afternoon, and we finished

with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off."

Now this is still Captain Eddie talking: "Something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant food...if I could catch it."

And the rest, as they say, is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull, and everyone said the same thing...it was almost like it wanted to be caught. Its flesh was eaten. Parts of it were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice. Captain Eddie lived to tell the tale.

And he never forgot. Because every Friday evening, about sunset...on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast...you could see an old man walking...white-haired, slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp was to feed the gulls while he walked...to remember that one which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle.

On a day long past, Jesus made a lonely, painful walk up the Hill of the Skull, was nailed to a cross beam, and gave himself without a struggle, so that you could live.

What will you do to say thank you?