

Luke 18:9-14 (1984 NIV)
Thanking God the Right Way

Introduction

Do you have something to thank God for today?

I attended the wake service of the late mother of a fellow pastor. In his eulogy, he shared how his beloved mother died that afternoon after a long battle with cancer.

He was having his lunch at the hospital canteen. But he sensed this sudden urgency to be at his mother's bedside. So, he rushed through his lunch and hurried back to the ward.

When he reached his mother's bed, he noticed that she was struggling with her last breath. She stopped breathing altogether and died not long later.

In his eulogy at the wake service, this fellow pastor said, "I have ministered in many death-bed situations, but the passing away of my own mother was still very painful for me. I could have missed being at her bedside when she was breathing her last moments because it was lunch time. So, I want to thank God this evening ... because while it was painful to see my mother passing away, God had granted me the blessing to be by her side when she breathed her last."

Indeed, we can have something to thank God for every day no matter what happens. Giving thanks to God is not always about what He has given into our hands. It is also much about who God is in our heart. Giving thanks in a way that's pleasing to God depends on where our focus is.

Our sermon text today gives us some pointers how to give thanks to God in a way that is right before Him and pleasing to Him.

Let's first capture ...

I. An overview of Luke 18:9-14.

Jesus gave a picture of two men praying in the temple—a Pharisee and a tax collector. In the time of Jesus, it was like a holy man and a cheat praying side by side in the temple.

Both men came to the temple to pray. The Pharisee was clearly, by popular opinion, considered as righteous and would enter the Kingdom of God. On the

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other hand, the second man—the tax collector—who was commonly despised by the Jews for cheating money and working for the hated Romans, would be viewed as a sinner and have no part in the Kingdom of God.

The Pharisee and the tax collector both came to the temple and stood in prayer. The Pharisee stood some distance from the tax collector (v. 13). I would imagine that this Pharisee found a very prominent place, while the tax collector found a place out of the public eye. The Pharisee wanted to be seen and approved by men (Luke 16:15); the tax collector did not, not even daring to look up towards heaven (Luke 18:13).

The words of this Pharisee are not, I believe, the words that he spoke aloud but rather those that he thought silently to himself. Jesus knew the thoughts of men (Luke 5:22; 6:8; 12:16-19) and could thus reveal them. The Pharisee was too shrewd to say aloud what he was thinking silently because his thoughts were not pious enough. He wished to appear to be very pious and righteous outwardly to people.

Jesus revealed what the Pharisee was really thinking even as he appeared to be praying. The Bible tells us here that this Pharisee was “praying about himself” (v. 11)—his focus when praying was himself, not even God!

He was not confessing his own sins, but the sins of the “other men” (v. 11). On the other hand, he was boasting of his own religious works—he would fast twice a week and give a tenth of all he would get (v. 12).

And of course we know who would have done a better prayer. It must be the Pharisee (the holy man), right? No! Jesus was the judge that day as He heard the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector (the one considered sinful by the Jews in those days because of his reputation of cheating people’s money). And Jesus judged the Pharisee as loser and the tax collector as winner.

The one whose work required him to pray more times than any other Jews was the loser in a prayer contest. And the one whose work had often tempted him to cheat and to think more about money than God was declared by Jesus as the winner.

The one thanking God about himself did the wrong thing. But the one telling God about his sin did the right thing.

Let’s move on to examine further ...

II. Why the Pharisee did wrong and the tax collector did right.

The Pharisee did wrong though he gave thanks to God because of these reasons:

- One, he viewed himself as better than others spiritually. The attitude of the Pharisee was one of self-righteousness and contempt for others.

“I am more holy, more blessed, and more able than others. Therefore, I thank God for being better than others and loving me more than others.”

These were the thoughts that preoccupied the Pharisee in his thanksgiving prayer.

- Two, he focused only on outward deeds and not the heart. The standard by which the Pharisee judged righteousness and unrighteousness was external, focusing only on outward deeds rather than on the heart. It is no surprise that this man chose to major on what he thought to be his strengths and to minimize or ignore his sins.

The Pharisee came to the temple. But that’s only an outward show. He came to boast about himself and not to pray to God. He came to think about himself and not to thank God.

What we say with our lips and do with our hands today must match what is in our heart. Giving thanks to God is not about doing or saying something nice for people to see and hear. It is about the thoughts of the heart, and only God Himself can know for sure the inner thoughts of the human heart.

- Three, he thanked God for nothing but thought of himself for everything. The Pharisee thanked God only for who he was according to his own high opinion of himself. There was no mention of God’s graciousness; no acknowledgement of being unworthy before God.

This Pharisee only thanked God for that which he had achieved for himself. He prayed about how good he was and not how great God is.

He was not praying to God. He was actually praising himself, or praying to himself as if he was his own god. This Pharisee was overflowing with self-love but was desperately lacking in love for God and others.

The tax collector was just the opposite. He seemed to have avoided public notice, and his only focus was God.

Let’s consider the following reasons why he did right before God even though he did not thank God in his prayer:

- One, he dared not look up to heaven. He knew he was a sinner and he was genuinely repentant. He did not boast of any righteousness that he

had earned. He only asked that God might grant him grace and mercy. He asked God for mercy and forgiveness of his sins.

- Two, he did not see himself as better than others in comparison. He was neither conscious of the Pharisee nor of any other. He only sensed God's holy presence and his sinful self. In his mind, there was none to compare with him in his sinfulness.
- Three, he did not even dare to make any promise. He knew he could not earn himself any merit before God even with all the good he could do. Unless God forgave him, he could not stand righteous before God no matter how best he would try or how much he would promise.

The examples of the Pharisee and tax collector teach us at least two lessons about doing good works:

- One, even doing good works can be bad if our attitudes and motives are not right. The Pharisee went to the temple to pray and give thanks to God—these were good works. But these became bad because of the pride and self-righteousness of the Pharisee.

Praying is good. But if we pray only to command God to answer whatever we tell Him, then we are making God our servant and not obeying Him as His servant. Praying this way becomes displeasing to God.

Serving God is good. But if we serve only to make a name for ourselves and not to glorify God's name, it becomes displeasing to Him.

Giving thanks is good. However, if we do so to tell people that we are more blessed than them, yet not willing to share our blessings with them, then it is displeasing to God.

- Two, the kind of boasting that's good is to boast of what God can do with us rather than what we can do without God. The more we boast of what we can do, the more proud we become. But the more we boast of what God can do, the more humble we become ... because it is all about the grace of God and not about the good of man.

Conclusion

We may think that we can only give thanks to God if only we have a little more. But that's not true. People whom God has blessed with a little more do not always give thanks to God the right way. Instead of giving thanks to God, they end up talking about themselves. Instead of coming to God in humility and praising Him, they end up coming to Him with pride and praising themselves.

Just because we have received much in our hands does not mean that it is easier for us to give. In fact, it may be even harder. Giving thanks to God is about where our focus is when we do it—is it on what we have in our hands, who we are in people's eyes, or who God is in our heart?

Today we give thanks to God. We want to give thanks to God with the attitude of the tax collector, not that of the Pharisee.

The Pharisee came to pray (a good thing). But he left just as he came—with no sense of need for God and thinking himself as his own god.

The tax collector came to pray too. And he left a different person—forgiven by God who became his personal God.

We do good things not to show that we are good, or to make God love us more, or to make others admire us, or to make our beneficiaries beholden to us. As Christians, we are not saved by doing good but saved to do good in order to show that God is gracious and great, to show our love for God, to share God's love with others, and to show our heartfelt thankfulness to God.

We come to thank God this day.

- Let's thank God for the lessons/experiences that He has blessed us with and share them with others.
- Let's thank God for our abilities/resources and use them to serve Him and others.
- Let's thank God for one another and seek to build up one another.

We give thanks to God this day. We pray that He will accept our thanksgiving because He finds it pleasing to Him. Amen!