

Editorial: Three exercises in gratitude

November 23, 2021

With Thanksgiving this week, here are three exercises for practicing gratitude before, during and after the big meal.

Clarify expectations and entitlements

I can tell you from experience, when we operate from expectation, gratitude is hard to come by. When we begin with what we expect, gratitude is like a fly ball lost in the sun. Expectations, focused on what we don't have, all too easily can blind us to what we already do have.

Obviously, some expectations are reasonable. In fact, if we have no expectations, we also have no standards. The editor of the *Baptist Standard* can't very well advocate against *standards*.

Yes, we have certain expectations, and we should. For example, we should expect Christians to act like Jesus. We should expect leaders to behave honorably and not to have their own interests at the forefront. These are reasonable expectations.

But expectations can morph into entitlements. We get a little running water in the house, and we expect it always to be there—every single time we turn on the tap. The same is true with electricity and internet service

In the 21st century, these are reasonable expectations, too, aren't they? Sure, if so much of the world—without running water or reliable electricity or internet—doesn't count.

Getting clear about the difference between reasonable expectations and

entitlements seems a worthy exercise when we are focused on giving thanks.

Thanksgiving isn't easy in a world that so often fails to meet our expectations. In a fallen world, where many of us expect more than we're ever likely to get in this life, how can we know the difference between reasonable expectations and unreasonable entitlements?

Notice in the examples above: Reasonable expectations call us to our better selves, something available to all of us. Entitlements focus on inequities—what *I* get whether you get anything at all. The first is worth keeping; the second is worth losing.

If we can differentiate between expectations and entitlements, letting go of the latter, we can reduce our disappointments and give our best to more things that really matter. That alone can increase gratitude.

Agree with God

Thanksgiving is a mixed bag. Life rarely is as good as it could be, or as bad as it could be. Giving thanks isn't easy, because we know how things could be. Yet, we give thanks, because we also know how things could be.

Our lives are filled with failed expectations, whether the failure is ours or someone else's. We tend not to be disappointed when life isn't as bad as we expected. We almost always are disappointed when life isn't as good as we expect. How often do we give all our energy to disappointment over not getting as much good as desired, without being grateful we didn't get as much bad as possible?

Health is just one example. We expect to be young and healthy forever, until we aren't. We assume our health system will keep us young and healthy forever, until it can't. Both are understandable and unrealistic. In

this life, there is no “young and healthy forever,” but our desire for such points to something we know intuitively—God intended better than this.

What if we paid more attention to how our lives confirm God’s good intent for creation? How might we discover gratitude, and in what unexpected places might we find it? How many ways can you find this world’s fallenness and brokenness pointing to the good God desires for us?

Consider the alternative

Jane Kenyon’s poem “[Otherwise](#)” is a reminder and a caution about gratitude.

“I got out of bed / on two strong legs,” Kenyon recalls. “It might have been otherwise.”

She goes on to recollect mundane moments of her day, noting each routine but enjoyed moment could have been otherwise, mindful “one day ... it will be otherwise.”

Approaching the second Thanksgiving of the COVID-19 pandemic, I am mindful so much could have been otherwise. Though I wish some things had been, I’m grateful other things weren’t.

The first things to come to my mind are anything but mundane.

I’m grateful those in my family infected with COVID-19 had mild symptoms. For millions, it was otherwise.

I’m grateful the chaos at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 did not spread beyond Washington, D.C. It could have been otherwise.

I’m grateful the physical injury I sustained this year was repairable. As Kenyon reminds us, “one day ... it will be otherwise.”

I'm grateful my father-in-law's cancer was discovered at stage 1. It usually is otherwise with that kind of cancer.

Many of us will eat a Thanksgiving meal with people we couldn't be with last year. For all too many, even without COVID, it will be otherwise.

I'm grateful we have religious freedom, that the imposition of only one religion—and inevitably, only one expression of that one religion—is prohibited. In so many places, it is otherwise.

There's a lot I haven't mentioned in this editorial. It could have been otherwise. You might be thankful.

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