

## Radical Gratitude | Mayo Mathers

What a dying friend taught me about being thankful "in all things."

"You need to visit Marcia," a mutual friend told me. "She's not doing well."

Marcia had moved to a neighboring town a few years earlier, so I no longer saw her as often. When I finally went to her home, Marcia's skeletal appearance shocked me. A once-gregarious bundle of energy, Marcia came to the door in a slow, excruciating shuffle.

"I've been diagnosed with systemic Scleroderma," she said, blinking back tears. "It's a fatal disease where your skin and internal organs harden."

On that first visit we mostly cried. On following visits we talked more, stopping frequently to pray. Marcia wanted to respond to her disease in a way that honored God, but forming effective prayers seemed impossible.

"Do I ask God to help me accept my diagnosis, or do I ask for healing?" Marcia wondered aloud one afternoon. I wondered the same thing. One prayer seemed to indicate a lack of faith, the other a lack of trust.

When held against her bleak future, familiar Bible verses often brought more questions than comfort, such as "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, NASB). Could it truly be God's will for us to give thanks even for Marcia's terminal disease?

Regardless of how illogical the command seemed, Marcia decided to do it, although she added one condition: "God, I've never lied to you before and I'm not going to start now. There's *no* way I can thank you for this life-robbing, painful disease or for the fact I'm not going to see my grandchildren grow up. But I will thank you for the things for which I'm truly grateful."

With that brutally honest prayer, Marcia began experiencing an intimacy with God she'd never known before. And as I spent time meditating on that verse, I realized Marcia's conditional obedience to God's command wasn't presumptuous at all. The verse says *in* everything give thanks, not *for* everything. There's a big difference in those two little words. God would never expect our gratitude toward things he finds repugnant or evil. However, as our Creator, he knows an overall attitude of thankfulness frees us from the grip of fear, worry, or hopelessness.

### From Doubt and Fear

Hebrews 13:15 says, "Let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God" (NASB). Setting aside our deepest emotions and speaking words of praise and trust—especially when we have doubts about what God allows in our life—are sacrificial.

My son has chosen to walk counter to God's call on his life. Despite this excruciating heartbreak, I anticipate the day when he recommits himself fully to God. However, I occasionally succumb

to dark times of disillusionment and doubt. The only way I can dispel them is by sacrificing my urge to mourn what isn't and embrace what is: My son is not serving God; God is trustworthy in all things.

Speaking words of trust takes an act of sheer will. But the reason God wants me to praise him is because he knows the pattern this forms in me. If I'm praising, I'm not doubting ... if I'm not doubting, I'm trusting ... when I'm trusting, I'm praising ... when I'm praising, I'm not doubting—and so on. A continual attitude of praise protects me against debilitating doubt.

### **Attitude Readjustments**

Several years ago my husband, Steve, made a career decision that affected us both without discussing it with me beforehand. My immediate desire was to lash out at him, but I managed, barely, to hold my tongue. Yet inwardly I burned with resentment and anger.

"Lord," I pleaded one morning, "take these feelings away. I don't want to wound Steve with my words, but I need relief from these emotions." In the midst of my prayer, God reminded me to "give thanks in everything."

The thought of being thankful at that moment was galling. It was the *last* thing I wanted to do. But as I begrudgingly thanked my way around the circumstances of Steve's decision, my resentment slowly receded, and I became overwhelmed by a renewed confidence in God. The devastating comments I longed to hurl at Steve dissipated to the point where I could view his decision objectively!

Until this incident, I'd thought any time I held my tongue I deserved big pats on the back from God. Now I realized holding my tongue wasn't enough. Destructive emotions still swirled inside me, affecting my attitude. Only by forcing myself to speak words of thankfulness did I find relief from the deep wound Steve's decision had inflicted. Thankfulness changed my perspective so I could discuss our situation rationally and constructively.

### **Enjoying the Results**

The last part of Hebrews 13:15 talks about "the fruit of lips that give thanks to [God's] name." God knows precisely the extent of the sacrifice involved in setting aside our natural inclinations, and he's quick to make it worth our while.

Marcia is incredible evidence of this. She began pursuing an attitude of thankfulness while I was out of town for several weeks. When I visited her on my return, I couldn't believe the difference. Physically Marcia hadn't changed—still emaciated, the hardened skin on her hands stretched so tightly it pulled her fingers in toward her palms. She was on heavy doses of pain medication and rarely got out of bed. Emotionally, however, she was a woman transformed.

"What's happened?" I asked, scarcely believing the sparkle in her eyes.

"I've been thanking God!" she explained. "I began with little things: the blue sky outside my window, the roof over my head, my wonderful husband." Every day she persevered in this task regardless of how much pain she was in.

"It's the most astonishing thing," she said. "The more I praise God, the more aware of his presence I become. In fact," she continued, "one morning as I was thinking of things I was thankful for, without even realizing it I heard myself say, 'God, thank you for this disease that's brought me so much closer to you!'"

I could only stare in astonishment. In her determination to be thankful, regardless of how illogical it seemed, Marcia had loosened the chokehold of this disease's terror. Marcia had switched her focus from her helplessness to God's holiness.

Seven years since receiving her "death sentence" Marcia's doctors marvel. She's again teaching Sunday school, playing with her grandchildren, and pursuing her passion for cooking. Her fingers remain stiff and curled inward, but the relentless progress of her disease has not only stopped but has greatly reversed itself. No wonder God tells us to cultivate thankfulness! It moves us over to God's side, where *nothing* is impossible.

And my son? He married a beautiful young woman whose background was far different from his. They went to church with us one Sunday and her reaction was critical. With each criticism she uttered, Tyler defended our church. Steve and I tried not to laugh. Only God could put Tyler in a position that would cause him to defend what he, himself, had become so critical of! Not long afterwards, Lorena became a believer, and together, they're growing. Such remarkable results have made me an avid believer in this illogical command that wields such power.

Although these two circumstances turned out well, sometimes things don't. So even when circumstances don't change, our heart attitudes can. And I will continue, *in everything*, to give thanks.