

Three Disciplines of Faithfulness

Psalm 105:1-11

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O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, / make known his deeds among the peoples. Ps. 105:1

Clarity often evades us in Christianity. The apostle Paul may have said it best when he remarked, to the Corinthians, that “now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:13) and that “we walk by faith, not sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). A lack of clarity is so much a part of Christian experience that one recent theologian has said, “Trying to make things clear is often a mistake in theology.”¹

Nevertheless, there are instances of clarity. The first verse of Psalm 105 stands out as one of these. I would mark it as one of the clearest sentences in the Bible. When the question is, “What is a person of faith supposed to do?”, the answer of the 105th psalmist is “[G]ive thanks to the Lord, call on his name, / make know his deeds among the peoples.” In this single verse we have three clear disciplines of faithful living: the discipline of gratitude, the discipline of prayer, and the discipline of witness.

The Discipline of Gratitude

There is the discipline of gratitude. “O give thanks to the Lord”

A man in his 80s wrote a book, a kind of spiritual autobiography. Near the end, he included a chapter on gratitude, which he opened with the observation, “I have never met a grateful person who was an unhappy person. And, for that matter, I have never met a grateful person

who was a bad person.”² Gratitude thus seems to be his key to a life both happy and good.

He goes on, in his chapter on gratitude, to name several of the gifts and graces that make him thankful. His list may match yours or your lists may be altogether different. He begins by naming the gifts of the day and includes several splendid, sometimes hardly noticed, things: the dew of the morning, the drop of rain, the blade of grass, the memory of a pleasant past, the hug of a laughing child, and so on.³ All the many moments of the day are rich with opportunities for thanksgiving.

After naming the gifts of the day, this 80-plus-year-old author lifts up for thanksgiving the person he has become in spite of what he was. This isn't arrogance. It is amazement. In his 80s, he is an old man with a weight problem, but he used to be a scrawny kid self-conscious because he was so thin. And he is grateful for what he has become. As a youth, he used to think pretty girls wouldn't have anything to do with him, now, he says, he has “a wife so lovely I often stand and stare.”⁴ He is grateful for what has become of his life.

Supremely, he is grateful for Christ and the message of the gospel. He remembers with gratitude that Jesus died to do whatever it took to let God's love flow into him, redeeming him, assuring him of value beyond all measure.⁵

“O give thanks to the Lord” John Calvin said, “nothing is more preposterous than to enjoy the remarkable gifts” of God and then “to overlook the Author who gives them.”⁶ There are reasons aplenty each day to give God thanks. The first clear discipline of faithfulness is gratitude.

The Discipline of Prayer

There is the discipline of prayer. "O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name" To call upon the name of God is to pray.

One definition of prayer comes from the old *Evangelical Catechism*, the teaching tool of one of the parent denominations of the United Church of Christ, the German Evangelical Synod of North America. The *Evangelical Catechism* answers the question of prayer saying it is conversation of the heart with God for the purpose of praising [God], asking [God] to supply the needs of ourselves and others, and thanking [God] for whatever [God] gives us.⁷

Writer Anne Lamott does not define prayer quite so much as she shares the content of most of her prayers, especially the ones she prayed at one point in her life. Her prayers then amounted to "help me, help me, help me" and "please, please, please."⁸

Both these attitudes, the one by our German grandparents and the one by the contemporary writer, concentrate on the idea that prayer is asking. Prayer is fundamentally an asking but it is more than an asking; the act of asking is also a confession of faith. Asking God for something, however large or small, is acting on the dual belief that God can give it and that God cares about you enough to give it.

To pray, to call upon the name of God, is also to live our lives in concert with God. Some time back we had a Confirmand who ended his Confirmation class prayers each week asking God to bless the poor children of Guatemala. Sometimes we think our prayers, to be approved of by God, have to stretch around the globe and go everywhere but home. Not so.

Aiden W. Tozer once preached a sermon in which he asked the congregation, "Do you know who I pray for the most in my ministry?" The congregation moved to the edge of their seats because they wanted to hear who this man prayed for. He was an evangelical mystic known for the quality of his spiritual life, and people, I'm sure, wanted to know who he prayed for the most. The answer? Himself! He gave himself the most trouble, he said, and needed the most prayer.⁹ Perhaps that is why our Evangelical ancestors put ourselves first in their definition of prayer as asking God "to supply the needs of ourselves and others."

Call upon the name of God. The second clear discipline of faithful living is prayer, especially prayer asking for God's help.

The Discipline of Witness

There is the discipline of witness. "O give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, / make known his deeds among the peoples."

I heard the discipline of witness practiced the other day. An older gentleman from Lena's apartment building came to the public portion of Lena's doctoral dissertation defense. Science is something of a hobby of his and he enjoyed visiting with Lena's research group as we waited for the faculty to be finished with her. He and the group members talked some sophisticated science about particle physics and such. Lena's neighbor did not know that at least one of the team members is a person of faith. And he wasn't trying to proselytize. But at one point he simply said, "I admit I'm a believer in God, and this is what makes me a believer." He was witnessing, unashamedly, to the wonder of the Creator.

To speak of God this way, to make a Christian witness in our casual conversations, is one of the hardest things for us to do. We've got the gratitude part down; that's simple.

We've got the prayer part down; that's easy. But this witnessing business! That gives us the willies, if not the creeps!

But let's start where we can with this discipline, not where we cannot. Psalm 105 goes on from the first verse to be a near "Cliff Notes" version of the Old Testament. It is a kind of epic poem that tells and tells of the deeds of God all through time.

Well, we are not going to do that, at least not right away. We are not going to all of a sudden quit being Marcel Marceaus and become Billy Grahams.

But we can start where we are and do what we can. Where we are is in the sanctuary. We can make a better witness here. A pastor went home from the Easter services highly discouraged one year. The attendance was good, the service was fine, the lilies were beautiful. What troubled him was that, in looking out upon the congregation from his place in the chancel during the hymns, he saw many stone-faced parishioners, mostly men, not singing. This was the highest and holiest day of the year, and there were parishioners too unmoved to sing. Everyone here can do better, beginning with the next hymn. If we cannot as yet practice the discipline of witness outside, let's at least practice it in here. Let your worship be energetic, not stone-faced. That's a witness, and it's one of the disciplines of faithful living.

Ralph Waldo Emerson somewhere said, "Life consists in what a person is thinking about all day."¹⁰ Why not think about and have life consist in this? "O give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, / make known his deeds among the peoples." Let your life consist of the disciplines of gratitude, prayer, and witness, and you shall be known as a faithful person true to God.

¹ William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 31-32.

² Lewis B. Smedes, *My God and I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 167.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169-170.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.v.6, tr. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

⁷ *Evangelical Catechism* (St. Louis: Eden, 1957), p. 62.

⁸ Anne Lamott, *Plan B* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), p. 36.

⁹ A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?*, comp. and ed. by Gerald B. Smith (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1985), p. 78.

¹⁰ Quoted in Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other* (New York: Putnam, 1996), p. 267.