

How important is it to pray before meals?

September 10, 2023 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

One of the things that I love about Qs from the pews is the wide variety of topics that we get to talk about in a short period of time. We've talked about some very complicated issues, we've had some really deep theological discussions and we've addressed some really practical questions.

This morning's question – our final Q from the pew for this year – is one of those last ones, a practical one:

How important is it to pray before meals?

I'm sure we've all had those awkward experiences where we're out in public and we feel like somebody should pray and everybody goes 'not it.' Or you are starving hungry and you take a bite as soon as you sit down and then you think – 'oh, I should say grace.' What's going on there? What's happening when we 'say grace' or give thanks' or 'say the blessing.' 'Rub-a-dub-dub-thanks for the grub.'

Does it matter? How important is it to pray before meals?

I think that the really easy answer is this:

If a friend invites you over for dinner and you enjoy a meal and fellowship at their table, what do you say as you go out the door? Thank you. Thank you for having us over. Thank you for feeding us and sharing what you have with us.

That's the same as praying before meals. When God gives good gifts, it's good to give thanks. It's good to stop and say 'God, thank You for this meal.'

Now, in a sense, we could stop and leave it right there because that's the answer. How important is it to pray before meals? It's very important because when God gives good gifts it's good to give thanks.

But if we take this question a little further and see what Scripture says, it shows us that saying grace isn't just about saying thanks, it's about we think about our possessions and how we practice our faith in everyday life too.

So let me give you through three points – short and sweet – praying before meals is important because it expresses dependence, gratitude and faith. Praying before meals is important because it expresses dependence, gratitude and faith.

Let's unpack those one at a time.

So first, praying before meals is important because it expresses dependence.

A few weeks ago, in our Bible reading plan, we read psalm 24, which is the psalm that used to be painted right here on the wall. 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof/the earth is the LORD's and everything in it.' 'The world, and all who live in it' (Psalm 24:1 NIV).

Our forefathers kept that front and centre by putting it at the front of the church, but that's not an attitude with much traction today, is it? 'Ok, the earth may be the LORD's but everything that I have is MINE. I've worked hard for it; I've earned it. The LORD can have the earth but my food and my house and my car, those are mine.'

God's Word says that's just not true. 'The earth is the LORD's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.'

We as human beings are like those seagulls in 'Finding Nemo' who keep saying 'mine, mine, mine.' We have this habit of saying 'this is mine, it belongs to me, it's all mine because of my hard work and ingenuity – and it's true, we DO work hard and we are ingenious people – but who gives us the energy to work and the minds to think? Who gives us the breath of life to get us going every day? All that we have comes from the LORD. We depend on Him for everything.

And our generation is not the first generation to lose sight of that – the first generation out of slavery in Egypt thought the very same way!

Deuteronomy 8:11 says:

11 Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day.

12 Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down,

13 and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied,

14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery...

17 You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."

18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today (Deu 8:11-18 NIV).

When we stop and pray before meals, we are remembering that it is the LORD our God who has given us the ability to produce wealth to buy food, we are remembering that it is the LORD our God who is providing for us. In fact, the verse immediately before this, verse 10, ties it directly to food.

10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land [and the good food that] He has given you.

When we pray before meals, we express our dependence on the LORD, acknowledging that all we have comes from Him.

In a sense, you can think of it this way: every Sunday, what do we pray? 'Give us this day our daily bread.' The implication there is 'God, we depend on you for everything' but that's only half the equation. We need to give thanks for that daily bread that He has provided. When we pray before meals - 'Thank You God for this daily bread' - we close the circuit and say 'We depend on You because You are dependable.'

When we pray before we eat, we express our dependency on the Lord.

So it's important to pray before we eat to express our dependency on the Lord; it's also important to pray before meals because it expresses gratitude to the Lord.

Now I think that most of you probably get that implicitly but let me show you where I'm coming from.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus went to a lot of dinners<sup>1</sup> – the wedding at Cana, various dinners with the Pharisees, with Mary and Martha, with Zacchaeus – but there are a handful of occasions where Jesus Himself was the host of the meal. And the Gospels show us how Jesus began those meals – He gave thanks. Let me read them to you; you'll see a pattern.

The feeding of the five thousand: 19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. (Mat 14:19 NIV).

The feeding of the four thousand: 36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. (Mat 15:36 NIV).

The Last supper: 26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

27 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. (Mat 26:26-27 NIV).

On the Emmaus road post-resurrection: 30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight (Luke 24:30-31 NIV). It was the act of giving thanks that tipped them off to the reality that this was Jesus in front of them.

Jesus Himself gave thanks for every bite of food He shared with others. He wasn't showing off by turning five loaves and two fishes into a meal for thousands; He wasn't trying to acquire fame for Himself. He was pointing the people heavenward and saying 'all that I have is from Him.' He was saying thank you.

It's important for us to pray before meals to give thanks. This is really the heart and soul of this question. We pray before meals to give thanks.

So we pray to say 'Lord, we depend on You.' We pray to say 'Lord, thank You.' And we pray to say 'We have faith in You.' When we pray before meals, we express our faith.

Now, this may not seem immediately obvious but let me explain.

If you're like me, when you're out in the world, cutting the grass, doing your job, shopping for groceries, changing your tires, you're probably not 100% conscious of your faith in God. It's there; you believe but it's probably not front and centre in your conscious mind. Oh that it would more often be but let's be honest, we can only focus on so much at a time.

When we sit down to eat, I assume three times a day, we have three opportunities to fix our minds on God and act on our faith, to express our conviction that God is great and God is good and God has provided the food that is before us.

I hope that you have many opportunities to express your faith throughout the day and to act on the belief that God is good, but at the very least, you have breakfast, lunch and dinner to say 'God I believe in You and I depend on You and I am thankful.'

It is important to pray before meals because it allows us to express our dependence on the Lord, our gratitude towards Him and our faith in Him.

What does that mean for how we pray?

I'm sure we're familiar with many formal prayers:

For food in a world where many walk in hunger;  
for faith in a world where many walk in fear;  
for friends in a world where many walk alone,  
we give you thanks, O Lord. – I like the gratitude piece in that.

Bless us, Oh Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty,  
through Christ, Our Lord. Amen. – Again, the gratitude piece is there and the receiving part implies dependence.

Be present at our table, Lord, Be here and ev'ry where adored, These mercies bless, and grant that we  
May feast in Paradise with Thee. Heavy on the faith part.

Johnny Appleseed, Mr T?

Bless this food to our use and give us thankful hearts.

What's important here is the heart behind it.

There is nothing magical here about 'saying the blessing.' You are not transforming bad cooking into a delicious meal by saying grace. What is absolutely vital though is that these prayers are flowing out of a true and real conviction of faith. It is so possible to rattle off these prayers and not actually think about these words, but that is not what they should be.

I remember being in France and feeling like I was just rushing through prayers without really meaning what I was saying. I had to force myself to slow down and say, truly, 'thank you Lord for all you provide.'

At our house, we combine the two. I'll often pray one of those more formal prayers, because they do express truths I want to say, but I'll also take a minute to pray for things that are going on in the world or in our house at that moment.

It's like buying a card for someone and then writing something in it. The words on the card are heartfelt and good and truly from you, but you want to put your own personal touch into it, even if it's signing your name and saying 'we care about you.'

Do that same with your prayer before meals. Let the Lord know you depend on Him and give thanks to Him as an expression of faith.

Let me just quick wrap up with a couple other observations.

1. If you're out in public, don't be afraid to pray. It doesn't matter if the people around you don't know God, you do and you can give Him thanks. You don't need to make a big show of praying. Just bow your head, give thanks, and enjoy what God has provided.

2. If you're somewhere, having a meal with people who don't pray, don't worry about it. Pray in your heart. Don't force your prayer onto others. I think it's interesting to see that while Jesus went to many meals, the only times that the Gospels record Him praying are when He was the host. So if someone comes to eat with you, you pray because you know that God has provided. If you're with someone else who doesn't know that and wouldn't think to pray, no need to force it on them. Give thanks in your heart and enjoy the opportunity to spend time with that person.

When God gives good gifts it's good to give thanks.

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<sup>i</sup> "In Luke and Matthew, it is only all too obvious that Jesus ate after his Temptation in the Desert (Luke 4:1–13) and (Matthew 4:1–11).

In John 2, Jesus is at the Wedding Feast at Cana (2:1-11).

In Luke 5, Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners at the home of Levi (5:29-32).

In Luke 7, Jesus is anointed by a woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee during a meal (7:36-50).

In Luke 9, Jesus feeds the five thousand (9:10-36).

In Matthew 14, Jesus feeds 5000 with two barley loaves and two fish. (Mt 14:13-21).

In Luke 10, Jesus eats in the home of Mary and Martha (10:25-42).

In Luke 14, Jesus shares about the parable of the large banquet in which He urges people to invite the poor rather than their friends (14:7-24).

In Luke 19, it is implied that Jesus ate with Zacchaeus and his household (19:1-10).

In Luke 22, we read the account of the Last Supper (22:14-23).

In Luke 24, states that Jesus stayed and had supper with the two disciples after the encounter on the road to Emmaus (24: 13-35).

In Luke 24, there is a second occurrence of Jesus eating after his resurrection. This time with his disciples in Jerusalem (14:35-48).

In John 21, Jesus ate fish with his disciples after his resurrection and the miraculous catch of 153 fish (21:1-14)."

<https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/69583/how-many-times-is-it-recorded-in-scripture-instances-where-jesus-ate-a-meal>