

Bless us O Lord, and these thy gifts,
which we are about to receive from thy bounty,
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Many of you are familiar with this prayer. It's the traditional Catholic blessing (or grace) before meals. We said it in my family before every lunch or dinner when my Dad wasn't there and Mom led the prayer (my father was Presbyterian and had his own blessing).

Today I want to talk about this blessing in the context of our first reading and gospel. A major theme of both scripture passages is our gratitude toward God for blessings received. Naaman the Syrian, after being cleansed from his leprosy, returns to the Prophet Elisha to give thanks to God. And in our Gospel the Samaritan, a foreigner, returns to thank Jesus for healing him. The other nine are too caught up in their good fortune and forget it was Jesus who gave them this great gift. We all too often do the same thing and thereby miss our chance to grow in faith and love of God.

God blesses us in many ways, all the time. But today I want to focus on just one little way we can grow in gratitude and a sense of prayer. I want to concentrate upon what happens at our meals.

Do we pray a blessing and thanksgiving before receiving the food we eat? For some of us there are no blessings before meals because there are no meals – at least no shared meals. There are many situations and circumstances that complicate life. But if there are few, or no, meals each week when you eat together as a couple or family, then this is a real problem, because family members can become functional strangers, people who see each other and interact, but on a surface level. They don't really know one another's hearts.

If there are no common meals together, then please look at that. What would have to change to make this possible? It would be worth it to make those changes, even if they are real sacrifices, because family is more important than sports, homework, extracurricular activities, screen entertainment – or even jobs (in the long run). That was a

digression, but – no family meals mean missing a great chance to grow in God.

But maybe there are meals in common in your family – but there is no grace before them. Why not begin today? Use the prayer I began with today or make up your own. That would be a great way to change the dynamics of your family. A family is not self-sufficient. Each marriage and family need God to be fully what it could be. A blessing before receiving one's food at least formally recognizes that fact.

But maybe there is grace -- maybe it's the one I began this homily with. But is it said so quickly and has it become so formal that it doesn't mean much? (Guilty!) Do we even think about what we're saying?

I ask all these questions because I want to suggest that a blessing before meals can be a great opportunity for increasing one's faith if it's done right. It's not just a of parroting words.

Notice that in both our scripture passages Naaman and the Samaritan leave their experience not only with a healed body, but with

a greater relationship with God precisely because they are grateful and take the time to thank Him. Naaman will worship the true God of the Israelites. And the Samaritan is given Jesus' blessing after he cries out in praise and worship at Jesus' feet.

What are the opportunities here? In praying a blessing before meals, maybe you could combine both the traditional Catholic blessing (or a similar one) AND an informal element that allows for the day's blessings to be brought forward. A family could begin by waiting for each member to contribute something worthy of their gratitude that day. It can be a very small thing – a playdate, sunny weather, a good test result. But don't let the kids say the same thing every meal. Then, when everyone's had a chance to add a prayer, sum them up by all praying the formal prayer together.

Gratitude is a powerful way of seeing God in our lives. This kind of family grace before meals allows all the members of a family to think

of, and hear, how God has loved them that day. We are reminded that God is working in our lives.

Maybe your family feels awkward praying together. If so, this is an easy way to start, not only to thank God for all He gives, but to grow comfortable with thinking and speaking your own prayers. That sounds funny to some, maybe, but I know for others it's awkward to do. This is a way to start. Kids often look for a way and place to pray out loud. This becomes a school for learning family members' prayers and souls.

Some people think keeping the formal Blessing before meals as part of grace too easily leads to mechanical and meaningless prayer. It can, but I believe that it helps to have a part of the praying we can all pray together, as a unit, as a family, in chorus.

Finally, what about when you go out to eat? My three siblings and I have made a commitment to go out to lunch at a restaurant every Tuesday. That's now my family meal. Before we begin eating, we pray grace. If your family is eating together at a restaurant, why not begin

with grace – including the sign of the cross? It is a way to evangelize without getting up on a soapbox. If it feels a little weird at first, that's OK. It's not a bad thing to be Catholic in public.

Talk with your family. See if this is something that would help you. Gratitude brings joy, peace, and an appreciation for the ways God really does work in our lives and families even in tough times. If you are a family with kids, or a couple without children, or a single adult eating by yourself – ask God's blessing on the meal and day, and you will find God among you at your table, and the rest of the day as well.