

Messages of
GRATITUDE
**for Advent and
Christmas 2021**

3-MINUTE DEVOTIONS

MICHAEL WHITE and TOM CORCORAN

Introduction

The Advent and Christmas seasons come with many special traditions. For both of us, watching holiday movies and TV specials ranks high on the list. While we disagree on almost everything else, we do agree on the must-watch status of three classics in particular: *A Christmas Carol* starring Alastair Sim, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and our personal favorite, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Many of you know the story of *It's a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey learns to see how wonderful his life has been by observing what would have become of his friends and family if he had never been born. That difference in perspective changes everything for him. He comes to see his family, his work, and his place in the community as gifts instead of burdens and disappointments. As a result of his change in perspective, he embraces the virtue of gratitude. Clarence, his guardian angel, underlines the value of this attitude when he tells George, "You have been given a great gift."

The word gratitude comes from the Latin word *gratia*, which means grace. Grace is a gift. It is something we receive and not something we can earn. Everything we have is a gift from God, and it is important to stay focused on that. In fact, it can be critically important. There are numerous studies which show that there's no behavior more effective at increasing your happiness and well-being than cultivating and practicing gratitude. In

one study, psychologists from the University of California asked a group of participants to keep a simple daily journal. One group was told to write about things they were grateful for, and the other to record their daily disappointment and irritations. After ten weeks, members of both groups were evaluated. Not surprisingly, the group focused on gratitude fared far better by every measurable standard: emotional health, physical health, productivity, and quality of relationships.

Centuries before psychology identified the connection between gratitude and happiness, God's word taught this universal and eternal truth. Psalm 28:7 says, "The LORD is my strength and my shield, in whom my heart trusts. I am helped, so my heart rejoices; with my song I praise him."

Psychology *and* scripture affirm the power of gratitude to bring joy and happiness into our hearts and our homes. Our own experience does too. When we forget to practice gratitude, we can easily lose our perspective on the many gifts God has given us; our vision becomes clouded when it comes to our blessings. That's why we have to bring this matter to prayer.

In this sacred season, when we await the joy of celebrating the coming of the Lord, we present to you this seasonal booklet focused on prayerful gratitude. We hope that it will help you to practice this crucial virtue each day of Advent and through the twelve days of Christmas. As you spend just a few minutes in reflection and prayer each day, may your

heart and mind be made ready to receive the many gifts of Christmas, especially the gift of God's only beloved Son who comes to live among us.

*Fr. Michael and Tom
Church of the Nativity, Timonium, Maryland*

FIRST WEEK
OF ADVENT

Sunday, November 28

The holiday season is here, as we have exactly one month to get ready for Christmas! Over the next month, we will be incredibly busy with parties; buying, wrapping, and sharing gifts; decorating our houses; watching holiday specials; and creating memories for our families. There are so many blessings and good things happening at this time of year that they can start to feel like a burden instead of a blessing at times.

To help you stay focused on the blessings and appreciate your life more fully, we offer this small book of daily spiritual messages. We hope that these three-minute devotions will help you grow a spirit of gratitude and thankfulness. When we lose our sense of gratitude, we lose our joy, our happiness, and our sense of well-being. Ingratitude is incompatible with happiness and hinders our path to knowing and loving God.

.....

Pray today that, as you make your many preparations for Christmas, you will grow in gratitude for all the gifts God has given you, especially the gift of his Son.

Monday, November 29

And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.

—Revelation 1:5

Gratitude begins with recognizing the blessings in our life. Our greatest blessing is Jesus Christ. In the book of Revelation, John reminds us of the blessings and gifts we have in Jesus. He is the faithful witness of God's love. His death on the Cross reminds us that when we turned our back on God, God did not turn his back on us. He remained faithful and sent his Son.

Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. He rose from the dead but is only the first. We, too, will rise when connected to him. We can be grateful that, in Christ, we can conquer death. Jesus loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. In Christ, we not only have life after death but also have freedom to live now as God's sons and daughters.

.....

Read the verse from Revelation again. Thank Jesus for the many gifts that come from a relationship with him.

Tuesday, November 30

Therefore, we who are receiving the unshakable kingdom should have gratitude, with which we should offer worship pleasing to God in reverence and awe.

—Hebrews 12:28

The kingdom of God lasts forever. It is a kingdom that cannot be shaken or taken away from us. The kingdom of this world will pass away, but God's kingdom lasts forever.

In Jesus, we receive the kingdom of God and all his blessings. While the gifts we have in this world are passing and we will one day lose them all, the riches of God's kingdom cannot be taken away from us.

.....

Thank God today for the blessings you have in Jesus Christ. Thank God that you cannot lose them.

Wednesday, December 1

As he was entering a village, ten lepers met [him]. They stood at a distance from him and raised their voice, saying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!" And when he saw them, he said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." As they were going they were cleansed.

—Luke 17:12–14

Luke tells us that Jesus is going on a journey. He enters a village and is met by ten lepers. Lepers had to live on the outskirts of town away from society. When anyone came near them, they were supposed to yell out, "Unclean, unclean" so that people would know to stay away. Instead, these lepers beg Jesus for mercy, and Jesus tells them to go to the priests. As they obey Jesus, following his instruction, they are healed.

Like the lepers in this story, we need Jesus' mercy. Like the lepers, we need Jesus to cleanse us and make us whole. The more we are aware of our need for Jesus and realize our need for his mercy, the more likely it is that we will be able to recognize his blessings.

.....

Pray today with the lepers, "Jesus, Master, have pity on me." Say that five to ten times. Then, pray it throughout the day.

Thursday, December 2

And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan.

—Luke 17:15–16

Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one of the ten sees that he has been cleansed. Rather than just going on with his life, the man stops and turns back. He praises God and then falls at Jesus' feet as a way to express his gratitude.

The first step of gratitude requires that we see our blessings. The second step is to do what the leper did—turn back or turn our attention to the benefactor or giver of the gift. The third step is to express our gratitude. We can express gratitude to God by simply saying thank you, praising him in song, or falling on our knees in worship as the leper did.

.....

Take a moment to reflect on the last twenty-four hours. Recognize the gifts you have received. Turn your attention to God and thank him for them.

Friday, December 3

Jesus said in reply, "Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?" Then he said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."

—Luke 17:17–19

Jesus cleansed all ten lepers, but only one came back to him. The Samaritan leper was the only one who came back to Jesus, and because he returned, he received more than the others. The other nine received only physical healing, but the Samaritan leper also received salvation. He entered into a relationship with Jesus.

When we return to God and thank him for his gifts, God can do more for us. God gives us gifts to meet our specific needs. He loves to meet our needs, but ultimately God gives us gifts so that we can grow deeper in our relationship with him.

.....

Turn your attention to God and thank him for the gifts you have received from him. Listen to Jesus say, "Rise and go your way, your faith has saved you."

Saturday, December 4

Psalm 103:1–10

O bless the Lord; my soul!

O bless the LORD; my soul; all my being bless his
holy name!

Bless the LORD, my soul; and do not forget all his
gifts,

Who pardons all your sins, and heals all your ills.

O bless the Lord; my soul!

Who redeems your life from the pit, and crowns
with you mercy and compassion,

Who fills your days with good things, so your youth
is renewed like the eagle's.

O bless the Lord; my soul!

The LORD does righteous deed, brings justice to all
the oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses, to the Israelites
his deeds.

O bless the Lord; my soul!

Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger,
abounding in mercy.

He will not accuse, and nurses no lasting anger;

He has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor
requited us as our wrongs deserve.

O bless the Lord; my soul!

Sunday, December 5

As we get ready for Christmas during this second week of Advent, we are working on growing in gratitude and appreciating the life God has given us. While ingratitude is incompatible with happiness, grateful people are happy people. Since all of us are on a happiness quest, it makes sense to grow in gratitude.

First, we need to see the blessings and gifts given to us. If we don't see them, then it is impossible to be grateful. Second, we need to turn our attention toward the giver of the gifts. Ultimately, God is the giver of all our blessings. So, to express gratitude, we must turn toward the source of our blessings and give God attention. In all of God's gifts, he wants to build a relationship with us.

Last, we need to express our gratitude. We need to do something in response to the gifts we are given and are grateful to have received. But sometimes this is hard to do. This week, we will be examining obstacles that get in our way of seeing God's blessings and responding to them in gratitude and action.

.....

Ask God today to help you see what gets in the way of recognizing his blessings and gifts. Pray for the grace to overcome these obstacles.

SECOND WEEK
OF ADVENT

Monday, December 6

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

—Luke 21:25–26

Jesus speaks of a time when “people will die of fright.” This is hyperbole. We would say it this way: “I was scared to death” or “He was scared to death.” Jesus warns that people will be scared to death when the Temple is destroyed. The foundations of their faith will be shaken because the Temple was the foundation of their faith. It would be a disaster so large that people would be terrified.

We can lose sight of God’s blessings when we are facing big problems or going through major changes. We can focus all of our attention on those hardships, and they can come to dominate our thoughts and weigh down our hearts.

.....

What major problems or change are you facing now or fear will happen in the future? Confess it to God. Acknowledge it. Ask God for the grace to see beyond the problem and to trust in his mercy and grace.

Tuesday, December 7

And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.

—Luke 21:27–28

Jesus describes a time of tribulation when the Temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed. Most people will be terrified, but Jesus says that his followers can have the opposite reaction. They are to stand firm and look toward him because their redemption is coming.

When big problems and major changes hit us, we don't have to be scared. We can instead be grateful and focus our attention on Jesus, who is the Son of Man. The name "Son of Man" communicates both Jesus' humanity and divinity. It means that Jesus knows firsthand our pain and struggles and also has the power to do something about them. Faith is thanking God in advance for working out all things for our good, despite and often through our biggest challenges.

.....

Thank God today that whatever major problems or issues you are facing; he is using them for your good.

Wednesday, December 8
Solemnity of
the Immaculate Conception

Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise.

—Luke 21:34

Big problems can block us from seeing God's blessings, but so can little things. The day-to-day grind of balancing work life and home life, managing anxiety, accomplishing our daily tasks, dealing with frustrating people, and all our other challenges can rob us of gratitude.

Jesus wants us to not allow the daily anxieties of life to rob us of a grateful heart. Do not let these things be a trap. One way we can avoid the ingratitude trap is to remember the blessings behind the burdens. Thank God for both the material goods that make life easier and for the spiritual gifts of Mary, conceived without sin, and all the saints, who are our companions and guides.

.....

What are the daily anxieties that rob you of a grateful heart? Through the intercession of Mary, thank God today for the blessings behind the burdens.

Thursday, December 9

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

—1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

Paul tells us clearly of God's will for us. In every single circumstance we are to rejoice, pray, and give thanks to God. God wants us to rejoice, pray, and give thanks because he knows that will give us a better life. If in every circumstance we rejoice, pray, and give thanks to God, we will live a life of value and purpose.

In all circumstances means that, even in our trials and tribulations and struggles, we are to thank God. We don't thank God for the circumstances. We thank God that he is at work in our circumstances.

.....

Pray today for the grace to give thanks to God regardless of your circumstances. Take a moment to memorize the verse above from 1 Thessalonians so that the next time the daily anxieties of life take over, the Holy Spirit can remind you to have an attitude of gratitude.

Friday, December 10

Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:6–7

Paul tells us to have no anxiety about life. When our hearts become anxious, we can choose to worry or we can make a better choice. We can turn our attention to our problems, or we can turn our attention to God. We can ask God for help through prayer and petition. We can ask God to act, thanking him because he knows us and hears us and has our best interest in mind.

When we thank God in advance, Paul tells us that we will receive God's peace. It is a peace that surpasses understanding because it is based not on our circumstances but on God's goodness and faithfulness. It is a peace beyond understanding because it guards our hearts from future anxieties.

.....

What are you anxious about? Make your requests about the circumstances known to God. Thank God in advance for what he is going to do.

Saturday, December 11

Psalm 98:1–4

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done wondrous deeds;
His right hand has won victory for him,
his holy arm.

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

The LORD has made his salvation known:
in the sight of the nations he has revealed his
justice.

He has remembered his kindness and his
faithfulness
toward the house of Israel.

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation by our God.

Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands
break into song; sing praise.

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous deeds.