

Our Calling to Gratitude!
By Amanda Ayars Nevin November 23, 2014
Matthew 6:25-34

So what does our scripture passage have to do with Sabbath? Sabbath is a reminder of the two worlds that are part of our lives of faith—this world that we live in and the world yet to come; it is an example of both. For the Sabbath is joy, holiness, and rest; joy is part of this world when we engage in a spirit of gratitude and holy wonder; holiness and rest are glimpses of the world yet to come that we receive while on earth, (Heschel, pg. 19)ⁱ. Sabbath time is supposed to be time carved out to in worship, prayer, praise and joy, so during Sabbath time we should be less concerned with what is missing and focusing instead on sharing our gratefulness for what God has already provided for us.

“Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic, asserted that if the only prayer we ever prayed our whole life was “thank you,” that would be enough. Gratefulness cultivates a visceral experience of having enough. When we are mindful of what we have, and give thanks for the many gifts we have overlooked or forgotten, our sense of wealth cannot help but expand, and we soon achieve a sense of sufficiency we so desire,” (Muller, pg. 128). And yet at times I believe that we are so filled with worry and fear of the future and the unknown that we fill our time with activities and busyness because we are worried and when we are worried we forget what our priorities are and because of that we forget to be grateful in every small moment of life. One could argue that Sabbath and gratitude go hand in hand. I learned that the Chinese join two characters to form a single pictograph for busyness: heart and killing (Buchanan, pg. 45).ⁱⁱ How insightful, our busyness kills our hearts because in our busyness we are unable to be fully present with the things that really matter, or we forget what truly matters because we are striving for something to fill void in our hearts, or we live with fear or worry over things that we may or may not be able to control. Worry is the fear of emptiness, not having enough, not being complete, not being liked, not getting ahead, etc. “Worry makes no attempt to move into the unknown with conviction and courage. Instead, it obsesses about how our life will be ruined if certain factors outside of our control do not change. Worry extends regret to the future as it anticipates a sorrow too great to endure” (Allender, pg 136)ⁱⁱⁱ. For this reason, worry is anti-Sabbath. Sabbath requires the release of worry and invites us to trust. Both regret and worry assume there is no God, or at least not one who loves and pours himself out for his children” (Allender, pg 136). “All of Jesus’ teaching seems to hinge on this singular truth concerning the nature of life: it is all right. Do not worry about tomorrow. I (GOD) have come that you might have life abundantly. Be not afraid. Over and over, in a parable, story, and example, Jesus insists that regardless of how it goes for us, we are cared for, we are safe, we are all right” (Muller pg. 43). When we turn our life over to God we are set free to live as the people of God. We are set free from worry, set free from the bondage of this world, set from the world’s

interpretation of what a good life is and rather set free to live the best life we can through Christ.

Sabbath though does not depend upon our readiness to stop. We do not stop when we are “finished,” finished with that last phone call, or the project, or when we get through the stack of messages, or get out the report that is due next day, or the bills that can wait one more day, or finishing the laundry. We stop because it is time to stop but Sabbath requires surrender. Surrender from the “to do” list and surrender from the worry and fear that drives our lives (Muller, pg. 83). Sabbath also requires a transformation in our hearts and our spirits. Often we get this backward, we won’t change our minds, hearts, attitudes, until someone—God, a friend, parent, boss, spouse, child, co-worker changes our circumstances. We refuse to budge until someone else moves a mountain for us. We live in the “if only, what if, and as soon as: If only I had more money, or as soon as I get a better/new job; then I can take a rest. Or what if my husband or wife would love me more then I will change? If only my child wasn’t so rebellious, or as soon as everything is in order with life, work, happiness, or the project is done” etc. then I can begin to make room in my life for Sabbath, for rest, for God. But that is not how God works. Romans 12:2 says “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Ephesians 4:23 says “Be made new in the attitude of your mind.” Nothing really changes until our minds do. Psychologists have shown that if you learn to be more grateful, to get up with a spirit of gratitude you can actually change a way a person thinks, feels and relates to the world. This is what God is saying. First our minds are renewed, we choose to live differently and then we are transformed and then everything is different, even if it stays the same it is different because everything inside of us has been transformed. I think that part of our shift in thinking is our attitude towards God and the world around us. It is learning to think differently than our culture and part of that I believe is our call to Gratitude. We need to shift our ways of thinking, to learn not live in worry and fear. Mark Buchanan says this: “The one who is most free is the one who turns the work of his hands into sacrament, into offering. All He makes and all he does are gifts from God, through God and to God. Just as simple bread and juice, when we eat and drink them in a spirit of thanksgiving and faith, become the very presence of Christ, so simple tasks—preparing sermons, cooking soup, cutting grass, growing corn—gathering around the Table this week (this holiday), when done in the same spirit of joy and thanksgiving to God, in the spirit of Christ, all become holy” (Buchanan, pg 24). When our hearts and mind are transformed even the simple things of life we see as both a gift from God to give thanks for and they are the gifts back to God. God is more interested in our hearts and our attitudes than on changing our circumstances immediately.

We are cared for but do we really believe it? Do we live into gratitude or do we live more with worry and complaint? I believe that when our hearts and our minds are transformed by Christ then we begin to release and let go and the more we engage in gratitude the more we are able

to trust because it puts things into proper perspective. The more we give thanks for the things we do have, the more we see the abundance that is around us, the more rely on God the more our hearts are transformed. Cynicism, consumerism, materialism and all other forms of gathering and obtaining stuff are at war with gratitude. The more I receive every dimension of life as a gift, the less likely I am to feel entitled and irritated when I don't get what I want. There is a strong correlation between gratitude and joy and the absence of gratitude and despair and worry, (Allender, pg 139). Gratitude opens the heart not only to wonder but to freedom. Anything that stirs gratitude opens our eyes to a world outside our seeing (Allender, pg 140). Gratitude opens our hearts and makes them larger. The more we are grateful the more we are able to see God in the midst of life even in the difficult parts of life. Gratitude reorients our perspective and properly places our focus on our God, who is the source of our hope, life, joy. We as a people have a lot to be thankful for that goes far deeper than just gratitude for our homes, clean water and food. We have the knowledge of Jesus Christ, we have the gift of having a personal relationship with Christ himself and the hope of eternal life and life in abundance because of him. There are MANY in our world who are hungry for this truth and are lost without it. There are many who live their lives with the understanding that if they have more stuff they win the game of life when in reality we all know that when die nothing goes with us. We as a people of faith deserve death and yet we are given life because of Jesus, if nothing else we should be giving thanks for that every day!

So what are ways that we can begin to increase our giving thanks? Start simply, with just a word or two each day, even for basic things. Or as you go to bed look back on your day and find one thing to give thanks for. If you are a parent of young children ask yourself these questions "are the kids fed, do they get off to school with clean clothes most days, did you get them out the door in time, is everyone alive," if you answer yes to any of those questions, then you can give thanks that you did a great job as a parent in that moment. Give thanks that when you are at the store you have a plethora of fresh fruits and vegetables to choose from, look at the bounty before you and give thanks. Give thanks when you are going work that you have reliable transportation that can take you places and that you don't have to walk 2-3 miles just to go to work or retrieve water and for that matter give thanks that your water is clean and free of parasites that cause harm in your bodies. Give thanks for those who are around you. Give thanks for your home, job, loved ones, etc. The more we live into gratitude the more our hearts are opened to trust in God, to see that we have enough and can place our worry at the foot of the cross. The more we are freed from worry, the more we are willing to rest in God's grace and maybe take a Sabbath.

ⁱ All quotes from Heschel are from “The Sabbath” by Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farr, Straus and Grioux, New York, 2005.

ⁱⁱ All quotes from Buchanan are from “The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath,” by Mark Buchanan, Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ All quotes from Allender are from: “Sabbath” Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2009.