

“No, I Won’t Bless the Food”

In my travels, at the start of a meal I’m often asked, “Will you bless the food?”

“No.”

My hosts sit there in stunned silence for a moment. Then, with everyone staring at me with awkward, “What do we do now?” looks, I’ll add, “But I’ll be happy to ask the *Lord* to bless the food.”

Maybe it reflects the limits of my own experience, but it’s been my observation that nowadays fewer followers of Jesus pause like this at the beginning of a meal to give thanks for what they are about to eat.

This seems to be true for individuals and for families, at home and in public.

Why the decline? As with all Christian practices and disciplines, unless each successive generation is taught the *reason* for something, it soon devolves into mere a routine, then an empty tradition, and then disuse.

Have *you* ever been taught the biblical reasons for the Christian tradition of praying before a meal?

- Before miraculously multiplying the loaves and fishes and providing a meal for His followers, Jesus asked the Father’s blessing upon the food:

“And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people” (Mk .6:41).

- As He instituted the Lord’s Supper, Jesus gave thanks before distributing the cup to His disciples and also before giving the bread:

“And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, ‘Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (Lk. 22:17-19).

- After His resurrection, Jesus blessed the bread at the beginning of the meal at the home of the couple from Emmaus:

“When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (Lk. 24:30).

- The Apostle Paul, publicly and in the presence of many presumed unbelievers, thanked God for his food before eating:

“He took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat” (Acts 27:35).

- Paul taught that believers should receive their food with thanksgiving when he spoke of:

“. . . foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:3).

For such reasons Christians have historically paused before (and sometimes after) meals to acknowledge in prayer (or a song, like the Doxology) that our God, in His goodness and providence, is the ultimate source of the food before us.

Can a mealtime prayer become a meaningless ritual? Of course it can, especially since it’s something we experience two or three times per day, seven days per week. In addition to its frequency, the table blessing—or any other prayer—is even more likely to diminish in meaning if we carelessly mouth the same words each time.

No Christian practice or spiritual discipline remains significant to the soul if one experiences it mindlessly and mechanically. Even activities as precious as personal daily prayer, singing praises to God with His people, or taking the Lord’s Supper can become hollow if we engage in them thoughtlessly. All prayer, including the brief prayer of thanks before a meal, requires the engagement of both mind and heart.

A mealtime prayer also acknowledges that “every good and perfect gift is from above” (Jas. 1:17). In a culture of plenty, it’s easy to forget that our food is in answer to the command to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Mt. 6:11).

Besides the benefits it has for ourselves, openly testifying in prayer that the meal before us is God’s provision also speaks to our children of our devotion to Christ and teaches them that what we eat is ultimately from the Lord, not the grocery store or our paycheck.

All of life should be lived with an awareness of the presence and blessing of God. Even in something as mundane and repetitive as eating, Scripture exhorts us, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Taking a moment to pray before a meal can help us to do that mindfully.

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