

Thanksgiving

Ephesians 5:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Colossians 2:7

Well, Happy Thanksgiving Harmony. I don't know about you, but I have had a great week. I know that nowadays we kind of breeze right by Thanksgiving and make a mad dash to Christmas, but for those of you who already have your tree and decorations up, can you please chill out a little bit and let everyone else enjoy Thanksgiving for a moment or two?

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday of the year, hands down. But it is not my favorite for the reasons you might expect; it really isn't about family, food or football for me. In fact, I almost never spend Thanksgiving with my immediate family. In 16 years of marriage, Eva and I have spent Thanksgiving Day together on exactly two occasions. That's because with a few exceptions every Thanksgiving week for the last thirty years I have gone on a hunting trip with my father back to his home state of West Virginia.

By the way, I realize that some of you guys are dying to know how I get away with being gone for a major holiday every year. I have just two words for you: prenuptial agreement. You have to get these things in writing. Now, before I get myself into too much trouble, I don't really have a prenuptial agreement and I don't believe in them. I just have a very patient and understanding wife. And did I say wonderful? Yes, wonderful too.

All right, time to get serious. Please take your copy of the Scriptures and turn with me to Ephesians 5. Over the last few weeks we have been following up from our Disciple series by teaching about some of the most essential elements of the Christian life. We have studied the importance of abiding in Christ, we have looked intently into the Scriptures in regards to believer's baptism, and we have spent an extended time reflecting and participating in the Lord's Supper. Now, next week we are going to kick off a brand new series in the Gospel of Matthew, a series that I am very much looking forward to. But before we do that, today we are going to look at the role of thanksgiving in the life of a believer.

And as we begin, I hope that you will come to recognize that this topic is much more than just filler on a holiday weekend. I hope that you will be convinced that thanksgiving is absolutely essential to the Christian life. Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary once wrote, "Thanksgiving is a key to understanding what we really believe about God, ourselves, and the world

we experience.” I think that he is absolutely correct. Our degree of thankfulness clearly reveals what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world we live in. And I think today we are going to find that what we say we believe about thanksgiving and what we actually practice are often two different things. Therefore, I hope that this will be more than a nice holiday message for you but instead will be a transformational time in the Word as we look together at what the Bible has to say about thanksgiving. Believe it or not, the Scriptures have a lot to say about this topic. In fact, there are more than 50 references to thanksgiving in the New Testament alone, and this morning I would like to look at three of these that do a great job of summarizing what the entire Bible has to say about this crucial subject. Since they are all close together, I am going to simply have you turn to each one of them with me. And this will be suitable because a little extra exercise after all the food you have eaten this week will be good for you.

Let’s start with Ephesians 5:15-21:

*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, **giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-21 ESV)*

The key verse of course, is 20. We are to give thanks *always for everything to God in the name of Jesus Christ*. Turn with me now to 1 Thessalonians 5, just a few pages over. Let’s look at verses 16-18:

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, **give thanks in all circumstances**, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV)*

Ok, one more passage. Turn back a few pages back to Colossians 2:

*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, **abounding in thanksgiving**. (Colossians 2:6-7 (ESV)*

Now, there are a number of things that we could talk about regarding thanksgiving in these passages, but I think there are five that stand out most clearly. Let's call them 5 thanksgiving basics.

1. It is God's will for believers to be thankful.

First, it is God's will for believers to be thankful. If you came here today wondering what God's will is for your life, I am happy to say that I know. God's will for your life is for you to be thankful. We see this both in Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians. You know, sometimes we make life just way to difficult. We spend a great deal of time wondering what God wants us to do about this or that, so much so that sometimes we miss the simple fact that what God wants us to do as much as anything is to be thankful for what He has done, is doing, and is planning to do in our lives. Believe it or not, God is much less concerned with where we work or live or even whom we marry than He is about our day-to-day, moment-by-moment relationship with Him. And one of the primary things He is looking for in our relationship with Him is gratitude.

2. Believers are to be thankful always.

Second, believers are to be thankful always. Look again at Ephesians 5:20:

Giving thanks always...

The adverb *always* might better be translated as *constantly*. One commentator on this passage says that this means giving thanks is synonymous with being a Christian. Did you catch that? Constantly giving thanks to God and being a Christian are one in the same. Thanksgiving is a defining characteristic of what it means to follow Jesus.

3. Believers are to be thankful for everything.

Third, believers are to be thankful for everything. Look at Ephesians 5:20 again:

Giving thanks always for everything....

And 1 Thessalonians 5:18:

Giving thanks in all circumstances....

Now, I believe this is one of the hardest things the Bible calls us to do, especially for those who have experienced incredibly painful circumstances, which is

probably just about everyone of us. Three years ago this weekend I was sitting in my office on a Saturday afternoon working on a thanksgiving message very similar to this one when I received a call that my youngest daughter had been attacked by a dog and was being rushed to the emergency room. And I will never forget sitting in that hospital room wondering how I was going to stand before the church in just a few hours and tell them how to be thankful for something like this. And in a little bit I will talk about how it is possible, but for now let's just affirm that this is what the Scripture calls us to. It is God's will that we give Him thanks for everything.

4. Believers are to overflow with thanksgiving.

Fourth, believers are to overflow with thanksgiving. The word *abounding* in Colossians 2:7 can also be translated *overflowing*. Thanksgiving should just be spilling out of us. Think about your plate of food on Thursday. All the turkey, and stuffing, and mashed potatoes, and gravy and cranberries, maybe you even tried to get a piece of pumpkin pie on there. Whatever it was, your plate was overflowing. There wasn't any room for anything more. That's how our lives are to be with thanksgiving. Overflowing. Abundant. So much so that we couldn't possibly be any more thankful.

I saw a quote on a church sign a few Thanksgivings ago that succinctly summarizes the New Testament teaching on thanksgiving. You know what I mean by a church sign – the marquees that some churches have where you can put up information or quotes? I find that most of the time the messages are really corny. Many of them make me wonder if the church is trying to get people to come or to stay away. You know the ones I am talking about, right? You have probably seen a few of the most common. Like the one with the letters “ch”, repeated twice with a gap in between. And then it asks what is missing? You know the answer right? “UR”.

Or the one that says, “We might not be Dairy Queen, but we have great Sundays”.

But perhaps my favorite of all time is this one. I have cropped out the name of the church to protect the guilty.

Despite all of that, a few Thanksgivings ago as I traveled the back roads of West Virginia I did find one that I really like. It said: “For the Christian, Thanksgiving isn't simply a day; it is a way of life.” That is exactly what God's Word tells us. We

are to be overflowing with thanksgiving for everything all the time. It isn't something we do just once a year or even once a week when we gather as the church, but rather an attitude by which we live and an action by which we express how God has richly blessed us.

5. Believers to give thanks to the Father through the Son.

Fifth and final, believers are to give thanks to the Father through the Son. Back to Ephesians 5:20 one more time:

Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

James 1:17 says that every good and perfect gift comes from the Father. Everything that we have is a result of His gracious provision in our lives. And we give thanks to the Father through, or in the name of, the Son because He is the one who earned all of these blessings for us. Romans 8:32 brings this all together:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32 ESV)

The Father is the one who provides us with the blessings we have and He does it through the work of the Son on our behalf.

Now, I want to show you one more passage that highlights why being thankful is so important. It comes from Paul's epistle to the church at Rome, in one of the most serious passages in all of Scripture. Romans 1:21 says this:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:21 ESV)

The "they" here in Romans 1 are people who see the hand of God in creation and yet refuse to honor Him and give Him thanks. They are people who have been blessed by God with life and breath and yet fail to give Him the proper recognition for His gracious provision. In other words, they are unbelievers, and this essentially means that an unthankful heart is an unregenerate heart. Unbelief in a person's life is displayed through a lack of honor and thankfulness to God. To quote Al Mohler again, "A lack of proper thankfulness to God is a

clear sign of a basic godlessness.” Therefore, the opposite side of the coin tells us that a sign of a believer is that their lives are clearly marked by gratitude. For Paul, apparently being unthankful = being an unbeliever, and being thankful = being a believer.

Do you get what is at stake here? Can you see why it is so important that thankfulness be a distinguishing characteristic in our lives? Let me ask you this morning, how thankful are you? Does your life reflect a thankfulness that comes from a believing heart? Is thanksgiving a way of life for you? Would people describe you as a thankful person?

I am afraid that most, if not all of us, are in many ways practical atheists when it comes to thanksgiving. This might be a new term for you, so let me explain. A practical atheist is someone who says they believe in God, but denies Him in the way that they live. In regards to thankfulness, a practical atheist is someone who would agree that God has blessed them but would rarely, if ever, display by their words and actions that this is true.

A perfect example of this is what happens in our country every Thanksgiving weekend. On Thursday we have a national holiday set aside to focus upon being thankful for all the blessings we have. And then less than 24 hours later we go out and spend more money than the gross national product of most developing nations, with people literally trampling over one another to get more of the same stuff they already have. I believe that this year Black Friday actually started sometime on Thursday night. I am somewhat afraid that before long there won't be a Thanksgiving at all.

That said, on some level I think that we are all practical atheists regarding thankfulness. I would include myself in this. Our hearts are all prone to think that we deserve what we have and that we are in some way responsible for the blessings in our lives. And because of this, we fail to give God the honor and thanks that is due Him as the one who has truly provided the blessings.

I can also say pastorally that it is quite clear to me that the most thankful people are the most joyful people. In my experience, the greater understanding that a person has of how blessed they are, the greater their contentment and happiness. Gratefulness and joy go hand in hand. So, if you find yourself struggling with joy and contentment, one thing I would encourage you to do is

increase your thankfulness quotient and see if that doesn't help you to be more joyful and content with where God has you in life.

Let me also point out to parents here the importance of teaching our children to be thankful from an early age. Dads and moms, we must very early on teach our children to recognize the blessings that they have and that God is the one who has provided those blessings for them. This is very hard to do in a culture where we have everything, but that makes it even more important. As Romans 1 shows, the end result of a lack of thanksgiving is devastating, and once a heart heads down that path it is very hard to ever get it back. So, parents, teach your children to be thankful from day one.

Growing in Gratefulness

Now, I think we would agree that we all need to grow, perhaps significantly, in this area. For this reason, I'd like to complete the message this morning by giving you four ways to live a more thankful life. I think the biggest issue of Thanksgiving weekend is learning how to fight our practical atheist tendencies and live a life of greater gratitude to God. So, how do we fight our tendency to think that we deserve what we have, or worse yet, deserve even better? While there are many things that we can and should do, let me give you four ways to grow in gratefulness.

1. Be intentionally thankful.

Number one, be intentionally thankful. By this I mean that you have to practice being thankful whether you feel like it or not. As Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic author, once wrote, "Giving thanks is not a matter of feeling thankful, it is a matter of obedience."

Think about your kids again for a minute. Every parent in this room has had to at some point make their kids say the words *thank you*. Why do we do that? We do it because we want them to learn to be thankful. We are pointing them towards the fact that they need to display gratitude. Well, the same thing we do for our kids we have to do for ourselves from time to time. We have to make ourselves be thankful to God.

Now, of course we want to get to the point where thankfulness is just something that naturally flows out of us. But if this is going to be the case we very well may have to jumpstart it. And I think the way that we do that is by

disciplining ourselves to regularly take time to say thank you to God for all that He has done for us. Thanksgiving needs to become a habit, and the way that you develop a habit is by regularly disciplining yourself to do something. So, I would encourage you all to set aside time on a daily basis, perhaps during your daily prayer time, to thank God for the blessings in your life. On top of that, look for opportunities to regularly and spontaneously thank Him for what He has and is doing for you.

2. Maintain the proper perspective on life.

The second thing we can do to grow in gratefulness is to maintain the proper perspective on life. A few years ago the church I was serving in was preaching through 1 Corinthians. And in chapter 4 there is a verse that rocked my world. It's 1 Corinthians 4:7, where Paul is getting all over the Corinthians for thinking that they were pretty big stuff. The church at Corinth had some very gifted but also some very proud members. And so in his normal in your face way, Paul asks them this:

What do you have that you did not receive? (1 Corinthians 4:7)

Let this sink in for a minute, and then let's answer this question together. What do we have that was not given to us by God? Nothing.

Take a moment and think of all the blessings you have today – your family, home, vehicles, food, talents, intelligence, income, the fact that you live in America, and most significantly your faith. Where do these things come from? They all come from God.

A few months ago during the presidential campaign President Obama made a statement that got quite a few people riled up. You may remember that he said, and I quote, "If you've got a business you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen."

Now, while we might disagree with the point the President was trying to make, in reality he was right. However, that somebody isn't the government but rather God himself.

I know that this is a hard pill to swallow, but it is the truth, and absolutely essential to growing in gratefulness. No matter how hard we work, or how smart we are, or how good the choices that we make, the ability to be able to do these

things comes completely from God. We cannot do anything by ourselves. I can only stand here and preach today because God has given me the strength and the mind and the ability to do so. Yes, I worked hard to put this message together (some might be thinking I needed to work harder) but I could only do that because God gave me the ability to do so. I can't take any credit for it.

When we have this perspective and keep this perspective, it is much easier to have a heart of gratitude. It's when we begin to think that we have earned our blessings or that we have done something to deserve them that we lose our attitude of thanksgiving and become discontent and ungrateful. So, we have to maintain the proper perspective.

3. Develop a deep understanding of God's sovereign goodness.

The third thing we can do to grow in gratefulness is to develop a deep understanding of God's sovereign goodness. By deep I mean deeper than you currently have. This is a truth that I have taught perhaps more than any other and yet even as I prepared this message I found myself growing in a deeper understanding of it.

We saw earlier in Ephesians 5:20 that God wants us to be thankful for everything. But how do we do this? We do it by affirming that God is completely sovereign over everything and that His sovereignty always works for our good. How can we be thankful for something if we don't think that it is good for us? We can't. Not honestly anyways. But Romans 8:28 tells us that this is truly the case. That God is working everything for our good:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

Now, I refer to this truth a great deal. And the reason I do is that without it the world does not make sense. You see, if God isn't in control we have absolutely no hope. Everything happens just by chance and has no ultimate meaning. At the same time, if God isn't using His control for our good than we have no possibility of joy, because God might use his control to do us harm. But because God is in control and is using His control for our good, we can have both hope and joy, because we know that in the big picture everything is going to work out for God's glory and our good.

So, let me take you back to three Thanksgivings ago. On what basis could I preach the fact that I could be thankful in the fact that a dog had attacked my daughter? Well, for one, I could be thankful that it wasn't worse, because it could have been. I could be thankful that God spared her life. But more than that, I could be thankful because God's Word says that He was going to use it for our good. Even though I couldn't see exactly how at the moment, and to be honest with you I even struggle with that to this day, I could trust in God's promise. But most significantly, I could give thanks in the fact that my daughter and I know the Lord and therefore our biggest problem by far has been take care of. That no matter what happens in this life, nothing can take us away from His love. Not now, and not for all eternity. And because of that truth, I can be thankful for everything.

Now I have to tell you that this is something that God just continually brings to the forefront of my life. Sometimes this is through big challenges, but oftentimes it is through very minor ones. One of my greatest sins is a lack of patience. I want things to go my way, right away. Is any one with me on that? And yet things rarely work out that way. I am convinced that one of the reasons this is the case is because God is trying to teach me that His plans are bigger than mine and that I need to learn to trust Him and what He is trying to do in my life and in the lives of others. So, instead of trying to control everything and getting frustrated when things don't go my way, I need to sit back and figure out how I can work with God in what He is trying to accomplish.

By the way, we need to recognize a significant difference, or what should be a significant difference between believers and unbelievers. Only believers can be thankful in all things – because all things only work for the good of those who know the Lord. If you don't know the Lord, all things don't work together for your good, and therefore you don't have everything to be thankful for. And so if you are here today, and have not trusted in Christ as your Savior, we would urge you to do so today and watch everything come together for your good.

4. Preach the gospel to yourself everyday.

Finally, if we are going to grow in gratefulness, we must learn to preach the gospel to ourselves every day. This is another simple, basic truth that I have referred to many times during the last year. But it is worth saying again because it is perhaps the single most important step in following Jesus.

We need the gospel every day of our lives, for two primary reasons. On the one hand, the gospel helps us to keep the proper perspective that we talked about a few moments ago. It reminds us that we are sinners. It reminds us that on our own we are lost, separated from God, and on our way to hell. It keeps us humble and constantly reminds us that were it not for God's grace we would have absolutely nothing.

On the other hand, the gospel also tells us that we have a great Savior. It tells us there is One who came and lived the perfect life that we cannot; a perfect One who was hung on a cross for our sins and came back to life for our justification; a perfect One who has provided a way for our sins to be removed and for us to be restored to God and live with Him forever. This, my friends, is the gospel and the ultimate reason that we can be thankful for everything at all times. Our biggest problem, by far, has been dealt with. It's gone. We have eternal life and nothing can take that away from us.

Let me try to bring this all together by taking you to one more passage. Turn with me to Hebrews 12. Pick up in verse 25:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. [26] At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." [27] This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. [28] Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, [29] for our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:25-29 ESV)

There is a lot that we could talk about here, but let me simply point out that there is a great earthquake coming but God has appointed a time in the future when He will shake the heavens and the earth. When He does there will be things that perish and things that remain. Actually, there will only be one thing that remains - God's kingdom. And the ultimate reason that we can be thankful for everything in all circumstances is that the only thing that matters is the only thing that lasts – the rule and reign of Jesus Christ in the lives of His people. And if you are one of those people, then you can and should be grateful, because the only thing that lasts is the only thing that can never be taken from you.

So, when you wake up in the morning, thank the Lord for another day to walk with Him. And when you eat your meals, thank Him for the food that He has so graciously provided. And when you lay your head down at night, thank Him for His sustaining grace to get you through the day. And when good times come, thank Him for His wonderful grace. And when difficult times come, thank Him that He is using these times for your good. And at all times, thank Him for the cross and the eternity in heaven waiting for you because of it. Friends, we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken – by anything. There is nothing that can take it away from us. Because of that, we can and should be thankful for everything always in all circumstances.

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