

THANKSGIVING: AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

This Thursday, we will all be gathering around the Thanksgiving Table—and I am sure that I will be eating way too much turkey, ham, potatoes and all sorts of calorie laden desserts. It is indeed a wonderful time of year when families gather and we give thanks to God for all of our many blessings. Of course, we are supposed to give God thanks every day of the year. The author, Robert Caspar Lintner, was surely right when he wrote: “Thanksgiving was never meant to be shut up in a single day.”¹ But, we can’t all get together every day of the year and go through the same rituals that we’ll be observing—come this Thursday. And this brings to mind two questions: A “how” question, and a “why” question. First, how do we make sure, throughout the year, that we give proper thanks to God for His many blessings? And second, why do we do it—why do we need to give thanks? So, let’s take them up in order.

First, how do we make certain that we give thanks to God? To begin with, we must be careful to recognize God’s blessings. As I mentioned last week, that’s not always easy to you because we sometimes fail to recognize a blessing when we receive it. But, there is something that we can do to sharpen our senses when it comes to recognizing God’s gifts to us. Specifically, we must be diligent in trying to cultivate an *attitude of gratitude* toward God. When we do this, we tend to more naturally take an inventory of our daily blessings.

Denzel Washington is one of my favorite actors. Not all of his films are to be commended—some are just too violent. (Maybe that is more the fault of Hollywood than of the actors themselves.) But, Denzel Washington has played a

number of roles that reflect Christian-based values. In fact, he sounded more like his character in the film *the Preacher's Wife* when he recently spoke at a public gathering. He told the crowd that he reads his Bible every day and that he tries to “regularly get up and speak of what God has done for him.” A couple of years ago around Thanksgiving, he attended a church banquet where he encouraged those in the congregation “to live in a constant attitude of gratitude for God's goodness: Give thanks for blessings every day. Every day—embrace gratitude. Encourage others. It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. I pray that you put your slippers way under your bed at night, so that when you wake in the morning you have to start on your knees to find them. And while you're down there, say ‘thank you.’ A bad attitude is like a flat tire. Until you change it, you're not going anywhere.”² That is, indeed, good advice because an attitude of gratefulness tames our human pride and opens our eyes to the abundant things that God provides to us every day.

Such an attitude helps us to appreciate the little things in life that God lays before us. Maybe it's a warm cup of coffee on a frosty morn, or laughter of children playing outside in the afternoon, or the chirp of a bird before it prepares to settle into the branches of a tree before sunset—all the little things that bring joy and peace and rest to our lives. Be grateful for such little things. It matters. Jesus said, “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much.” Luke 16:10 (NIV). Reflecting upon Jesus' words, the Christian writer, Matthew Thomas, tells us: “This surely applies to stewardship of the heart as much as to stewardship of resources. If you are grateful in small things, even in a small way,

you will naturally express gratitude in great things.³ Thank God for those major blessings in your life, but don't forget to thank Him for those little blessings as well.

Now there is a flip-side to this—while God is pleased with our gratitude as it furthers our relationship with Him, ingratitude is something that naturally separates us from God. Each month Charles Stanley sends out an inspirational letter to anyone who would like to subscribe. It is free and I encourage you to take advantage of his Godly wisdom and direction. In his November letter, Dr. Stanley points out just how damaging ingratitude is to a person's relationship with God: "The sin of ingratitude began early in human history in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve decided that what God had given them was not enough. Although He had provided a perfect environment with abundant fruit from every tree except one, Adam and Eve weren't satisfied and wanted more. When they ate from the forbidden tree, sin entered the world and spread to all mankind. Any time we aren't satisfied with what the Lord has given us and decide we want something outside His will, we are expressing ingratitude."⁴

Ingratitude is a serious problem. Paul re-directs our lives to a true sense of gratitude with these simple words from Philippians: ¹¹ . . . I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. ¹³ For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. Philippians 4:11-13 (NLT)

The next thing we need to do in order to assure that we give proper thanks to God is to ask another important question: Exactly how do we go about thanking Him? Actually, there are several different ways to give thanks to God. The most common way we give thanks to God is through prayer. Again, Paul's letter to the Philippians instructs us: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, WITH THANKSGIVING, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV)

Prayers of thanksgiving can be given aloud or silently in meditation—either way, we verbalize our thoughts of gratitude to God. But, there is another way of giving thanks verbally that is always given out loud, with great joy of expression. David tells us about this mode of offering thanksgiving in Psalm 28 when he sang out: "My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to Him *IN SONG.*" Psalm 28:7 (NIV) In this way, we can sing with the Psalmist: "Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song." Psalm 95:2 (NIV) Paul couldn't agree more when he adds: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you. . . *sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* with GRATITUDE IN YOUR HEARTS TO GOD." Colossians 3:16 (NIV) When we sing our hymns and play our instruments, it is not for us, but for Him. Give thanks to God with every note you sing, every chord that is strummed—indeed, "Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song." Psalm 95:2 (NIV)

Giving thanks to God through our prayers, our hymns of praise and our music is extremely important. But, there are other ways of giving thanks to God

besides doing it very verbally or with musical instruments. There is an old proverb that holds: “Thanksgiving, to be truly thanksgiving, is first thanks, *THEN GIVING.*”⁵ Did you know that you can actually give thanks to God when you give to others? God’s Word tells us that when we give to those in need that “they will break out into thanksgiving and praise to God for your help.”⁶ Imagine the effect of that! You give to one person in need, and then to a second person, and then give to yet a third person. Each one of them, in turn, thanks God for the blessings He has given them through you. It reminds me of a song that I really like by the group, *Needtobreathe*. The lyrics sing out: “God of mercy, sweet love of mine / I have surrendered to Your design / May this offering stretch across the skies / *And these Halleluiahs be multiplied.*”⁷ The generous acts of just one person result in multiple instances of thanks being offered to God by each one of the recipients. Give to others generously. Give to as many as you possibly can. And, when you do, you multiply the thanksgiving to God!

There is yet another way to give thanks to God that goes beyond giving *material things* to others. Rather, it involves giving of yourself to others—giving your time, your efforts, your care, all to help other people during times of difficulty. After all, God helps us out in when we face difficult times. God wants us to do the same for other people. By helping others, you give thanks to God when you “return the favor”—so to speak. Jesus points to this in a parable about a King sitting in judgment. (Of course in this parable, the “King” is Jesus Himself sitting in judgment at the end of time.) And the following dialogue takes place between the King and some of His loyal subjects. And the King said:³⁵ “I

was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’” Matthew

25:35-40 (NKJV) **An act of kindness to one person, by extension, is an act of devotion and thanksgiving to God. Thank God through your service to others.**

When it comes to our *attitude of gratitude*, the bottom line is this: Our words (whether expressed in prayers or hymns of praise) and our acts of generosity (whether shown by the giving of our material possessions to those in need, or by the expenditure our time and efforts in serving them)—all of these things must be part of a life characterized by thankfulness to God. That is exactly what Paul is saying in his letter to the Colossians when he tells them: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:17 (NIV)

Now—very briefly, I want you to consider one last question. And the question is this: Why do we give thanks to God? After all, it is not like God needs anything from anyone—He *is* God—He is all powerful, all knowing and all being. So, certainly God does not *need* our thanks. What then is the purpose in giving thanks? Is it merely a common courtesy—like when we thank someone for

holding the door open for us? Actually, it is not God who needs our thanks. Rather, we are the ones who benefit from the process of thanksgiving. We are made in the image of God—and the process of giving thanks with its attitude of graciousness and gratitude does something to us. It helps to shape us more in the image of God. God is love. God is generous. God is gracious. When we extend thanks to Him, we begin to reflect just a little more distinctly these attributes of God—and so we begin to be more and more transformed to His image.

So, with all of these things in mind ask yourself what is the most important thing that we can thank God for on Thanksgiving Day (or on any other day, for that matter)? This may sound odd, but the answer may well be that you should thank God . . . FOR YOU. Now, I don't mean that in a conceited way; rather, it should be a prayer of thanksgiving in the most humble of ways. It is a thank-you that is framed in the words of the Psalmist when he asks: "Of what importance is the human race, that you should notice them? Of what importance is mankind, that you should pay attention to them?" Psalms 8:4 (NET1) Yet, despite our lowliness, God created us and He loves us more than we can ever comprehend. The Christian writer, Ingrid Trobisch, understood this when she said: "One Thanksgiving Day I was home alone in the evening. On my favorite radio program, Bill Pearce, the host of *Night Sounds*, asked us to think of all the things for which we were thankful—our country, our families, home, work, and all the rest. Then he challenged us and asked: 'Have you ever stopped to be thankful just for yourself?' As he candidly shared his own struggles with this, I realized I

had never really thanked God for all the work He had done in my creation. I was overcome as I thought of how God had made plans for my life long before I was born.”⁸ And if we thank God in this way, it helps us to understand why we should be so very thankful for something else—the Greatest Gift God has given us: His Son, Jesus Christ.

Through Him we are offered a gift that costs us nothing—but was paid for dearly on the Cross. It is the free gift of salvation to those who accept Jesus into their lives as Lord and Savior. It is the salvation that offers the keys to His Kingdom. Heed the words from Hebrews Chapter 12 which tell us: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, *LET US BE THANKFUL, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.*” Hebrews 12:28 (NIV) Let that be your aim this Thanksgiving Day and every day thereafter.

It is strange how two days in the week, one on Thursday followed by one on Friday, point to such different directions in life—such different choices. Those who cling to the one so appropriately named “Black Friday” chose a life of chaos and an attitude of greed. But, those who long for the one coming this Thursday chose a life of peace in Christ marked by an attitude of gratitude. Chose Jesus Christ and let Him bring Thanksgiving into your life.

Let us pray.

¹ Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Thanksgiving".

² Jeannie Law, "Denzel Washington: God Has 'Faith in Me,'" *Christian Post* (11-12-15), <http://www.preachingtoday.com/search/thanksgiving+illustrations>.

³ Matthew Thomas, "Gratitude: Key to Wholeness," – *Discipleship Journal* 6, no. 1 (January-February, 1986), WORDsearch CROSS e-book: Under: "Gratitude: Key to Wholeness".

⁴ Charles Stanley, "From the Pastor's Heart," In Touch Ministries, intouch.org, November, 2017.

⁵ Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Thanksgiving".

⁶ 2 Corinthians 9:11 (TLB) Yes, God will give you much so that you can give away much, and when we take your gifts to those who need them they will break out into thanksgiving and praise to God for your help.

⁷ "Multiplied," written by Bear and Bo Rinehart, the *Rivers in the Wasteland* album, Atlantic Records (2014).

⁸ Ingrid Trobisch, *The Confident Woman. Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 13. *Today's Best Illustrations – Volume 5*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "THANKFULNESS".