

True Thanksgiving: What is it?

Our celebration of Thanksgiving Day is only 18 days away. So, this morning, I'd like for you to think about what Thanksgiving is supposed to be, and what it is not supposed to be—because we need to develop an attitude of **true thanksgiving**, not just during the time of special events, like our Fall Feast today, or just on Thanksgiving Day, but throughout the year—and even more than that: Throughout our lives. Listen to what it means to be thankful. In Colossians chapter 3, Paul writes: ¹⁵ Let the **peace of heart** that comes from Christ be always present in your hearts and lives, for this is your responsibility and privilege as members of His body. **And always be thankful.** ¹⁶ Remember what Christ taught, and let His words enrich your lives and make you wise; teach them to each other and sing them out in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing to the Lord with **thankful hearts.** ¹⁷ And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, and come with Him into the presence of God the Father **to give Him your thanks.** *Colossians 3:15-17 (TLB)*

Now Paul's words are very helpful in helping us to understand some of the underlying components of what **true thanksgiving** is made of. Here, in three places, he tells us to be "**thankful**" and he connects **true thanksgiving** to what is **in our hearts**. And more to the point, this Scripture tells us that we need **Jesus Christ in our hearts** if we ever want to experience any **peace in our lives**. Christ in our hearts leads to an inner peace that allows us to engage in **true thanksgiving**.

So what is another component of **true thanksgiving**? Again, Paul gives us a clue in his letter to the church in Thessalonica. Paul tells us to: ¹⁶ **"Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances,** for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. *1 Thessalonians 5:15-18 (NLT2)* Notice how Paul ties **thankfulness** to the **presence of joy** and **to the exercise of prayer**. And he doesn't say to be joyful some of the times—just when things happen to be going well. Nor does he tell us to pray only when the chips are down—when some troubling circumstances have come into our lives. No, **joy and prayer**, as they relate to **true thanksgiving**—are not "**sometimes**" things; rather they are to be a reality in our lives **all the time**—in good times and in bad. Now that really tells us something—i.e. **true thanksgiving**, the kind that God calls for us to offer to Him, is not bound up in whatever we happen to be experiencing emotionally at the time. Rather, true thanksgiving is bound up in the **condition of our hearts**. And if we have Jesus in our hearts—i.e. we trust in His provision and protection all the time, knowing that no matter how good or bad things may appear, then our **heart-focus** is upon Him and not upon the circumstances going on around us. Whatever those circumstances may be, we need to trust in

Jesus to see us through. And if we'll do exactly that, then we can continue to experience His **peace and joy**, while offering to Him our **prayers**, and consequently be thankful that He is here to help us. Now those are some New Testament passages that enlighten us on this concept of **true thanksgiving**. What is there in the Old Testament that helps to flesh this out even more?

Well, if we look in 2 Chronicles, chapter 33, we'll find the people of Jerusalem trying to rebuild their city and the Temple after they had been unfaithful to God and, as a result, were conquered by the Assyrians and hauled off in captivity to Babylon for a short period of time. This all occurred in the seventh century B.C. during the reign of the wicked Judean King, Manasseh (696-642 B.C.), who was notorious for his unfaithfulness to God. But once Manasseh was in captivity, he apparently repented and prayed to God for forgiveness. God heard his prayers and allowed him, along with the people of Judah, to return to Jerusalem¹ where we read the following: ¹⁴ "After this Manasseh rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, from west of the Gihon Spring in the Kidron Valley to the Fish Gate, and continuing around the hill of Ophel. He built the wall very high. And he stationed his military officers in all of the fortified towns of Judah. ¹⁵ Manasseh also removed the foreign gods and the idol from the LORD's Temple. He tore down all the altars he had built on the hill where the Temple stood and all the altars that were in Jerusalem, and he dumped them outside the city. ¹⁶ Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed **peace offerings and thanksgiving offerings** on it. He also encouraged the people of Judah to worship the LORD, the God of Israel." 2 Chronicles 33:14-16 (NLT2)

So here we see a once fallen and unfaithful king repent of his evil and then go about restoring God to the rightful place in his life and in the lives of his people. And he commemorates that submission to God by giving Him **peace offerings** and **offerings of thanksgiving**. Now, you might say, "**Hey, that's simple—all I have to do is make some kind of peace offering and a thanksgiving offering—and I'm out of here! Time to head on over to the Fall Feast and eat some smoked turkey!**" But, if that's what you are thinking—then hold on a minute, because that is a **false** concept of thanksgiving. There's more to thanksgiving than just going through the motions of some ritual kind of offerings—even if you call it a "**peace offering**" or a "**thanksgiving offering**." Unfortunately, that false attitude is one that we see in so many people today. They tend to show up at church about twice a year—during Christmas and Easter—and they feel that that kind of thanksgiving is enough.

But, does that sound like the quality of **peace offerings** and **thanksgiving offerings** that are backed up by a heart filled with Christ? Let me see—one hour in church for Christmas, another hour for Easter—does that really do it for a 365 day span? Wow—I'm sure glad Jesus shows more interest in us than what some people deem to be a sufficient offering of their time in worshipping Him. People like

that have a real attitude problem. But, believe it or not, there is a problem that can be even greater. What if a person has no issues in giving those **“offerings of their time”** to God (i.e., they come to church just like clockwork), but their lives fail to reflect Jesus even in the least little bit? I wonder what God thinks about that. Well, actually, I don’t have to wonder about it at all. And the reason for that is that the Book of Amos tells us very clearly what God has to say about those who give continuing, but lackluster, offerings of thanksgiving to Him. God says to us the same things he told the people of Israel during the days of the Prophet Amos: ²² “Though you offer Me your burnt offerings and your cereal offerings, I will not accept them, neither will I look upon the peace or thank offerings of your fatted beasts.” ²³ Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice run down like waters and righteousness as a mighty and ever-flowing stream. ²⁵ Did you bring to Me sacrifices and cereal offerings during those forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ²⁶ No but instead of bringing Me the appointed sacrifices you carried about the tent of your king Sakkuth and Kaiwan [names for the gods of the planet Saturn], your images of your star-god which you made for yourselves and you will do so again. ²⁷ Therefore, I will cause you to go into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts. Amos 5:22-27 (AMP) This is exactly what God tells such people whose hearts are anything but spirit-filled.

You see, you can’t fool God. He knows what’s in your heart. The Book of Jeremiah confirms this: “But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.” Jeremiah 17:10 (NLT2) When God looks into a person’s heart, He is searching for some sign of love. It is the kind of love that produces a prayerful heart—one that is filled with that joy and peace that Paul spoke of. A heart that fails to allow the Holy Spirit in to cultivate those things can never be **truly thankful** to God for anything. There is a real divide among those who like to call themselves Christians, and those who actually have **true thanksgiving** dwelling within. I love the way the Christian author, Brennan Manning, put it when he said: ***“I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, nor between Republicans and Democrats. The real difference is between the aware and the unaware. When somebody is aware of that love—the same love that the Father has for Jesus—that person is just spontaneously grateful. Cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of the interior life, and the byproduct of gratitude is joy. We’re not joyful and then become thankful—we’re thankful [to God], and that makes us joyful.”***²

The more you study the Word of God you’ll find that God’s commands are for our well-being. We don’t always see that necessarily, but over time it always proves to be true. Having thanksgiving in

our hearts equips us to better relate to God as our redeemer, protector and provider. That alone is a sufficient spiritual reason for wanting to develop a grateful heart. But, God's call to us to be thankful benefits us in physical ways as well. Even the research of secular universities confirms that thankfulness not only makes you feel better, it actually promotes healthy bodies. Robert A. Emmons is a professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis. He is touted by some to be the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude. He maintains that: "***Clinical trials indicate that the practice of gratitude can have dramatic and lasting effects in a person's life. It can lower blood pressure, improve immune function and facilitate more efficient sleep.***" The University of California's San Diego School of Medicine has found that people who are more thankful have better heart health—especially less inflammation and healthier heart rhythms. They are generally less depressed, less stressed, less fatigued, and they sleep better than those who lack a thankful demeanor. Another study found that a thankful outlook can actually boost your immune system. Those who have a '***daily gratitude practice***' [we Christians call it ***prayer***] can expect a reduction in the aging process that effects the brain.³

You see, when God tells you to do something—as He tells us to ***be thankful***—He knows what He's talking about. It is for our benefit that He calls us to do this. But, I must admit, the Scriptures do tell us something that is hard to practice. It tells us: "Give thanks ***for everything*** to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Ephesians 5:20 (NLT2)* That means what it says: Give thanks for ***everything whatsoever!*** Yet, the other day I received something in the mail that was hard to be thankful for. It was a letter from the "*Great*" State of Maryland informing me that I owed them some money. In fact, they were very specific about it—they informed me that owed them \$1.40 and basically implied that if I ever wanted to cross over the borders of their State again, I'd better come up with that \$1.40 forthwith and sent it to their Treasurer without delay. Now, I was a bit taken aback by this. What on earth had I done to the State of Maryland to deserve such a rude demand? And then as I read a bit further, I learned that I was being accused of committing what they deemed to be a significant trespass while navigating the roadways of their State. In fact, they claimed that I had been so bold as to cross through one of their self-pay toll booths without paying a \$0.25 toll and I better not come back again until I got all this straight. And from their standpoint, the only way to get this straight was to promptly handover to them a check for a buck-forty. And as proof of my crime, they even included a photograph of my car with my license plate clearly visible passing through without paying. But, the thing is, when I looked more closely at that photo, I could see that that wasn't me driving at all. Rather, it was my partner in crime—who will remain nameless in the interest of domestic harmony—and she was boldly passing right on through that booth with no questions asked and no money surrendered. It was a bit of a

“Bonnie and Clyde” photo, but I’m pretty sure both Bonnie, as well as Clyde, were clueless of their oversight throughout this entire escapade.

And so, you might be wondering what my reaction was at that moment—having then been notified by the authorities in Maryland of this alleged malfeasance. So, how did I react? Did I stress-out or explode in fury and rebellion against this foreign government? Did I cast an angry glance at my alleged accomplice? Well, in my younger days, those kinds of reaction would have been a distinct possibility. But, you know what?—such reactions would have been so unnecessary, so counterproductive, and so ***unthankful***. And I am not talking about my thankfulness to the sovereign State of Maryland for having its highways or toll booths in good order. Rather, I am talking about ***thankfulness to the Sovereign God of the Universe***. And do you know why it that true?—because on the way up through Maryland to Lancaster, Pa. to see the ***Jesus*** play where we were headed, a lot of worse things could have happened to us than having to pay a \$1.40 fine to a money hungry government. On that same day of our travels, there were hundreds of vehicles across this country that broke down during their travels, and hundreds more that were involved in serious accidents with a lot more adverse consequences than a mere toll booth fine. The Psalmist rightly proclaims: ³ [The LORD] will not let your foot slip-- He who watches over you will not slumber; ⁴ indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵ The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right hand; ⁶ the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm-- He will watch over your life; ⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Psalm 121:3-8 (NIV) ***That’s a lot to be thankful for!***

We need to be grateful for God’s blessings of protection, for they can never be overstated. Think about that the next time something doesn’t go your way and your first instinct is to become angry, frustrated or stressed-out. If I had become angry over having to pay a toll fine, it would have just robbed life of the joy and peace that God had so freely given to us during entire trip—not to mention just how ungrateful it would have been to the Lord for all His countless blessings.

So this year, when someone mentions the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, what will your reaction be? Will your muscles automatically tense up and a worried frown frame your face? Don’t let that be the case, as it will likely be for so many frenzied people. Don’t fill your heart with such ungrateful feelings. Rather, fill it with the ***love of Jesus Christ*** and feel ***His joy*** and ***His peace***. ***Commune with Him in prayer***, and with the Psalmist turn to the Lord and proclaim: ²¹ “***I WILL GIVE YOU THANKS,*** for you answered me; you have become my salvation.” ²² The stone the builders rejected has become

the capstone;²³ the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴ This is the day the LORD has made; **LET US REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT.**" Psalm 118:21-24 (NIV)

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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¹ Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "MANASSEH," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915), s.v. "MANASSES, THE PRAYER OF," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, ed., Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "MANASSEH".

² Brennan Manning: "The Dick Staub Interview: Brennan Manning on Ruthless Trust," ChristianityToday.com (12-10-02).

³ Adapted from Lauren Dunn, "Be thankful: Science says gratitude is good for your health," TODAY (5-12-17).