

Thanksgiving to Thanksliving

November 25, 2012

Who didn't have turkey on Thanksgiving? I want to know who broke with tradition. Who skipped the traditional pumpkin pie on Thursday? We love the traditional Thanksgiving meal. Mom spends all day in the kitchen to prepare it. Unfortunately, it is gone in less than 15 minutes, but the taste is worth it. Polls on the Internet say Thanksgiving is America's second favorite holiday, only surpassed by Christmas¹. Part of the reason for Thanksgiving's popularity is undoubtedly the turkey, potatoes and stuffing. I think another reason for its popularity is the much needed rest and reconnection with friends and family it brings.

At the heart of Thanksgiving is not a meal of turkey with all the trimmings. It is not a day of rest and relaxation. It is a day to give thanks!

This week, to help myself give more thanks, and hopefully to help each of us, I spent time studying thankfulness in the Bible. I wanted to know what the Bible says about thankfulness in our life.

Let's find out what the Bible says about Thanksgiving.

What is the biblical background of Thanksgiving?

While Thanksgiving has its roots with the Pilgrims, we celebrate Thanksgiving as a national holiday largely because Abraham Lincoln declared it one during the Civil War. He realized our nation needed to regularly fix our eyes on God's blessings, especially during a time of national crisis.

¹ <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/878/Default.aspx>

A national holiday of thankfulness is nothing new. When we put our fingers in the Bible, we find a number of them. In the Old Testament, many of Israel's national holidays were national holidays of thanksgiving. They were similar to our Thanksgiving today. Probably the two feasts of Israel that most closely resemble our Thanksgiving are the Feast of Harvest and the Feast of Booths.

The Feast of Harvest

The Feast of Harvest has a moving target for its name. Sometimes you find it called the Feast of Pentecost because it took place 50 days after the Passover. Sometimes you find it called the Feast of Weeks. That is because the feast took place exactly seven weeks after Passover. Don't let the holiday's nicknames throw you off. It is the same holiday. It marked the end of the barley harvest, which came in June. The nation gathered to celebrate God's goodness with the crop.

The Feast of Tabernacles

The Feast of Tabernacles is another Thanksgiving holiday in Israel. It also has a moving target for its name. Sometimes it was called the Feast of Booths because people lived in telephone booth-size structures made of willow and palm branches during the holiday. This helped the Jews remember how their ancestors lived in tents when wandering in the wilderness. They were thankful to have a land to call their own and a harvest enjoy. The Feast of Tabernacles took place in the fall. It is the feast that most closely corresponds with our Thanksgiving. It took place after the olives, grapes and other fruits were

gathered. The best part of the holiday is that it lasted a week long. Anybody in favor of extending the Thanksgiving holiday to a week?

I want us to realize that national holidays of thanksgiving are nothing new to God's people. They had two of them, and one of them lasted for a week.

Psalms of thanksgiving

Expressing gratitude to God was much more than a national holiday. In the Bible, the book of Psalms is the song book of God's people. The book of Psalms has songs that talk about all different areas of life. It has songs to sing when depressed. It has songs to sing about the good times in life. One of the great themes of the Psalms is thanksgiving. God's people were not to be thankful only on the holidays. When they gathered, they were to sing of their thankfulness to God. They were to go throughout the week singing songs of gratefulness to God.

Thank offerings

In the Old Testament sacrificial system we also find a place for thanks. People didn't simply give offerings for sin when they were thankful to God for his blessing on their life, they gave thank offerings (Leviticus 7:12-15; Leviticus 23; 2 Chronicles 29:31; Amos 4:5). When people were thankful to God, they didn't just say it, they actually did something to show it through an offering.

What we find is that the heart of God's people in the Old Testament was a heart seasoned with thankfulness to God. To use a thanksgiving analogy, thankfulness was the stuffing in the lives of God's people. They had national

holidays to reflect on God's goodness; they sang about it whenever they gathered. They didn't just say it, they did something about it with their money.

Unlike the false religions that were enslaving the people, God's people were to have a heart not filled with fear but filled with thanksgiving. If they griped, it didn't honor God. If they grumbled, God wasn't pleased. God was honored with thankfulness.

When we get to the New Testament, thankfulness grows as we run across what I call *distinctively Christian* thanksgiving.

What is distinctively Christian thanksgiving?

Christian thankfulness is not thankfulness *for* but thankfulness *to*.

Many people are posting on Facebook for the 30 days of thankfulness. They are thankful for their health. They are thankful for their children. They are thankful for their spouses. They are thankful for their jobs. I want to challenge you to think about things differently. As a Christian, I don't want you to be thankful for anything.

As I was reflecting this week, I realized a Christian is not to be thankful for, they are to be thankful to. Thankfulness for just describes our relationship to something we have or enjoy. Thankfulness to gives the credit to God, who is the one who gave us all good things.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1:17 (ESV)

The Bible tells us every good thing we have is a gift from God. Appropriate thankfulness is not for what we have but to the one who gave us the gift.

Think of a child opening a present on Christmas morning. Pretend your daughter is wild about Barbie dolls. She constantly begs for a Barbie. On Christmas morning, she unwraps her presents to find a picture perfect Barbie doll among them. She tears open the box, runs to the phone and calls her best friend. She tells her how thankful she is for the new Barbie.

Is that girl truly thankful? I don't think so. True thankfulness is not for the doll, it is to the one who gave her the doll. True thankfulness wouldn't begin with her calling her friends; it would begin by her hugging her parents and then thanking God for giving her parents a job so they could buy her the gift. Christian thanksgiving is directed to the giver, not the gift.

Christian thankfulness is from grace to gratitude to glory.

...knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. 2 Corinthians 4:14–15 (ESV)

In this passage, Paul details how thanksgiving works in the life of a Christian. Thanksgiving always starts with the grace of God. The message of the Bible is that we are completely screwed up. We can promise ourselves again and again that we will break free from sin but we are addicted to sin like a drug addict. Great news --- God loves us. His own son, Jesus, died in our places for our sins. Jesus paid in full for all our sins. When we ask Jesus to forgive our sins, rather than receiving our just sentence of eternal condemnation in the Lake

of Fire, we are given the exact opposite. We are given eternal life with God. We are the objects of God's undeserved grace, not his fully-deserved wrath because Jesus took the wrath we deserve.

So Paul is excited. As God's grace through his Son extends to more and more people, what does Paul say will be peoples' responses? The response will be increasing thanksgiving to God.

There is a play on words in the Greek that the English masks. In the Greek, the word for the grace that comes from God is the word *charis*. The word for thanksgiving in the Greek is *eu-charis-tion*. As you can see, the word for grace is in the middle of the word for thanksgiving. The two are connected. One way to unmask what is happening in the original language is to simply change the English a bit. Instead of using the word thanksgiving, let's use the word gratitude so we can see they are related.

What Paul is saying is that when we experience God's grace in our lives, the reflexive response that we can't help but have is gratitude (thanksgiving) to God. The more people that experience God's grace, the more gratitude that swells up among humanity to God for his kindness.

Many people stop there. The problem with ending with our gratitude is it makes us the center of everything. If you haven't noticed, we are not the center of the universe. The purpose of the universe is not our pleasure. Who is the center of everything? God. Paul says our gratitude returns to God. It brings him more glory.

As Christians, we have experienced mind-boggling amounts of grace from God through Jesus. As that impacts our lives, we burst with gratitude. Our gratitude to God is what brings glory to God with our lives.

There is no room for ingratitude in the life of a Christian. God is good all the time. A heart of gratitude is how we glorify him.

Christian thankfulness is not vanquished by circumstances.

This is distinctively Christian. Christians have gratitude to God in spite of our circumstances. Before we look at this, I want you to know I am not making light of anyone's circumstances. I am not pretending suffering is not real. I have many friends who suffer deeply. I am simply keeping my finger in the text.

...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (ESV)

...giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Ephesians 5:20 (ESV)

When you are laid up in the hospital, how can you give thanks? When your wife leaves you or your husband dies, does that mean you are to pretend the agony doesn't hurt? How can we give thanks in all circumstances? That is the million dollar question.

No matter what assails us, God's purpose for us is not destroyed and his work in us is not ruined.

What he began in us on the day we first trusted him, he will continue to work in us.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

In the days of trial, we can still give thanks because God will use those trials to teach us to love Christ more. God will use our trials to form the spirit of Christ in us. What Satan intends to destroy us, God will use to mature us.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31 (ESV)

As Christians, no matter what is against us, we have God on our team. It reminds me of my time as a freshman on the high school wrestling team. At the time, I was slightly shorter but only 129 pounds, still wet from the shower. I was not the most athletic kid on the team. As a new wrestler, I was frequently beat up after practice. One day Jeff, a senior who was the heavyweight on the team, decided he had enough. He stepped into a group of freshmen and sophomores beating me up in the locker room after school. It didn't take long for him to scatter the crowd. Jeff stood by me for the rest of the season. This verse reminds me of those days. When the heavyweight on the wrestling team is for you, who can be against you? In the end, you will always win. If God is for us, at the end of the day, who can be against us? That is why we can have gratitude in tough times. No matter what happens to us, we know who is for us and who will ultimately win in the end --- God the father and his son, Jesus. They are the big dogs of the universe that nobody can beat.

God promises to work everything to conform us to Christ.

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)

We can also have gratitude in all circumstances because we have a promise from God. God promises to take whatever comes into our life and use it for our good, to grow us in holiness and to use it to shape us to be more like Jesus. The key to this verse is reading it in context. The good the verse talks about is not a life of ease and comfort; it is conforming us to be like Christ.

As Christians, when we go through good times and great blessings, we have hearts filled with gratitude to God not *for* the good gifts but *to* God because he is the giver of all good gifts.

When we go through tough times, we still respond with gratitude. God promises to use those tough times to form the character of Christ in us which is more valuable than anything else this world can offer. This is why we can have gratitude at all times and in all things. God is for us. Who can be against us?

How do I express thanksgiving (gratitude) that is acceptable to God?

Prayer

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. Colossians 4:2 (ESV)

One way we express our thankfulness to God is prayer. This week, my challenge is that every one of our prayer times contains thanksgiving to God. It is easy to just pray requests for what we want God to do rather than focus on thanking God for what he promises he will do and has done. Season every one of our prayer times this week with thankfulness.

Songs

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! Psalm 100:4 (ESV)

I mentioned earlier that many of the Psalms focus on thanksgiving. Some of the most meaningful worship songs are songs that give shape to the gratitude in our heart. When we sing them, God is glorified.

Speech

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:4 (ESV)

This verse probably stepped on your toes. I know it stepped on mine. I am not talking about the filthiness, crude jokes or foolish talk, but about the amount of thankfulness in my speech. Thankfulness is what the speech of a Christian should be known for.

The antidote to grumbling is gratitude.

When life isn't comfortable, it is easy to grumble, gripe and complain. Grumbling doesn't bring glory to God; gratitude is what brings glory to God. When I am grumbling, the antidote to grumbling is thanksgiving.

Let me give you an example of someone who replaced grumbling with gratitude. His name is Martin Rinkart. He was a Lutheran pastor who lived in the city of Eilenberg, Germany, in the 1600s. He began in his pastorate just as the Thirty Years' War was raging throughout Germany.

Waves of refugees streamed into the walled city of Eilenberg. Eventually, the Swedish army surrounded the gates. With minimal food, the city soon faced famine and plague. Death became a frequent occurrence. Martin, and the other pastors, worked constantly to share the Gospel and bury the dead. Eventually, the pastors of the city began dying, until only Martin Rinkart was alive. History

tells us that so many people were dying that sometimes he performed 50 funerals a day.

To end the siege, the Swedes demanded a huge ransom. Martin was the one chosen to negotiate the conclusion of the war. He successfully negotiated the ransom. When the siege was over, the destruction on the city was beyond calculation. More than half the city was dead. Eight hundred homes were destroyed. Many in the city were sick. What were they to do? There was bitterness and rage. What would be the antidote to the grumbling and bitterness?

Martin decided to compose a hymn called “Now Thank We All Our God.” He insisted the citizens of the city sing it and remember all they could thank God for. That hymn was used powerfully in that city’s history to restore the people. It is still a popular hymn that many hymn books have today.

My friends, Thanksgiving is not just a holiday to celebrate one day a year. For Christians, it is the way we are to live every day of the year. For Christians, a better term Thanksgiving would be Thanksliving. That is the part thankfulness plays in our life.

The key points I want you to remember this morning are:

1. We don’t give thanksgiving *for* our gifts, we give thanksgiving *to* the giver.
2. The reflex response to God’s grace is always gratitude, which is how we bring glory to God.

3. We give thanks in spite of our circumstances. In good circumstances we thank God for those blessings. In tough circumstances, we thank God for how he will use them to conform our characters to be like Christ.
4. One of the ways we express our gratitude to God is with our mouth in prayer, song and our everyday words.

In the small group work sheets, we cover another important way we express our gratitude to God, through our choices.



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