

“Recipe for a Thankful Heart”

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Texts: Hebrews 13:15-16**

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” Hebrews 13:15-16

When it comes to our American Thanksgiving holiday, we all have things we look forward to the most. Pie, family, turkey, mashed potatoes, football. For most these are critical ingredients to an enjoyable Thanksgiving holiday. Another ingredient that is essential is a thankful heart. A little girl who was designated to pray for the family’s Thanksgiving meal certainly understands this idea much better than anyone else in her family.

This morning I’d like for us to examine our hearts in light of what Scripture teaches us about Thanksgiving. Please pray with me:

Loving Father, You are a good God. Everything we have comes to us as a provision from Your hand. You have given us more than we could ever ask or imagine, yet our hearts are still not content. Lord, we pray that the light of Your Word would shine upon our hearts this morning. Adjust our attitudes to reflect the goodness of Your love. We ask that you would replace our discontentment with gratitude. Take away our bitterness and instill in us thankfulness that honors You rightly. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

The first question that I’d like for us to consider is “Why have a thankful heart?”

A thankful heart protects us from a life of bitterness and discontentment. Dissatisfaction comes when our attention shifts from what we have to what we don’t have. One of the most notorious examples of this in the whole Bible comes from Numbers 11. A certain people had been given freedom from slavery, deliverance from their enemies, and a perfect supply of food, heavenly food at that, twice a day. Yet they complained to one another because they didn’t have the variety of food they wanted. In their ingratitude and discontentment, God’s anger burned against them. They snubbed His provision and focused on what they lacked rather than what the Lord had done for them. Their dissatisfaction became their downfall.

Before we are too quick to side with God against the Israelites, have we looked at our own hearts first? How much time do we spend day-dreaming about all that we’d like to have rather than thanking God for the good gifts we have already been blessed with?

Last spring I went to New Jersey for study leave and to Southern California to visit family, all within a month's time. I lovingly refer to those trips as my Midwest appreciation tour. There are many things that I cherish about both of those locations. But I know that God wants me to be content with what He has blessed me with now. So as I sat in traffic and saw advertisements for unreasonably priced housing, I praised God for the blessings He has given me here in Ohio.

I love to travel and can definitely find reasons to appreciate whatever place I happen be. In regards to location, I can generally echo Paul's words of "I have learned the secret of being content" (Philippians 4:12). Yet sometimes I am slower to do so when it comes to stages of life. I often want God to rewind or speed up time so that I can relive the past or get onto other things, rather than appreciating and enjoying the gifts He has given me right now to savor.

Are you able to enjoy whatever season of life God has placed you in? Are you content with what God has already given you to enjoy? I have both observed and experienced that if we can't be content with the status quo and give thanks to God today, then we are usually unlikely to do so when circumstances change.

The second and most critical reason to have a thankful heart is that God commands it. We are admonished throughout Scripture give praise and thanksgiving to God. Our scripture text this morning is one such example. Elsewhere we are told "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18) and "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His love endures forever" (Psalm 136:1). In the Old Testament, God's people were commanded to bring a variety of burnt offering to God for different purposes, one of which was for thanksgiving when God had brought you through a specific trial. When Christ became the final sacrifice, once and for all for the atonement of sin, believers were then called to bring a different kind of offering before God. The New Testament calls the kind of offering we are to give to God a "sacrifice of praise" (Hebrews 13:15). This is an offering we can bring to God anytime and anywhere. A sacrifice of praise can be thanking God for who He is and what He has done and not forgetting "to do good and share what you have" (Hebrews 13:16).

When we were little children, the first thing that our parents taught us about manners was to say "thank you." They want us to be polite, but they also know it is for our own good. Parents know that without regularly being thankful to others, children will become selfish and ungrateful. God knows that without giving Him thanks our souls will grow selfish and ungrateful.

The next reason I suggest for why we should have a thankful heart piggy backs on the one we just discussed. We should have thankful hearts because it honors God. Even if we never thanked God He would still be the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Nevertheless, God's fame spreads when we choose to thank Him. Key leaders in Scripture had songs of thanks composed after an important event or triumph. These songs of God's saving acts became the vehicles by which future generations learned about the nature of God. When we publicly thank God in our speech and prayers, others learn about what God is like. Also, giving God the thanks is the best way to stay humble. When we rightly give the credit to God for what has happened we are kept from pride and God is glorified.

We should also have a thankful heart because we really ARE blessed. As believers we are blessed spiritually. We have the assurance that our sins are forgiven and that we will enjoy eternal life with Christ. We can trust that God is doing something glorious with our lives and daily making us into new creations. Scripture teaches that God's grace and the mystery of Christ in us are incomparable riches. These riches alone give us enough to thank God everyday of our lives.

Yet there is more. We are also incredibly blessed materially. Presbyterians are the wealthiest Christians on the entire globe right now, and probably the richest Christians as a group that has ever lived. When I ponder the weight of that statement I am overwhelmed by the responsibility that entails. As Americans we enjoy unprecedented conveniences and comforts than most of the world could ever dream of attaining. Even the poorest among us are better off than 2/3 of the world's population. This doesn't mean that God loves us more. It means we really have no reason not to be thankful when it comes to material wealth. We have been blessed to be a blessing to others. We are especially blessed if you place our lives in the global context. I know that when my trivial inconveniences are luxuries for others, I have a new found gratitude and contentment.

Given all these reasons to give thanks, what's the recipe for a heart that is truly thankful? I recommend at least four key ingredients:

First, let your thankfulness overflow into concrete gestures. Our main scripture text today says, "do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." If you are thankful for the family God has given you, make sure you tell them. Also, not everyone has the same blessing. Invite someone without a family nearby to join your family for a meal or a day. Are you thankful that God has blessed you with good health? Why not use some of that blessing to help those who might need a hand with energy intensive activities around the house? If God has really blessed you in a certain skill area, have you thought about volunteering to use that gift for a person or organization that could really benefit from your expertise? Our thanksgiving to God multiplies when we let it overflow and others praise God too for the gift He has given them in you!

The second ingredient in my recipe for a thankful heart is to cultivate an attitude of gratitude all year long. In 1 Chronicles 16 when David brought the ark of God to Jerusalem, there was much rejoicing. David commissioned a Psalm of thanks for the occasion and appointed a number of the Levites to the task of offering regular thanks to God. These times of thanks were to be perpetual, not just for feast days. Even though certain Levites were set aside for this duty, Scripture also makes it clear that we are to offer our praise personally.

In the book of Leviticus when regulations for all the offerings were being established, the people of God were called to bring their fellowship offerings with their own hands (7:28-30). God is not pleased by proxy praise. Just because the little girl in the video had cultivated a thankful heart and said the Thanksgiving prayer doesn't mean the rest of her family can slide by. God has given us gifts individually and has loved each of us as unique people. Don't let someone else's gratitude substitute for your own expressions of thanks to God. Maybe it will be during a walk

after the big dinner or while tucking your child into bed, but let your thanksgiving come from your own heart.

I think the key word in all of this is cultivate. Thanksgiving doesn't always come easy or naturally to us. Just as we would take time to cultivate the soil for our garden or to marinate the holiday roast, we must take time to intentionally refocus our hearts on what God has done for us. Often when I am cranky and more upset with God than pleased, I have to take an emotional time out and remind myself of God's goodness and provision. As I worked on my sermon this week I was hoping that extreme thanksgiving would just bubble up in my heart at every moment; that would certainly make my job of preaching on Thanksgiving easier. Occasionally it did, but as I wrestled with other things this week I was frequently tempted to give myself over to an ungrateful spirit. I had to consciously and repeatedly ask God to help me have a thankful heart and to focus on what He has done and Who He is rather than on my frustration and hurt.

This leads us to the third ingredient for a thankful heart: seek out ways to thank God during challenging circumstances. The pilgrims, whose celebration led to our holiday of Thanksgiving, were an incredible example of this. Their entrance into the new world was anything but easy. Disease and other tribulations took a significant toll on their surviving numbers. I am sure that many of the celebrants of the first Thanksgiving had lost many loved ones as they settled into a new land. Yet they choose to thank God for His provision: a place they could worship Him freely and a new people who could help them cultivate food. The presence of these new friends led to a bountiful harvest. God was to be praised!

I know this will be a challenging Thanksgiving for many as we continue to grieve the loss of Becca and other loved ones who are so precious to us. Even in the midst of my sadness in not having Becca's energetic presence in our youth group and in daily experiencing the deep pain of all who miss her so very much, God has pointed me to things I can be thankful about. I praise God that Becca grew up in the midst of a loving family and church family. There was never a day that went by when Becca didn't hear about God's great love for her. Becca loved to travel. I feel so blessed that I was able to lead her on her first international mission trip to Nicaragua this past summer. As I look back on the week before she died I am SO grateful for the extra opportunities I had to spend time with her. Sara and I took some of the high school girls to see a movie and eat ice cream that Saturday. I am blessed to be one of the last ones to share yummy Cold Stone ice cream with her. On Monday of that week, I happened to bump into her mom in the Kroger parking lot. She told me that both of her girls were playing soccer back to back the next evening if I was able to come. I am thankful I had the opportunity to see one of Becca's final soccer games. While the weight of our loss is still so very real, I know that even in the midst of our pain there are things for which we can choose to thank God.

In any circumstance we can always thank God for the opportunity to grow as followers of Christ. The traffic jam creates an opportunity for patience. The difficult school or work situation creates the opportunity for perseverance. The dark night of the soul allows us to walk by faith and not sight. Thankfulness adds sweetness to an otherwise bitter situation. Thanksgiving to God puts the icing on the cake that we have cause to rejoice. Indeed, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18).

The part that I love the most about our text this morning is that it opens with “Through Jesus.” As a people who are united with Christ in His death and resurrection we can give thanks when others can’t or won’t. We always have a reason to hope and a cause for rejoicing.

There, my last ingredient for a thankful heart is to remember what God has done. This is the most lasting thing for which we can ever give thanks. Family members move away, companies close, seasons change, but Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). In this season of Thanksgiving, do give thanks for the blessings you have today, but more than anything else may your heart praise the God who never fades or grows weary. “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).