

Thanksgiving in the New Testament

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

Well, Happy Thanksgiving Bethel. 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 all of you who already have your tree and decorations up, can you please chill out just a little and let us Thanksgiving folks enjoy our favorite holiday?

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday of the year, hands down. But perhaps not for the reasons that you would expect – it really isn't about family, food or football for me. In fact, I almost never spend Thanksgiving with my immediate family. In 13 years of marriage, Eva and I have spent Thanksgiving Day together just once. That's because every Thanksgiving week I go on a hunting trip with my father. I actually thought about showing some pictures this evening of my accomplishments, but I didn't want to offend any animal lovers here today. If you are interested you can check out my Facebook™ page later - just not during my message.

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.

Alright, time to get serious. Please take your copy of the Scriptures and turn with me to Ephesians 5. It's now my job to bring our time in the Word together today by taking a look at the subject of Thanksgiving in the New Testament. Wes blessed us by doing a wonderful job of bringing out the Old Testament meaning and expression, and now we want to take a look at what the New Testament authors have to say to us regarding this important aspect of the Christian life.

But first I have an admission to make....I have to admit I wasn't terribly eager for this assignment when Steve gave it to me a few weeks ago. It's not that I wasn't excited to preach, but rather I wasn't very excited about the topic - Thanksgiving. My first response, at least inwardly, was a little bit of a yawn. Do you know what I mean? I was thinking, it's a holiday weekend, everyone's going to have turkey hangover, and a message on Thanksgiving doesn't seem to be the thing to wake everyone up from their post-Thanksgiving tryptophan slumber (tryptophan is the chemical in turkey that makes you sleepy). But, thankfully, I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut and in the past two weeks, the Lord has done a real work in my heart and transformed my understanding of the importance and significance of being thankful, and I am hoping that He will do the same for you this morning.

You see, the Holy Spirit has convinced me of the absolutely essential nature that gratitude plays in the life of a believer as well as the real lack of it in my life and the church as a whole. As Al Mohler wrote in his blog this week, "thanksgiving is a deeply theological fact and a key to understanding what we really believe about God, ourselves, and the world we

experience.” 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 New Testament has to say about Thanksgiving. Believe it or not, the New Testament has a lot to say about giving thanks. In fact, there are more than 50 references to thanksgiving in the New Testament. Let’s begin our study by looking at three key passages that do a great job of summarizing the New Testament’s teaching. Since they are all close together, I am going to simply have you turn to each one of them with me. I know that we rarely have you flip through your Bible during our services, but 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.***

The key verse of course, is 20 (in bold). We are to give thanks *always for everything* to God. Turn with me now to 1 Thessalonians 5, just a few pages over. Let’s look at the same passage we focused on during our prayer services two weeks ago, 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.***

What sticks out to you about these two passages? A number of things, I am sure, but perhaps the most obvious are the many all-inclusive words such as always, all, and everything.

If you came today wondering what God’s will is for your life, here you go. God wants you to be thankful to Him for everything all the time in every circumstance. And He doesn’t want us to be just a little thankful, but rather really, really thankful. We see this in Colossians 2, which is about two pages back. Look at verse 6: *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.***

The word abounding 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 that we couldn’t possibly be any more thankful.

I saw a quote on a church sign this week 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? Like

the one I saw a couple of summers ago during a heat wave, 'You think this is hot?' As if someone driving by is going to think, right there, "Hell is a lot hotter than this; I need to be saved!" Or how about one that I see on a regular basis 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 maybe my favorite of all, "We might not be Dairy Queen, but we have great Sundays."

Despite all of that, I finally found one this week 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 the New Testament 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.

I want to show you one more passage that brings home for us why being thankful is so important. It comes from Paul's epistle to the church at Rome, in one of the most serious and revealing passages of Scripture. In Romans 1:21 we read 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.*

The "they" here in Romans 1 are unbelievers, and Paul essentially says 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 gratefulness. 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 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 for a number, if not all of us, that when it comes to thanksgiving we are in many ways practical atheists. 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 they have been blessed by God but would rarely, if ever, display by their words and actions that this is true.

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. At other times we are simply forgetful. 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. I don't have a Scripture passage to point to here, but 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.

I'd like to complete my message tonight by giving you three 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? How do we fight the sin of pride that leads to ungratefulness? While there are many things that we can and should do, let me give you three simple answers to this important question.

First, we must maintain the proper perspective on life. Several months back in our 1 Corinthians study, there was a verse that rocked my world. It's 1 Corinthians 4:15, where Paul is getting all over the Corinthians for thinking that they were pretty big stuff. He asks them this question: *What do you have that you did not receive?* 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.

I know that this is a hard pill to swallow, so take it slowly. But no matter how hard we work, or how smart we are, or how good the choices that we make are, 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 tonight 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 blessings that we lose our attitude of thanksgiving and become discontent and ungrateful. So, we have to maintain the proper perspective.

Second, and I know we talk about this truth a lot here at Bethel, we must develop a deep understanding of God's sovereign goodness. By deep I mean deeper than you currently have. Do you realize that it is only possible to be thankful in all circumstances if you affirm that God is completely sovereign over everything and that His sovereignty always works for your good? How can you be thankful for something if that something isn't for your good? You 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.*

By the way, we need to recognize a significant difference here, 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 good for 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. For believers, the deeper our understanding of God's sovereign goodness in our lives, the more thankful we will become for how He uses everything, yes everything, to bless us.

Finally, if we are going to grow in gratefulness, we must learn to preach the gospel to ourselves every day. This is a simple, basic truth that if you have been at Bethel for any length of time you have heard on multiple occasions. But it is worth saying again because it is perhaps the single most important step in walking with Jesus.

We need the Gospel every day of our lives, for two primary reasons. On the one hand, the gospel helps us to have the proper perspective that we talked about a few moments ago. It reminds us that we are terrible sinners. 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 Christ we would be in grave danger, with no hope of rescue.

On the other hand, at the same time it tells us that we have a great Savior. There is one who came and lived the perfect life that we cannot; a perfect One who was hung on a Roman 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.

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 at all times, thank Him for the cross and the eternity in heaven waiting for you because of it. As the author of Hebrews says, *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.* (Hebrews 12:28)

Friends, we are the heirs of 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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