

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

69 What Is the Christian View of Thanksgiving?

Scripture: Psalm 92:1-15; Ephesians 5:14-20

Shakespeare has written that the winter wind is not so unkind as man's ingratitude. His thinking was that while the wind may chill the body, ingratitude chills the soul and was, therefore, the most unkind of the two. Christians are not people who have chilled souls. That is the clear impression one receives when attempting to draft a Christian view of Thanksgiving from the Bible. The Scripture passages mentioned above are expressions of gratitude and exhortation indicative of what the Word of God teaches on the subject of thankfulness.

We do not think of November without associating it with Thanksgiving Day which we celebrate with football games, appropriate gatherings and elaborate feasting. It is not difficult for us to set aside such a day for it is a reasonable thing to do. We have been reared in a society which expects us to dutifully give expression to our appreciation when something is done for us. Well mannered people, polite people, courteous people, have learned to say "thank you." It is the thoughtful thing to do, and it follows that God should not be treated otherwise. Now, that is what we want to think about in our study this morning.

I. OUR TENDANCY IS TO BE UNGRATEFUL:

Verses 14-21 of Ephesians 5 provide some interesting insights into what God considers man's highest act, the worship and praise of Himself. The language and meaning of Scripture is plain. We are to *"enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise."* (Psalm 100:4) We are to *"offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay our vows to the most High; And call upon (Him) in the day of trouble."* (Psalm 50:14-15) In I Thessalonians 5:18 Paul calls all things thankworthy, and the Hebrew writer (13:15-16) talks about thanksgiving as being a confessional activity which pleases God very much. In spite of God's desires the world in which we live is marked by ingratitude. Thanklessness abounds. We are surrounded by indifference, lack of appreciation, apathy, grumbling and griping. Paul approaches the thought of giving thanks by admonishing, *"Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you."* (5:14) In the verses which are immediately before he describes the people

of God as children of light. (5:8-13) People who do not have God in their lives are in the dark and so great is their darkness, they are like the darkness themselves. Light renders the ability to discern between alternatives, in this case what is pleasing or not pleasing to God. Darkness makes such a choice impossible. People are not thankful to God because they are incapable of realizing how important the giving of thanks is, so great is their darkness. The poetic quotation about the sleeper called to awaken has long been considered part of an early Christian hymn. Inactivity describes the one who is asleep and in this case one who is not active toward God. The cry is to awake from the sleep of unbelief and engage in the noble activity of being thankful to God. It is not natural to so stir oneself. Our tendency is to be complacent and indifferent. The dog knows the hand that feeds him, but man does not willingly acknowledge that hand.

Jesus knew this tendency toward ingratitude that was in man and He wove it into a rebuke against nine leprosy men He has healed. The story is told in Luke 17:11-19. Actually, there were ten lepers, one was a Samaritan, he was not a full blooded Jew. Samaritans had mixed their blood by intermarriage with pagans during the time of captivity and the Jews disowned them from the covenant between Israel and Jehovah. They all owed a debt of gratitude to Jesus for healing them, but only one returned, it was the outsider. Jesus then asked, *"The nine, where are they?"* The text indicates they did not come back to give God the glory. I have no Scriptural basis for feeling they did in point of fact return for a momentary "thank you." I think chances are fairly good they gave some kind of expression to Jesus, but it was not enough and illustrates the tendency on the part of all men to basic ingratitude. The Samaritan turned back and came to Jesus *"and with a loud voice glorified God."* That's the fellow who went away with a clean body and a healed spirit. You see, words don't make it. God requires us to say more than "thank you" with our lips. The Christian view of thanksgiving is that it is as much an attitude as it is an expression or activity. That is why only one of the ten was really healed. One side thought here, this is the only instance in the New Testament where a leper is spoken of as being cured or healed. Lepers were cleansed because there was ceremonial uncleanness associated with them. This man was cured, he was made whole. He now had fellowship with man and God. It was no casual thing with him. He came falling at Jesus feet loudly praising God. There is never anything ho-hum, take it or leave it, or nonchalant about true thanksgiving in Christian perspective. But the tendency is to be like the nine, to throw out a "thank you" and be on our way.

II. INGRATITUDE TOWARD GOD IS A STEP AWAY FROM HIM:

It is well for us to realize that there is a difference in the severity of our shortcomings or sins before God. Many Christians are under the impression that sin is sin and that is all that can be said about it. This is false and foreign to Scripture. We have long been told that “little” sins are equal to “big” sins in God's sight. I do not believe this view squares with Scripture. All sins are sin, but not all are equally sinful. In Matthew 23:23 Jesus speaks of the “weightier” matters of the law. When you put things on God's scale they weigh so much. Tithing weighs so much, as do justice and mercy. The law required both, but justice and mercy carry more weight. In another place Jesus taught that the help afforded a person in need was of more importance than “*profaning the Sabbath.*” (Matthew 12:5) His conviction was that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27) There are many examples of the greater good in Scripture. This is the first and great commandment to love God. (Matthew 22:38-39) Jesus’ disciples healed and plucked corn on the Sabbath. In His eyes their conduct was “guiltless” and “good.” (Matthew 12:7,12) It was a greater good than keeping the letter of the law. You see, there is the scale of values in the eyes of Jesus. (Matthew 5:22, 11:24; Luke 19:17-19) We find this in Paul's writings when he speaks of the greatest virtue in I Corinthians 11:30, 13:13 and II Corinthians 5:10,

The reason for mentioning this is because ingratitude ranks quite importantly in our walking away from God. In Romans 1:20-21 we have the steps in humanity's waywardness described. There is enough condemnation written in the majesty of the sun and stars, according to verse 21, to keep any unbeliever away from God. The march continues. They did not worship God, they were not thankful to God, they became vain, their minds were clouded, they became idolaters, and finally God gave them up. This is the pattern. Unthankfulness has an important place in man's departure from God.

III. GOD'S PURPOSE FOR OUR LIVES IS THAT THEY BE FOUNTAINS OF THANKSGIVING:

While Christian thanksgiving is not natural to us, God's purpose for our lives is that our thanks to Him shall not be silenced under any circumstances. This is the teaching here in Ephesians 5:20, “*always giving thanks for all things,*” and the same truth is mentioned in I Thessalonians 5:18, along with the reminder, “*...this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*” Going beyond exhortation,

Thessalonian Christians were to understand that being thankful was God's particular desire for them. They were clearly told that the giving of thanks was the will of God for their lives. It was to be further understood that thanksgiving was no mere abstract idea, but that it would show its various effects. Returning to Ephesians 5 we find the value, of genuine thanksgiving in the following ways.

1. Thanksgiving Makes the Best Use of Time:

It is very interesting to me that Paul mentions time in the context of giving thanks. He writes, *“making the most of your time, because the days are evil.”* (5:16) The word used here suggests placing a value on time. It was used in the market place to be certain that an article was not sold for less than it was worth. Time used to its highest worth is time spent in thankfulness to God, in the acknowledgment of His goodness. Time which is spent in complaining and grumbling is wasted time, time which counts for nothing, it has no value. We have an example of this, I believe in Numbers 11:1 where it is said that the people complained and it displeased the Lord. (Numbers 11:1)

2. Thanksgiving Honors the Holy Spirit:

“Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.” (5:18) The Apostle Paul is drawing the contrast to the pagan world which drinks to the point of uncontrol and those who are divinely intoxicated because they are controlled by the Spirit. Until we know the infilling of the Holy Spirit it is inconceivable that we will ever come to the place where we are able always to give thanks for all things. Furthermore, it isn't only the Holy Spirit who is recognized, but true Christian giving of thanks exalts the Father and reveals the Son. Verse 20 teaches that thanks are given to the Father and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a Trinitarian thank you. Whenever the people of God join together they have a chance to honor the Godhead. They can be grateful that the plan of the Father is being worked out in their lives, as it is being enjoyed through the work of the Son, and entered into through the control of the Spirit. This is a supernaturalistic lifestyle. One of the very sad things that somehow happens to Christians is that they become very naturalistic. The naturalism of the unbeliever begins to wear upon the Christian and the great distinguishing feature of the Christian life, which is supernaturalism or belief in a creator, keeper, redeemer God. The Christian feels this is a reasonable world view or philosophy to live by. The counterpart is to endow nature with qualities which have produced and

which maintain the world. The Christian thinks right thoughts about God and in so doing, is led to give thanks to God. Ingratitude kills the Christian faith because it expresses a lack of confidence or concern for the God who does mighty deeds, hears prayers, and providentially governs in the world.

3. Thanksgiving Is a Help to Others:

In verse 19 we are reminded that thanksgiving is not only a good idea, but that it affects others. Colossians 3:16 is a parallel passage which adds the phrase, *“teaching and admonishing others.”* Here we have the speaking of the Word of God (5:19), the singing of the glory of God (5:19) and the sharing of the authority of God (5:21). The practical significance of a life of thanksgiving and praise is amazing. The person who is thanking God continually is either crazy or has made a great discovery and cannot keep it to himself.

In this regard let me point out a verse which is found in the Psalms. It is Psalm 40:3, *“And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many shall see and fear, and will trust in the Lord.”* We don't see songs, we see lives. When lives of people who praise God under the energy of an unquenched and ungrieved Holy Spirit are seen, the result is that many will come to the faith. There isn't anything that rattles or jars an unbeliever more than a person who sees the hand of the Lord in everything and praises Him for it. Personal thankfulness, on the other hand, is a means of encouraging fellow believers. In Acts 16:25 we have an example of people coming to the faith through the ministry of praising Christians.

IV. THANKSGIVING HAS NO RELATIONSHIP TO CIRCUMSTANCES:

Psalm 92 begins with the words that it is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord. The implication follows that it is a bad thing to withhold such gratitude. We can understand how it is good to thank the Lord when things are going well for us, but the interesting and very penetrating thing about Christian thankfulness is that it is to be given at all times. When the Apostle Paul dictated the words of Ephesians 5:20, he did so under the most amazing circumstances. He was sitting in prison and chained to two Roman soldiers. Ruling over him and everybody else at the time was the tyrant Nero. This man murdered his own mother and later set the city of Rome aflame, casting the blame upon Christians and going onto persecute them unmercifully. The sword of this sworn enemy of believers hung precariously over the head of Paul. Yet, in spite of these difficult

conditions and circumstances here is a man who talks about thanking God at all times for all things. Clearly, he knew something we don't or he was out of his mind.

You see, Paul saw himself not as a prisoner of Nero or the Roman empire. He saw himself as a slave and prisoner of Jesus Christ. His great confidence was that his Lord was ordering the course of his life, bringing the details to pass in a way that will work for good. This same Paul wrote to Roman people telling them that *"all things are working together for good to them who love God."* (Romans 8:28) He was sure not to say that all things are good, because in themselves they are not good at all. They are terrible. All things are working together for good. The *"all things"* of Romans 8:28 are the *"all things"* of Ephesians 5:20. Psalm 92 speaks of the designs and purpose's of God as being very deep. (92:4-5) Indeed they are. Whatever has been experienced in the past is not to be compared with God's purposes in terms of blessing for the future. (I Corinthians 2:9)

The Christian giving of thanks is both a spiritual and sensible activity. God allows cause and effect to work in this world which has been a disaster area ever since the woman saw the fruit was good for food and it will continue to be until the conquering Christ puts the last sin down and reigns over a redeemed creation. Until then life will be characterized by brevity, uncertainty, tragedy and inadequacy. The sum total of sin's effect is incredible and has spilled over upon everything which touches our lives. When we come to the Bible we find something which can lift our spirits and give us courage for our days. We find that God is in control of even the processes of death and decay and therefore no ultimate tragedy can befall the committed and informed Christian. When this kind of truth manages to grip our lives the whole picture changes. We live out our lives within the providence of God knowing He does all things well, He is very, very wise, and we can entrust ourselves and all we have to Him, knowing there is final triumph and glory. Thanksgiving is not a day. It is an attitude. It is a confidence. We can be thankful that God is there whatever the circumstances.

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,
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