

Things To Be Thankful For

Sunday AM

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You know, we've made that declaration this morning, "O come to the altar, the Father's arms are open wide." It's a declaration that we made over and over and over again but, you know, I think sometimes we lose some of the subtleness part of that. There was a statement that we declared earlier in that piece that said, "Have you come to the end of yourself?" You see, until we come to the end of ourselves, until we come to the end of our own endeavors and our own best achievements do we truly understand the grace and the mercy and the desires of the Lord for ourselves. Today I ask you a very simple question: have you come to the end of yourself?

Let's pray.

Lord, as we gather together today as our hearts have been prepared to hear from your word, Lord, I pray that we would not see this as just a time on the calendar where we check off a box. God, I pray that we would not see this as some type of cerebral exercise but, Lord, may we approach your word as you told us to, that these are the inspired preserved words from on high, not suggestions, not good ideas, but this is as if you were speaking directly into our ear, into our mind, and into our heart this day. Lord, help us come to the end of ourselves just as the prodigal did in Luke 15 so that when he returned your arms were opened wide. God, we recognize your arms are wide. We recognize your calling. Help us this day as we read your word to come to the end of ourselves. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning I want to encourage you, open your Bibles to the book of Isaiah 57. Now as you're turning to Isaiah 57, if you're a guest or visitor with us today, I want to welcome you to kind of a journey that we're taking as a family of faith. It's about a three year journey where we are walking through the Scriptures a chapter or two chapters a day and you'll notice that through the book of Isaiah because of its length, we've been walking through two chapters a day and I've had several folks come to me and say, "Isaiah is rough. It's tough. I mean, there's a lot of material there." Here's the good news, this week we roll out of Isaiah and into Matthew and so a book of the Bible that we're probably a little more familiar with.

Today as we turn to Isaiah 57, I want to do something a little bit different. You see, typically we look back on the passages that we've read throughout the week, maybe

there's a certain theme, maybe there's a specific story, but today Isaiah 57 is actually one of our Bible reading passages from this day so you may or may not have an opportunity to read chapter 57 and 58 of Isaiah but the reason I want to do so is that these two verses that we're going to look at today really summarize this great prophet. Now understand, the Lord gave him 66 chapters of information and one of the things that we see in Isaiah is this holy tension. There is this impending rightfully-owed judgment of God on one side and then there is this hand of mercy and grace on the other. So as you read through the book of Isaiah, you see the judgment of God impending, you see his righteousness being extended; you see the result or consequences of our sin and then you see his mercy being bestowed. So in this kind of holy tension within the prophet Isaiah, we come to chapter 57, verses 15 and 16, to what I believe will be not only a wonderful summary of this great book of the Bible but also a challenge for us this week as we approach what we know as a week of thanksgiving. It says,

15 For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones. 16 For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made.

Now out of 66 chapters in what we know as the book of Isaiah, it is difficult at best to pick out just a verse or two that could summarize the entire message but I believe verses 15 and 16 does because it basically says that the Lord is high, he is lofty, he is rightfully one who can judge, but yet it says he wants to revive those of a contrite spirit and a humble heart. Today as we approach this week of Thanksgiving, it's a week in which we will be with folks maybe we haven't seen in a long time, it's a time that we'll see family that maybe we see on an occasion basis, it's a week where we do all that we can to watch as much football as we can, I mean, a week where we come and eat together as a family, but it will be a time at some level this week, you and I will spend a few moments either with others or by ourselves and we will maybe out loud or maybe just the whisper of our own voice, we will give a word of thanks, thanks for the family, thanks for the food, thanks for the freedoms that we cherish in this culture and country of ours, but I want to look at Isaiah 57 today and look at things we should be thankful for when it comes to our relationship with the Lord.

The first thing we need to be thankful for is that the Lord, God himself, he is distinct. He is different than humanity. Notice what it says in verse 15, "the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity." Now humanity has been perpetually guilty of making "gods in their own image," whether it be the Greeks and the Romans and the mythology of days of old, we have this tendency to make those that we adore, we honor, just a tad bit better or maybe a little bit higher than us, but what we see here with the distinctfulness of God is his perspective is completely different than anything that we can imagine or grasp. He is high. He is lofty. He is the holy One. He inhabits eternity. Time is of no essence to him. It is relevant to him but not of essence to him. In fact, Isaiah 66 makes this declaration, "Heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool." In fact, you go a couple of chapters

earlier in Isaiah 55, it says that his thoughts are not our thoughts, his ways are not our ways. His distinctfulness, his perspective is so much different. In fact, if you'll allow me today, I want to share with you three kind of theological terms. It's the omni's, by the way "omni" means "all." The fact that God is omnipresent, that he is everywhere; he is omniscient, he knows everything; he's omnipotent which means he's all-powerful.

I know those are big words that takes just a moment to unpack but in the spirit of Thanksgiving, in the spirit of Isaiah 57, I want to think about this for just a moment, the fact that God is omniscient, it means he knows everything. You know we need to be thankful for that. You say, "Why?" Because he knows every hurt you've ever had. He knows every struggle that you've walked through. He knows every disappointment that you've encountered. He knows every time you've ever been done wrong by somebody else. He is all-knowing. He knows absolutely everything that you've had to walk through, go through or experience in life and shouldn't we be grateful that when we talk about the Lord, that he's not absent minded. We don't have to remind him and say, "Do you remember what happened a few months ago?" You see, because he inhabits eternity, he's got it all.

It also says not only that he's omniscient or all-knowing, he's omnipresent, that means he's everywhere. You know, this is the season not only of Thanksgiving and what we begin to roll into the Christmas season but this is also as many people say, the loneliest time of the year. This is the time where we remember and we hate the fact that we've lost loved ones and people that have passed. This is the time where we experience the heartache of loneliness. Shouldn't we be thankful or shouldn't we be grateful that it doesn't matter whether we're in a crowd of a million or a crowd of one, there's nowhere you can go that God is not. In fact, in Psalm 139, King David makes this great declaration, he says, "If I go the highest mountain, you're there. If I go down to the lowest valley, you are there." How many times have we had this thought, "God, does anybody understand? Does anybody even know I exist?" He knows exactly where you are, what you're doing, what you're struggling with. He is everywhere. It doesn't matter if humanity tries to marginalize us or shove us to the side, there is no place that anybody or anything can place you that he is not there.

He knows it all, he is everywhere, and here's the great news: he's omnipotent, he's all-powerful. That means there's not a struggle, there's not a disease, there's not a problem, there's not an addiction, there is not anything in this life that he can't take care of. He has the ability to break the bonds of any struggle. He has the ability to mend things that the world says can't be mended. He is all-powerful.

Now when we think about this, this is critical because in this time where we will receive so much information about what the world tells us we should be thankful for, aren't we grateful that we have a God who knows everything about us, knows wherever we are located with whatever situation we're going through and there is nothing that we bring before him that he ever looks at us and says, "Well, I don't think I can handle that one."

He's got it all but not only does he have a perspective that we can't grasp at times, he's peculiar and you say, "Well, peculiar, that's a strange word." Not in this case. Look in verse 15. He's not only the lofty One that inhabits eternity, his name is Holy. He is the distinct one. He is the different one. He is the sacred one. Do you know what the Bible says about humanity? All of our best works are as filthy rags.

Back in the book of Leviticus and repeated over in 1 Peter 1 it says, "Be holy for the Lord your God is holy." In fact, in James 1 it says that the Lord has never tempted man to sin, never not once. And when we talk about the distinctfulness of God that we should be grateful and thankful for today, not only his power, his knowledge, his presence but we need to be thankful that the God that we seem to, the God that we serve, the God we love, he is the only holy one in the universe. He is the distinct one. He is the different one which means this: that nothing he commands, nothing he encourages, nothing he challenges us with will ever be contrary to his will, his way and his word. He is the holy One.

Shouldn't we be thankful today that we have a God, we have a Creator, we have a sustainer who is different, who is distinct, who is outside and far from what all of humanity offers us every day of our lives? But as we talk about thankfulness not just the fact that he's distinct, I want you to notice the middle of verse 15, it says, "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him." I'm going to stop there for just a moment. It says he dwells in this high and holy place, with him. Now that's a qualification that we're going to talk about in just a moment but I want you to understand we need to be thankful not only that we serve this all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God but he actually desires to dwell with us.

I want you to think about the proximity there. His desire is not to say, "Hey, y'all stand a million light years away while I'm up here taking care of business. I will dwell with them." You know, as we approach what we know as the Christmas season, one of the great Christmas passages that's found in the prophet Isaiah back in chapter 7, the Lord says, "Seek a sign from me for, behold, a virgin shall conceive and give birth and his name will be Immanuel," which means God with us. It is his desire, it is his intent to dwell with us and I want you to think about the extent that he went to dwell with us. It wasn't just the Incarnation, it wasn't just the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, it wasn't just the fact that he who created everything known, walked on the very dust of his creation, it wasn't just the fact that he hungered and he thirsted, it was the fact that he was willing, he was willing to allow himself to bear our sins on his cross. He was willing to bear the nails. He was willing to bear the crown of thorns. He was willing to bear the mockery, the shame, the ridicule that came from all of humanity on Golgotha or Calvary's mountain that day. When it says that he wants to dwell, he desires to be in a relationship with, I think we need to be thankful today what he was willing to do for this relationship, what he was willing to endure, what he was willing to allow himself to become so that that chasm or that gap or that space between his holiness and our sinfulness could be breached.

You know, you go to the book of Revelation 3 and you find yourself in one of the seven churches of Revelation. Notice the church of Laodicea and it gets a bad wrap for a rightful reason, it's the lukewarm church. By the way, when you start studying those seven churches in Revelation, the Lord says some good things to them, some bad things, but when it comes to Laodicea, not much good there. I mean, this place, it's a mess. It talks about that they've got buildings and money and they're self-sufficient, but they don't have the Lord. In verse 20 of Revelation 3 I want you to hear what Jesus says. This is his analogy, this is his perspective on things. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man will open, I will come into him and I will sup with him. I will have a relationship with him. I will dwell with him." Isn't it good to know today that an all-powerful, all-knowing God of the universe who knows everything we've done, everywhere we've been and every aspect of our life, he does not want to shun us, he does not want to marginalize us, he actually wants to dwell with us. He says if you'll just open the door, I'll sup with you.

But it's not just the proximity, it's the priorities here. Notice what he says, "I will dwell with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit." You see, these are the qualifications or these are the priorities that the Lord [unintelligible] and he says, "Okay, if you want to dwell with me, if you want to be in a relationship with me, the first thing is a contrite spirit." Now that word "contrite" means "one who he is ashamed of or one who is embarrassed by." Simply put, Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." He says if we want to dwell with him, if we want to be in that relationship with him, we've got to admit something that we struggle with in our culture today, we've got to admit that we're the problem. You see, we live in a culture today where nobody, nobody wants to admit inferiority, nobody wants to admit maybe they don't meet the mark. In fact, one of the things that we've done is we've lowered the bar so much on so many things that there's nothing to attain for.

I'm going to go from preaching to meddling here, here I go. I don't know about you but participation trophies drive me nuts. I mean, they do. And the fact that everybody gets a trophy, everybody gets an award, I've got news: for all of the sports leagues in the world, please watch this on video and hear what I have to say, you cannot put the score on the board but 4 year olds know who won. They do. They understand and yet we live in a world that says this: never ever ever admit that you fell short. Never admit that you didn't meet the mark. Everybody gets a trophy and everybody gets a ribbon.

What did Jesus say? "For all have come short." It says the only way to dwell with him is you've got to have a contrite spirit. You've got to be willing to admit, this is revolutionary to some of us, we've got to admit that we're the problem. He says when you admit that you're the problem, you're on your way to understanding how this thing works.

Not only do you have a contrite heart but a humble spirit. A humble spirit, one who is willing to admit that there's somebody that knows more than them; somebody who has understanding greater than them. As we approach this week of non-stop endless praise the Lord football, all of us will be guilty, we will be guilty. Now you're going to say you're not going to be but you will be, you will be guilty of armchair quarterbacking this

week. You will. It's real simple. Here's what you'll do: you'll say something to this effect, "Well, if I were the coach, that's not the play I would have called." How many of you are guilty of this one, "If they were paying me that much money, I would have done this." How guilty are we of thinking that somehow, some way, we know better than those guys coaching, those guys playing, because if you put us in there, I've got news for you, they hired them, not us. But you know, it doesn't just work in sports. How many of us are guilty in the world of economics, politics, whatever it may be of saying, "If I were in charge"?

You know, I don't know if it was a coach, I don't know if it was my dad, I don't know if it was combination thereof, but early in my life this was engrained in me. It's a wonderful thing for all of us to hear. Are you ready? There is a God and you're not him. I think we all need to learn that little lesson in life. It breeds some humility in us. You know, this was our struggle in the garden of Eden, right? There is Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and the Lord made it real clear that of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, don't consume of that one. Don't participate in that. It's going to turn out really bad. Do you know what Adam and Eve did? Let me put it in 21st century American terms. They said, "If I were God, that's not the tree I'd of planted. If I were God, that's not the rule I would have put. If I were God... In fact, I'm going to tell you what, I'm going to do it the way I want to do it because I know better than God does." And were did we end up? We ended up on the other side of the garden with pain, misery, heartache in the falling. What does the Lord say? He says, "I dwell."

Isn't it incredible, something to be thankful for, that this all-powerful, all-knowing God actually wants a relationship with us but he set some priorities, he set some qualifications. You've got to be willing to admit you're the problem, you've got to be willing to admit you're the one who's messed up, you've got to be willing to admit that you're the one who has come short, and then you've got to humble yourself and say, "Do you know what? There is a God. I'm not him. He knows best and I don't." Boy, that's a struggle, is it not? But it's something to be thankful for, that there is a God who knows best, there is a God who loves us unconditionally, there is a God who wants to forgive us and wants to save us.

So not only in the book of Isaiah but this week, we ought to be grateful that we're talking about a God who is distinct and different. We ought to be grateful that he desires a relationship with us. But last but not least in verse 16, and this may seem a little strange, we need to be grateful for deadlines. It says, "For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made." You know, I know I talked about the participation trophies and such, but one of the things that I'm going to be honest I also struggle with in our culture today is that we've decided that deadlines are suggestions and not mandates; that we somehow can email our way out or text our way out or talk our way out but as you read through the Scripture, God's deadlines are very different than humanity's deadlines. We can talk people out of a certain criteria or we can delay things for a week or maybe a month or whatever it may be, but one of the things that you notice is that when God sets a deadline in Scripture, he means it.

Now there are precedents for this. Let's go all the way back to the book of Genesis. The Lord comes to Noah and his family and says, "I need you to build a big boat. There's going to be a big rain. There's going to be a big flood. There's going to be a big mess. There's going to be a big judgment coming." Do you know what he tells Noah, he says, "My Spirit will strive with man 120 years." The thing that we need to realize is this: when the 120 years came and went, the boat was built, the door was closed, and the rain came, and to use our vernacular today, it doesn't matter how many texts or emails or how many conferences you have, you weren't getting on the boat because the deadline came and went and all throughout the Scripture the Lord gives deadlines. He says, "Here is what I expect of you. Here is when I will hold you accountable. This is when it will take place." Notice what he says in verse 16, he says, "Even though I'm high and lofty, even though I'm holy, even though I inhabit eternity, even though I will dwell with the contrite and the humble, I will not always strive." In other words, there's a deadline coming.

When you get to the book of Revelation, I mentioned chapters 2 and 3 and these famous 7 churches. There's another woman that shows up there, same name as the lady back in 1 Kings, married a king by the name of Ahab. It's one of those names that we rarely if ever see on a birth announcement in our culture. How many of you have ever seen somebody who named their daughter Jezebel? Nonetheless, Jezebel is there and according to Scripture she's causing all those that are around her to fall into all kinds of sin and all kinds of error, but that being said, even in her sin, even in her rebellion, even in her struggle, do you know what the Lord says? "I gave her space to repent." The Lord in his goodness and his grace and his mercy said, "Even someone behaving as you are, even someone as messed up as you are, I'm still going to give you a deadline. I'm going to give you time to repent."

Now, there's a whole lot of precedent in Scripture but here's the predicament: Noah got 120 years, the Israelites had 40, Jezebel we're not quite sure, the predicament is that you and I when it comes to the deadline of God in our life, we don't know what it is because, you see, we don't inhabit eternity. We don't know what tomorrow will befall. We don't know what next week will befall. We don't know what next month or next year but how guilty are we when the Lord is impressing something upon our life we say, "God, I'm grateful but how about next week? Or how about next month? Or how about when the kids are grown? Or how about when they're out of diapers? Or how about when there's no more formula and diapers and I can afford to do it?" I've got news for you: you think they're expensive in diapers, wait until they're teenagers. How guilty are we of saying, "At a later date in time"?

You know, one of the great heroes of the modern Christian faith is a man by the name of D. L. Moody. D. L. Moody was an evangelist and, in fact, he's one of the very few people in a day without the internet, in a day without the communication of the telephone, in fact, he died in 1899 so you can go back and look at the technology that he had access to, he actually shared the Gospel with and saw over a million people coming to know Jesus Christ as their Savior during his tenure of ministry. Well-known for the establishment of Bible colleges, universities, churches. His great revivals with Ira Sankey on this and the

other side of the Atlantic Ocean. One of the great modern heroes of the faith and yet it was D. L. Moody on October 8 of 1871, he stood up in an environment very similar to this, he had a copy of the word of God in his hand and he shared the fact that we've all come short of the glory of God, he talked about the fact that the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, and then they came to a time as we're about to in just a few moments where it was a time to respond and here's what he said that fateful night, he challenged the people who were listening to him to go home and think about it, he challenged them to pray about it, he challenged them to come back the next night or the next night or even next week. The meeting closed, the audience was dismissed. Little did he know that while he spoke those words of come back tomorrow or come back next week, that the great infamous Chicago fire was already blazing on the other side of town. That night he sat on the shore of the lake there off of the city of Chicago and he watched the very place that he had preached from burn to the ground and he began to ponder and he began to think about all the souls that he said, "Just wait until tomorrow. Just wait until next week." And he made a promise, in fact, we might say he made a vow that night to the Lord to never make his own deadlines; to never say that we're guaranteed another day, another week, another year, another season of life, but to emphatically declare that as Scripture says, today is the day of salvation. I don't know what the Lord has impressed upon your heart but don't wait until next week. Don't wait until next month. Don't wait until you can afford it because you're only going to be less able to afford it. Don't wait until next year, next season. If he has called, as we sung earlier, let us respond.

He says in verse 16 that there's a day of reckoning, there's a time and the predicament is you and I don't know, we don't know when we're going to breathe our last breath, we don't know when the season is going to pass, we don't know what's going to befall tomorrow, but we do know that with his gift of mercy he has given us this day to respond. Shouldn't we be thankful for that? Shouldn't we be thankful not only for his distinctness and his desire to dwell with us, aren't we thankful that his deadline in our lives today has not passed. We have the privilege and opportunity.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that person today, maybe you're that individual who has thought about, contemplated, even prayed about this concept of Jesus Christ and a relationship with him and salvation and forgiveness and maybe you're that one who said, "Well, I'm just going to wait another day. I'm just going to wait another season. I'm just going to wait another month." The Bible says that today is the day of salvation and let me just encourage you if you're that person today whether you're on our campus or on the other side of the cameras, just do what Romans 10:13 says, just call on the name of the Lord. You say, "Well, how do I do that? What do I do?" Well, calling out to the Lord is really just having a conversation with him, just having a time of what we might call prayer. You don't have to do so out loud, in fact, you don't have to say the same words that I might say but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, today for the very first time I want to admit something, I want to admit that I'm the problem and that Jesus is the answer. Lord, today I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was

willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to bear the price of my sin on the cross and I believe he loved me so much that three days later he rose from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I come and I don't have all the answers to the world's problems, I don't even have the answers to my problems, but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. So in the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, if that's the conversation you had with the Lord, we'd love to celebrate with you and in just a few moments we'd love to celebrate what the Lord is doing in your life. But maybe you already made that decision years ago, maybe decades ago and maybe the Lord's calling you to something different or something else or maybe you just need to pray with somebody, we just want to celebrate what the Lord is doing in your life.

Lord, today as we come to this time in our service, Lord, we truly are thankful that you're a God of second chances. Lord, you didn't have to allow us the ability to be on this campus or behind or to watch our service by way of the camera. You didn't have to give us the breath in our lungs today but you did and you gave us a challenge from your word and you've made it clear that more than anything even in your greatness you want to dwell with us and be in a relationship with us. Lord, may we not take it for granted. May we not tell you tomorrow, next week or some other time. Lord, your Holy Spirit in this moment at this time so draw us to yourself. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.