

November 22, 2015
Sunday Morning Service
Thanksgiving
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as we prepare to study verses about thanksgiving.

1. How many commands are there in the N.T. requiring us to give thanks?
2. How do modern followers of Christ come into the presence of God?
3. Describe how sin in a person's life interrupts thanksgiving.
4. Describe the connection between knowledge of God and sin.
5. How do you encourage thanksgiving in your own life? (See Colossians 3:15)

FIGHTING THE BATTLE OF THANKSGIVING **Psalm 100:4; Romans 1:21; Colossians 3:15**

As we begin our thoughts on thanksgiving, let me offer a couple of disclaimers. First, this is a special sermon designed specifically to direct our thoughts toward Thanksgiving Day which we will celebrate on Thursday. Therefore, these admonitions will not be in the format of the book studies in which we typically engage.

Second, allow me to try to explain the odd title. Granted, if a speaker has to explain the title of his speech, it is undoubtedly a poor title. Okay, some of us are famous for picking poor titles anyway. What is the battle of thanksgiving? Right away some of you have

already begun to think about relatives showing up at your place for Thanksgiving who always push your buttons, who never have anything nice to say, or who will make you uncomfortable in some way. That is indeed a battle, but not the one we will consider this morning.

Maybe this title causes you to think about the battle with overeating. No. While we might fight that battle in normal times, the beauty of the Thanksgiving dinner is that we are expected to overeat. No fight. No war. Just enjoy the day. Or, in this current secular environment, it is possible that the battle of thanksgiving has something to do with the pushing and shoving that will go on at big box stores across town beginning at 6:00 Thanksgiving evening with the battle raging through the weekend in some stores. That is indeed a battle. One which I choose to avoid because I am a conscientious objector.

The previous examples are certainly matters of conflict. But what I am concerned about in my own life is the lack of thanksgiving not only on this special day, but throughout the year. As I have contemplated the coming of Thanksgiving Day this year, my first thought was, "How did this happen so quickly?" My second thought was, "Am I truly thankful?" More precisely, I wonder, "For what do I express my thanks to God and how frequently do I express that thanks?" When I truly assess my thankfulness, I am embarrassed about how independent of God I can be, how self-sufficient, and how I can plow ahead day after day offering little sincere thanks to my Redeemer, Savior, Sustainer, Protector, and Friend.

A quick review of the simple concept of thanks or thanksgiving tells us that the word is an expression of gratitude that might convey a sense of obligation, appreciativeness, or gratefulness. But have you ever looked up all the antonyms of thanksgiving? Most dictionaries or thesauruses list about one—ungrateful. Therefore, not to be thankful is the opposite of the synonyms of thanksgiving. It is to show non-gratitude, no sense of obligation, or to be unappreciative. Is that closer to a description of us?

Does God really expect us to be thankful people? Is it not true that all of us struggle with this battle not to be thankful? How do we change that natural propensity to be thankless people? Let's consider three separate texts that answer those three questions.

The Creator Commands Us to be Thankful (Psalm 100:4).

The Psalmist wrote good advice for people who claim to love God: *Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! (Psalm 100:4)*. This is simply a call for us to seek the Creator's presence. "His courts" is where one might expect to find God. But where is that? Let's begin to answer that question by remembering that this was not one of David's psalms. We often forget that David didn't write all the psalms.

Whoever wrote this psalm intended for it to be sung in connection with thanksgiving. It is very likely that the psalm was written before David's time and was already being sung regularly by the time he came to the throne. Therefore, there is a possibility that "His courts" referred to the tabernacle with its tent and curtains. The Hebrew word translated "*courts*" can refer to something as simple as a corral or a sheep pen. Inside the curtain that surrounded the tent were the various pieces such as the altar, the laver, the furniture in the holy place and the ark in the holy of holies.

But the structure wasn't the issue. This same word could have referred to the grand edifice that Solomon built after David was already dead. Wherever the place would be (if it was a reference to a particular place), it was certainly considered to be a place where worship and thanksgiving would be offered. That was the case from the day Solomon finished and dedicated the temple. But again, the physical place or structure is not the issue.

One interesting observation is that this same Hebrew word described the inner and outer courts at the palace of Ahasuerus (Esther 6:4). This is an important picture to help us understand the importance of the statement in this psalm. In Ahasuerus's palace, Haman could enter the outer court but dared not enter the inner court without the king's permission. To barge into the inner court was to invade the king's private space and could result in execution.

Now to the lesson of this psalm. God does not invite us to enter a structure or a physical place. Religious people are generally impressed by physical structures, mundane operations, or attractive religious leaders. If all buildings and organizations that claim to represent God were suddenly to disappear, what would happen to the so-called faith of many? But God is not distracted by buildings. God

invites us into His very presence. He made us for fellowship with Himself. Sin interrupts that fellowship. God has provided the means of reconciliation through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Through Christ, He still invites us to come into His courts to praise Him

It is the creature's responsibility to come to Him. Our approach is characterized by worship. Worship is the humbling of the heart before God coupled with the expression of acknowledging His greatness. In our modern worship, songs play a big part in praising God. The same must have been true for ancient worship also because the word *praise* in this verse speaks of songs or hymns that rightly assess the person and character of God. Right assessment of God coupled with right assessment of ourselves is going to lead to thanksgiving.

People who love God also love to worship Him. We worship the Lord individually. That takes place in those quiet times of reading the Bible and praying. Not all people who claim to love God engage in this kind of practice. It is the individual's loss, because people who are unfamiliar with private worship of God tend not to be thankful people.

We also worship the Lord corporately. People who do not worship God privately might balk at true worship of God along with others. The beauty of corporate worship is that it encourages our hearts to praise God accurately. This idea of corporate worship where there are dozens or hundreds of people gathered together praising and thanking God is the picture we typically imagine when we read this Psalm. But God desires for us to show thanks to Him even when we are alone.

In this context, we are not surprised to see the command to bring the Lord an offering of thanksgiving. This psalm is just that. It is a call for the public expression of thanksgiving. Some of the ancient versions of the psalm had a note attached in the margin that called this, "A Psalm for the thank offering." The *thank offering* was a particular kind of offering God required under the old system of the Mosaic Law. That offering is mentioned in the law in Leviticus. *If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the thanksgiving sacrifice unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and loaves of fine flour well mixed with oil (Leviticus 7:12)*. It is possible that this psalm was part of a collection

of psalms that the people sang as they went to the temple or tabernacle to offer sacrifices. Some Bible scholars regard Psalm 93–100 as a section of Psalms that would be sung together all expressing the same theme: “Jehovah is King.”

At the same time, this is a call for all of God’s people to be characterized by thanksgiving and praise. If we know God at all, we should be thankful that He is so gracious and beneficent. If we are honest about ourselves, we should be thankful that God is so kind and forgiving. We should be continually thankful for the simple things like life, breath, health, and another opportunity to think about how great God is. That should be our daily offering to God. But we are not thankful like that, are we? We do not offer daily offerings of thanksgiving. Why not? Why do we fight this battle of not being thankful when we know we should be?

The Creatures Tend not to be Thankful (Romans 1:21).

An explanation for why we fight this battle is found in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. *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 (Romans 1:21).*

In short, this statement tells us that sin keeps us from being thankful. Oh, but we’re not sinners, are we? Yes, by nature we all are. The great sin is rejecting God. Not to love Him and embrace Him in faith is to reject Him because God has revealed who He is. According to verse twenty, which precedes this statement, God has given vivid illustrations of His invisible attributes. *For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse (Romans 1:20).* In that statement, we see that God has revealed His eternal power and God has revealed His divine nature.

He has made these things obvious through creation so that people are without excuse. We know there is a God and we know a lot about Him. We also know Him because He has also revealed His divine character by virtually writing His law in the conscience. In the

next chapter of that Romans letter we read, *They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them (Romans 2:15).* As if creation and the conscience was not evidence enough, God really gave a detailed description of Himself in the Bible. Paul argued in the third chapter, *To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged” (Romans 3:2-4).*

Because of His self-revelation, we know who God is and what He is like. But sin causes us to resist God and not accept Him as our Creator and Master. Paul put it like this: *“By our unrighteousness we suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18).*

Rejection of God is a refusal to acknowledge who He is. A primary example is to create a theory called evolution so that we do not have to accept God’s revelation of His eternal power and divine nature. Sin causes us to be sinners, and sinners suppress God’s revealed truth. The more we are characterized by sin, the more we suppress God’s truth. The more we suppress God’s truth, the less thankful we are.

Ultimately then, the farther a heart is from God, the less thankful it becomes. In the next verse of Romans one, we read that in spite of God graciously revealing Himself, *but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened (v.21b).* Because they reject God, sinners become futile in their thinking.

That is not to say that if we walk in sin we will become unintelligent. The wisdom of sinning humans is actually quite impressive. The evidence of human wisdom in technology is astounding – maybe even fearful. Who can imagine what sinful humans can accomplish in an age of computers, robots, and genetic altering? God expressed the extent of sinful human wisdom like this: *And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Genesis 11:6).* No thinking person would claim that all sinners are stupid just because they are sinners.

But all of this wisdom leads to futile thinking. Sin causes us to fail to acknowledge God's character, which in turn leads to thinking that is useless and foolish. Such people are given over (an action upon them) to speculations that are pointless according to God our Creator.

Also because they reject God, sinners have darkened hearts. The heart is the seat of the intellect, the emotions, and the will. God created us to think in line with His truth, react in line with His character, and to desire what He desires. None of that is possible when the heart is infected with sin. As we reject God, we lose the ability to understand Him, His truth, His way. The result is a darkened heart. God, through His self-revelation and through His Word, sheds light on the seat of our intellect, will, and emotions. When God removes His light, that center of decision-making is stuck in a darkness that is equivalent to physical blindness.

A person who is physically blind is destined to live every moment of every day in utter darkness, even while they are standing in brilliant sunshine. You can describe for them a beautiful sunset, a lovely flower garden, and a handsome prince or a gorgeous princess, but they cannot see such beauty for themselves.

Likewise the person who does not embrace God as He reveals Himself moves into deeper and deeper spiritual darkness. As much as we fail to acknowledge God in our lives, we will be overtaken by sin and understand and appreciate Him less and less. The result is greater and greater emphasis on and concern for human matters and passing things and less concern for God and eternal things. People on that downward path are very thankful for turkey and stuffing and for Walmart staying open for Christmas shoppers, but not for important things.

As we neglect God, we are not able to be thankful for the really significant things of life and eternity. Sin makes us unwilling or unable to be thankful for God's amazing grace revealed in salvation. It blinds us to God's astonishing power to create as it is displayed in the panoply of heaven at night. God's patient work as He leads us to green pastures, beside still streams, and through the valley of death in order to make us more like Himself is just simply overlooked and not a point of thanks. Nor are we thankful for God's wonderful kindness in giving us the Bible so that we can know Him. How

thankful are we for things like that? Being thankful as we should be is a war!

The Antidote to Unthankfulness (Colossians 3:15).

Our help in winning the battle with thanksgiving is as near as our Bibles. Paul admonished us Christians, *And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful (Colossians 3:15)*. In the simple vernacular, that means that we must let Christ have control.

The peace of Christ must rule in our hearts. The peace of Christ is more than just a tranquil feeling. The peace of Christ is the assurance that we have peace with God because of Christ. By nature and through birth, we are at war with God. But Christ shed His blood to provide the peace treaty between us and God. Therefore, when the peace of Christ is ruling in our hearts, it is all the truth that is bound up in that amazing treaty with God.

All this truth is found in the Bible. That is why in the very next verse we read, *And let the word of Christ dwell in you richly*. The Holy Spirit of God, the Comforter like Christ, is teaching us the Word of Christ as He dwells in us. When these truths control our hearts, we not only have the peace treaty with God, but we also enjoy a peace that surpasses human comprehension. *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7)*.

God called us to this end. This is the kind of life God drew us into when He called us with the irrevocable call of salvation. Everyone who is in the Body of Christ, the universal Church, truly saved people have this same character and calling. Therefore, Christians ought to be thankful to God all the time based on what He has revealed to us.

God expects that people who are controlled by the treaty of peace bought by Christ will be thankful people. The phrase "be thankful" certainly sounds like a command. So let's do it, right? Well we should indeed be thankful people, but this particular text is not a command. "Oh but there are plenty of other commands telling us to be thankful in the Bible, right?" Not actually. It appears that the only command for us to be thankful in the New Testament is *Give*

thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1Thessalonians 5:18). Most of the time the mentions of thanks are adjective or participles that simply describe the character and normal practice of believers. That means that the Bible teaches that if we really are made right with God through the peace of Christ, we will be thankful.

Thankfulness is our characteristic when we let Christ's peace rule. In this verse, the word *thankful* is an adjective which describes our character, our habit, our practice. The word is *eucharistos*. The Greek word gives us the English work *Eucharist*, which is a name for the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a time when we reflect with thanksgiving and gratefulness on the sacrifice Christ gave for our sins. Therefore, the Greek word means to be mindful, grateful. The root of the word is the word for grace or favor – things for which we ought to be thankful.

Genuine thankfulness for all the benefits that God give us is the natural result of reading, studying, meditating on God's Word. In the Bible, we learn about our Creator and why He created us. There we learn about the devastation of sin and how our Creator provided reconciliation with Himself through Jesus Christ. In the Bible, we learn about the promise of eternal life with God in heaven, the escape of hell, by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. It is there we learn how God draws us, saves us, equips us to serve Him and then places us in an assembly where we can do the work of ministry. The Bible even tells us how God provides for our physical needs and blesses us beyond our needs.

In a way, I hate to read prisoner of war stories because they demonstrate such human wickedness. In another way, I like to read these stories as they tell of the courage and tenacity of men and women who have been treated so unjustly. One thing I find in common in these stories is the profound thankfulness these people gained for the small things, the things we take for granted. When they finally are given freedom, these people are very thankful for fresh air, for fresh water, a clean restroom, a nice clean bed, sanitary conditions, freedom to speak or go where they want to go. They are so thankful for clean clothes and astonished at the variety. They are thankful for food and embarrassed about the amount available.

Isn't it strange that we seldom remember or think about our condition as slaves in sin. We really must wonder if the person who is not grateful to be released from the bondage of sin is not still in bondage. The peace of Christ is an astonishing treaty that does rule in the heart of those who own it. For that we must be thankful.

Based on what we learn in God's Word, we need to answer a couple of questions. Why would we ever have to hesitate when trying to think of things for which we are thankful? Why wouldn't we be the most thankful people in the world? If we are not thankful, is it really because Christ's peace is not in control; that is, we really do not have the Holy Spirit of God ministering the truth of God in our hearts?