

Meaningful Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving

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Bible Text: Matthew 6:9-13
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Well, as you all know, this is the week of the American holiday of Thanksgiving. We associate that holiday with the blessings of food and family and football, for some, and I'm good with that; I'm not going to be critical of those traditions, but tonight what I want to do is to elevate your sense of thanksgiving and gratitude beyond the human and to give you a sense of wonder at the glory of God that would make you truly thankful in a truly God-honoring sense this evening, and also throughout the rest of this week.

What exactly does it mean to give thanks? Well, you give thanks in a biblical sense when you express gratitude to God for who he is and the blessings that he has given to you. It's an expression of gratitude that comes from the heart that says, "Lord, I realize that you have given things to me. I thank you for that. Lord, I recognize who you are. I thank you for that as well." So we're talking about a vertical dimension of thanks this evening that is God-centered, that is God directed, and I want to tell you that a true Christian is someone who will be thankful to God. That is one of the defining marks of a true Christian. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." It is the will of God, it is the command of God, that we be a thankful people. This is what we are meant to do.

And by way of contrast, just by way of introduction, turn over to the book of Romans 1 for just a moment, Romans 1:21. I'll give you a moment to either turn there or scroll there on your iPad. Romans 1, Paul is talking about the universal condemnation of unbelievers and how they suppress the knowledge of God, the knowledge of the truth in unrighteousness, and one of the distinguishing marks of an unbelieving person, one of the reasons that they are marked out for condemnation is because they are not thankful. Romans 1:21 says, "even though they knew God," meaning that they recognized his hand in creation; it's not a statement that they were true Christians, "even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." And so the contrast is very sharp in that true Christians are marked by thanksgiving; they gladly submit to that command of God to give thanks and part of just having a regenerate Spirit-filled heart is a sense of gratitude toward our Redeemer. On the other hand, the mark of an unbeliever is a lack of gratitude toward God; stated differently, a lack of gratitude is the mark of somebody who does not truly know Christ regardless of whatever else they might say about their

profession of faith in Christ. So this attitude of gratitude goes straight to the heart of what it means to be a spiritual person; to be a Christian; to be someone who knows Christ.

As we read the Scriptures, we just find so many things to be thankful for but tonight what I want to do is I want to go beyond the earthly matters that might be expressed through superficial things that anybody could say thank you for in one sense, that are just temporal and passing and really related to very little more than our own sense of entertainment, and our own sense of comfort. We want to go beyond that and kind of enter in with bold and confident access into the Holy of Holies and find why it is that we should be thankful to God and in response to the transcendent qualities of who he is and what his work is.

So go back to Matthew 6 now with that sense of introduction. I never get tired of teaching on this passage. It's a passage that in various places we've looked at in the past but it's inexhaustible, really, as Jesus tells his disciples, "This is how you should pray." And I'm just going to take the opportunity to set it in your mind yet again. I know I read it just a few moments ago but with the framing sense of gratitude in your mind now, let's look at this prayer from that context. Jesus said,

9 "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'"

At one level, this might seem to be an unusual text to choose for a Thanksgiving message because this is framed in the language of petition rather than as an expression of gratitude; in the terms in which Jesus gave it, these are imperative that we are asking God independence to give us and provide certain things for us as well as the language of praise. But here's how I would like you to think about this passage tonight in the context in which we meet: if this is what we are to ask from God under command of our Lord, Jesus said pray this way and it gives us a number of different petitions that we are to have mark the spirit of our prayer life throughout all of our Christian existence, if that's what we're to ask from God, then surely it is also that for which it is appropriate for us to express gratitude to God for. This is what it is appropriate to thank him for, having expressed the petitions to come back and to thank him for what he has done and who he is, and that's the spirit in which we are going to look at this prayer tonight. You know, you remember when Jesus healed the 10 lepers and he sent them away, only one of them came back and gave thanks to him and Jesus said, "Where are the other nine?" Well, what we want to be as a people, what we want to be as a church, what we should want to be as Christians, is we want to be marked by that smaller sliver, that 10 percent that not only asks God but comes back and thanks him as we do as he mediates his blessings to us in so many ways.

So that's what we're going to focus on here all too briefly here this evening, and we're only going to touch on these points so that we can see the broad picture; so that we can get a sense of the panorama for which we should be grateful and not simply focus on one particular item alone. So what are we thankful for as we look at this prayer? Well, first of all, we could say that we're thankful for the person of God. We are thankful for who God is in his very character. Before we ever get to anything that he does or doesn't do for us, we're just thankful for who he is. We're glad that the God of the Bible is the God of the universe. We're glad that the God of the Bible is the God who he is revealed to be in Scripture and at the start of this prayer, we see that this is the very foundation of how we pray and therefore becomes the very foundation of our gratitude. God is who he is. This is why we're grateful.

Look at verse 9 with me. Jesus says, "Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name." God, let your name be sanctified. Let your name be set apart. And as we've studied in the past both here on Tuesday nights and in other settings, the name of God is more than the term by which we call him. It's more than just like a name John or Tom or anything like this. The name of God is a reflection, it is the sum of his very character. It is the character of God that is expressed by the concept of his name, and what is that character? What is God like? Well, we could study the whole Bible to answer that question but go back to Exodus 34 and I just want to show you one passage to, again, we're just touching on points lightly tonight. Exodus 34:5, the Lord is manifesting himself to Moses and it says in verse 5, "The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as Moses called upon the name of the LORD." And in verse 6, "The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.'"

Here is a reason above all reasons to be thankful. Here is a reason above all reasons for you to get on your knees and express gratitude toward God, that you as a sinful creature, even more for us as redeemed creatures, we can know God in this way. We can know him for who he truly is and who he truly is is truly magnificent. It is truly wonderful to know that the God who operates the universe, the God who brought us to faith in Christ Jesus, the God who forgave our sins, is a God who is compassionate. He is a God who is gracious. He is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth. With all of our sinfulness, with all of our spiritual indifference, our spiritual lethargy, that prayerlessness that we often fall into, the indifference to his word, the lack of obedience, with all of that marking us, here in response is God being who he is: gracious, full of lovingkindness, forgiving transgression, iniquity and sin. How grateful are we that God is like that as opposed to being, if he were somewhere else which we're talking in absurdities now, but if he were quick to anger and impetuous in his judgments, we would all be miserably lost. So the fact that God in his innermost being, by the very nature of who he is is like this, sets a whole different context for the course of life for us. We, in response to our sin, we are met with grace. In response to our weakness, we are met with his strength and faithfulness. That's a reason to be grateful and to be thankful. He forgives iniquity,

transgression and sin. He is graciously disposed toward us. And what better way to remember that than what we're going to do in just a few moments and remember the Lord's table. You have in front of you the elements of bread and the wine, so to speak, the juice that we use, to represent and to remember the shed blood, the crucified body of Christ. How great is his grace? How much can we magnify his willingness to forgive sin? That much. That much, that he entered into humanity. He went to the cross for you by name.

Now, I ask you: is that not reason for gratitude? Is that not reason to be profoundly thankful in ways that transcend being thankful for certain earthly things that we might or might not enjoy? So Psalm 97:12 says it well, it says, "Be glad in the LORD, you righteous ones, And give thanks to His holy name." And so as we gather together here this evening, corporately what we're doing as we worship God even through the opening of his word, we are responding and Lord God, we are responding even as we hear and even as we speak here now, we respond to his character with a sense of gratefulness, of gratitude, of thankfulness, of joy and happiness that God is who he is. So, over these next 48-72 hours or so as you gather together with family in the name of the Thanksgiving holiday, go straight to the throne of God with your gratitude. Go straight to who he is. Forget everything about the world and just bow before him in gratefulness for his holy, righteous, gracious, faithful character. Because God is who he is, in a sense, everything else is secondary to that. When we rest in him, when we rest in the Beloved, when we rest in our Lord Jesus Christ, we have all that we need. We have perfect satisfaction. We have all the protection, all of the joy that we need. And when we respond to him with thankfulness just on who he is, we manifest his glory in saying, "Your character alone is reason for me to give thanks." And that's what we do. "Hallowed be your name."

Now, secondly, and these things just continue to expand and expand: we're thankful for the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God. Look at verse 10 of Matthew 6. The person of God, now the kingdom of God. Jesus said, "Your kingdom come." And in light of the lawless events over the past 24 hours or so, here's a fresh reminder that we are not always going to be subject to the sin and the wickedness that we see around us; that this world and the wicked people of this world and the nature of sin is not going to have the final word on the outcome of existence; that there is a coming culmination where Christ will return and establish his kingdom on earth, he will rule and righteousness will be supreme. There is a day coming when Christ will physically be on the earth again manifesting righteousness and enforcing righteousness on the world. It's not always going to be like this. This is as bad as it gets, in one sense. I mean, it will get worse in some ways but this declining nature of society as we see it now is not the outcome. The outcome will be marked by a supernatural intervention of the Lord Jesus Christ returning to earth to establish the kingdom of God on earth. That's reason to be thankful. We can look past, we can look through, the horror and the ugliness of this life whether it's on a social level or on a personal level and say, "Christ is coming back. I'm grateful for that." Revelation 11:15 says that, "The seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.'"

We're not living for this world and we're thankful for that. We're thankful in advance for what Christ is going to do to restore order to his creation. We're thankful that sin and Satan do not get the final word; that Christ will be supreme; that sadness in this life is not permanent, it is not eternal for the Christian because there will be a certain intervention of Christ that will bring things back to order and restore joy to his people. What I want to say to you this evening is this, is that what we should do as Christians is we should appropriate that by faith. We should, as it were, reach into the future and bring that into the present for grounds for thanksgiving now. "Lord, I'm grateful to you today that Christ will return; that I will see my Lord face-to-face and you will right out all the wrongs. Lord, I'm grateful for that and we're grateful in advance. We're grateful by faith because we have a certain revelation in God's word that makes us thankful."

But, you know, there's another aspect to the kingdom as you read through Scripture. There is the spiritual aspect of the kingdom as well, not just the earthly return of Christ, but the spiritual kingdom. This prayer, "Thy kingdom come," reminds us that God is doing a continuing work of bringing sinners to salvation. Colossians 1:13 and 14 says this, "He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." And so, when you became a Christian, when God brought you to faith in Christ, God expanded his spiritual kingdom. As we go about the business of the Gospel and we see other sinners coming to faith in Christ, we see God expanding his spiritual kingdom and those who once were in darkness are now in light; those who were facing judgment now have a coming expectation of blessedness and being glorified in the presence of Christ. And that's what belongs to us as Christians, is that we have been transferred from the domination of Satan into the Lordship of Christ; brought out of a dark kingdom into a kingdom of light; brought out of slavery, brought into true spiritual freedom; out of guilt into righteousness and forgiveness.

What a great, unspeakable, uncountable blessing God has given us in our salvation. "Thy kingdom come." When God saved us, his kingdom came to us personally and so, your salvation and the salvation of those that you love who are in Christ, should be central to your gratitude. "Oh God, you are a King and you have extended the blessings of your kingdom to me and to those that I love as well. God, I am so thankful that you have made your kingdom known. Here spiritually now, then coming in the future with Christ, God, there is just such an unfolding majesty to the grandeur of your kingdom and I share in that. You brought me into that. Oh God, I'm so thankful to you tonight. I am so thankful to you as a manner and as a pattern of life, God, you are who you are. Thank you. God, your kingdom come, it will come, it has come, God, thank you." So, what I want you to see is there is a responsive nature to gratitude, isn't there? And gratitude and thanksgiving start with a recognition outside of us of who God is and what he has done and we're giving thanks in response to that, and what he has done is beyond comprehension and it makes us grateful.

Now, thirdly, we said the person of God, the kingdom of God, let's give thanks, thirdly, as we follow the pattern of Jesus' prayer for the providence of God. The providence of God. Look at verse 10 again, Jesus said, "Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven."

Now, we've alluded often to the providence of God in our teaching. The Bible says that God works all things after the counsel of his will. Your worst mistakes, your sins, your sorrows, your good times, your good decisions, your bad decisions, the good political leaders, the bad political leaders, everything that happens, the bad churches you've been exposed to, the good experiences that you've had in church, God is taking all of that, all of the details of that, all of the relational sorrows, all of the relational joys, God is taking all of that, every single detail within the out-stretched encompassing arms of his work and directing providence, to accomplish his will, and in a way, Romans 8:28 says, works out that "all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." The trials that are just on your doorstep that you're about to bring into your life because you can't avoid them, all of this comes under the umbrella of the providence of God and this does remarkable things to quell the roaring, tumultuous seas of anxiety in your heart. God is over it all. God is directing it all. It's not just that he permits it, it's that he uses it. He brings these things to pass in order to accomplish long-term good and benefit to his glory and for our good. Scripture teaches us that God is at work in absolutely everything that happens and that he directs all creatures and events to accomplish his purposes.

Well look, beloved, in the context of what we're talking about tonight, as we're talking about being thankful to God, this just opens up a panorama of gratitude if you will take a biblical view of God. If you will take a high view of God whether life has seemed good or bad, easy or hard, God is accomplishing his will. And for the Christian who is handed over, who has submitted his life to the Lordship of Christ, for a Christian who by definition is someone who prefers the glory of God to life itself, by definition that's what a Christian is, if that's who we are and our God is accomplishing what he desires and somehow he manages to work all this together for our good in the end, then we should be a grateful, thankful people, and what I want you to see is that gratitude is theologically informed. It's not just that we are thankful because there's a bare command to be thankful and we have to be thankful whether we feel like it or not, our gratitude is going to be deepened, our gratitude is going to be in measure by the view of God that we bring to the table with it. And when we receive the teaching of Scripture and we have a high view of the power and the wisdom and the majesty and the sovereignty of God, when you have a high view of that, then you view everything through a different lens and you can find that you have the capacity to give thanks in everything as 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "In everything give thanks for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Well, the only way that you can have that perspective is by having a high view of God. Jesus says, "You pray, God, your will be done," and it's not so much that he won't do his will unless we ask and if we don't ask Satan's will gets done in the end or something else like that, rather it's an expression of submission. As we pray this way, we are aligning ourselves with the purposes of God and say, "God, I prefer what your will is over what I think my will is." And when we pray that way, when we view God that way, we have the rich soil for a thankful heart to grow in. The person of God. The kingdom of God. The providence of God. This is utterly all-encompassing. In everything that we see, there is reason for thanks.

Now, fourthly, as we, again, we're obviously just skimming the surface here. Fourthly, we thank God for the provision of God. Look at verse 11 where Jesus says, "Give us this day our daily bread." And we're reminded through this text that God blesses us materially as well as spiritually. When Jesus says, "Ask for your daily bread," it's about asking more than the product of yeast and flour, it's a term that refers to our daily necessities. And as we're thinking in terms of gratitude, it's a reminder that everything that we have comes from God's hand; that God has blessed us almost without exception in this room. I don't want to say too much. I never want to presume too much, but almost everyone in this room is warm and to one manner or another well fed. Well, we're grateful for that. We remember that. We step out of the realm of those who take those things for granted, who just assume them, as it's easy to do when our pantries are full and there's enough money in the checking account for what we need next. Well, we step out of that assumption and presumption and recognize that this comes from the hand of the blessing of God. And God, as we feel the warmth, as we are satisfied in the realm of our bellies, so to speak, "God, I remember that this is a blessing from you. I thank you for it." And there is just this pervasive submission and gratitude and a sense of dependence that looks at the hand of God and says, "God, I see your hand all around me. I see your provision just abundantly everywhere I turn. God, you have given to me here and here and there. God, thank you. You are so good to me and I give thanks." From your family to your finances to your future, God has provided for you. God will provide for you in a way that meets your needs, and even, I think it's good to talk about this in advance, even when the hour of death comes for us, if that's a conscious moment for us or not, even in that final hour, we will find without fail that God is being gracious to us even then so that even at that end-of-life moment there will be no cause for fear. God will not abandon us in that hour. He will be faithful to us even then and there will be praise on our lips even then as we cultivate this gratitude in our lives now when death seems remote.

So from beginning to end and beyond into the realm of heaven after we die, every need possible conceivable, God is supplying, so we just step back and we want to look at these things from the big picture perspective. The person of God, who he is; the kingdom of God, he will intervene in the world and he is intervening now spiritually and we enjoy the blessings of that. Every detail of life that happens, he is working out for our good and he is directing it in a way that takes the pressure off us and we don't have to worry about it. We can just trust him and in the process, he's meeting even the daily physical needs that we have. Oh, it's very humbling. It's very encouraging. It's a blessing to think on these things and to realize that contrary to where our flesh will sometimes take us when life seems adverse, contrary to that spirit of grumbling and complaining that we all fall into to one extent or another, we step out of that. We step out of that, we look at the reality of it and say, "Lord, my grumbling and my complaining attitude are all wrong. I reject that. Lord, I repent of that. It is wrong for me to have a grumbling, complaining heart, my God, in light of who you are and what you've done. God, I'm grateful." And then our eyes are lifted up to this reminder in front of us of the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf and it is taken to a whole other realm as well. "Lord, it's not just that you give us good things in life, you laid down your life and spilled out your blood for the salvation of my soul as a substitute Lamb sacrificed on my behalf, and when I came to you and put my faith in you, you were a perfect and complete Savior for all of eternity on my behalf. And Lord,

now you have ascended into heaven where you intercede for us, for me by name, my name carried into heaven on the tablet of your heart, and you intercede for me before the Father; day by day by day, moment by moment without ceasing my name is named in the throne room of God." Wow. Let that sink in, that not only do we not live in a random universe, not only are we not going to be judged for our sins, but we are on the receiving end of just unspeakable blessing that goes into the very throne of God itself, all purchased for us at the cost of the perfect life blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. I'd say we've got reason to be thankful, don't you?

We see also in Jesus' prayer: the pardon of God. The pardon of God. Look at verse 12, Jesus says pray in this way, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." And as we have alluded earlier, as we talked about the kingdom of God, Jesus teaches us to make prayer a matter of addressing the spiritual side of life as well. It's not simply a matter of what our physical needs might be or our medical needs and those horizontal things that God cares about and provides for and orders for us, but there is another dimension, a more critical dimension, that God has provided for us in Christ, he has provided for the forgiveness of our sins. In a once-and-for-all fashion, he has wiped sin off of our slate and imputed righteousness to us so that we have a perfect legal standing before God. We are justified before him, declared righteous so that no accusation can successfully be lodged against us in the court room of heaven.

And at the same time, and as what Jesus is referring to more specifically here, is that forgiveness that God grants on an ongoing basis in our daily lives to restore the joy of our fellowship with him. When you bring your guilty conscience before God today, tonight, as a Christian and lay it before him, "Lord, I confess that sin or that sin. I confess that my thoughts were wicked. That my words were harsh. That my conduct was wrong and in violation of your law." And we humble ourselves like that before God. We don't meet with a God, figuratively speaking, who has his arms folded across his chest and say, "What do you have to say for yourself?" Some of you had parents like that. "Now, what do you have to say for yourself?" And it's very cold and isolating and remote. With God, as a Christian when we come confessing like that, we come in the spirit knowing that the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sins, 1 John 1:7. We're tied right back to where we opened up, that God forgives transgression, iniquity and sin, and that we have the privilege as Christians to walk through this life with a conscious sense of sins forgiven, of a clear conscience, of fellowship and reconciliation with God. That is our birthright. That is our privilege as Christians. That is what Christ in part died to purchase for us, all at his gracious initiative, all beyond our possible deserving, and we contemplate those things without a sense of, not in a sense that we're scolded into responding to them but the warmth of the love of God, the grace of God, the incalculable mercy of God, draws us and with warm, loving, heartfelt gratitude we say, "God, thank you for that too. You have forgiven all my sins. You have washed away my guilt; taken it as far as the east is from the west; taken my sins and buried them in the bottom of the sea where I don't have to relive the shame and the guilt of it anymore. I don't have to fear the judgment of God for it anymore because the judgment was paid at the cross and, God, you have forgiven all of my sins. Lord, thank you for that too."

I would ask you to consider, especially in the moments when we're waiting for the elements to be served, to ask yourself whether you take that aspect of salvation for granted. Does that ever seem to get stale to you? It never should. The forgiveness of your sins should always be fresh in power to you. Forgiveness is a profound matter for thanks. It is the basis upon which you can look to eternity with confidence and not with fear; that your heart can triumph over the prospect of the grave because death has lost its sting, because Christ paid the price of death at the cross for you. "God, thank you. God, we're so grateful."

Well, finally, we give thanks for the protection of God. The protection of God. We've said that as we've walked through this prayer, we've spoken about thankfulness for the person of God, the kingdom of God, the providence of God, the provision of God, the pardon of God, now the protection of God. Look at verse 13 with me, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Hasn't God brought you through trials in the past? Hasn't he brought you through times of temptation? Times of discouragement? Hasn't he directed your steps into realms where you're able to obey him, into realms where you can know him? Hasn't he protected your life from sins that you might have pursued if you were left to yourself? Haven't there been times where you found your steps directed into obedience when your heart inclinations would have taken you into sin? This is all the protection of God, the spiritual protection of God, and we thank him for that too, and we thank him not only that he's done it in the past, we thank him with a sense of confidence and gratitude that he's going to continue to do that in the future.

So this prayer lays out for us that Jesus has taught here, this prayer lays out for us such an immeasurable breadth and depth and height to the work and the activity and the person and the character and the lovingkindness of God, and we see as we contemplate these things, that God has undertaken, at his own gracious initiative, to provide for everything that we need all the way until we're secure with him in the palaces of glory. "God, we thank you. Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. It's grace that's brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

Bow with me in prayer as we prepare for communion in response.

Father, your character, your kingdom, your providence, and your provision, and your forgiveness, and your protection, are simply an ocean depth of reasons to give thanks to you. And, Father, we have treated these things lightly, simply, briefly here this evening by way of reminder, by way of stimulating us, stimulating the redeemed heart to remember what you've done for us and how you have displayed yourself to us, and we're so grateful, we're so thankful for that, Father. So as we gather together as the people of God here tonight on a week devoted to a spirit of thanksgiving, Lord, we remember and we give you thanks. And tonight as we prepare our hearts for communion, Father, we especially thank you that you have rescued us from the penalty and the power of sin in our Lord Jesus Christ. Father, you showed mercy to us while we were enemies. You forgave all of our sins. You brought us into your family and we have a place in heaven reserved especially for us, as it were, with a gold plated nameplate waiting for us to sit at the table in the presence of our King, Lord Jesus, all of that purchased at the cost of your

blood. We enjoy this salvation, we enjoy this position of privilege and protection, Lord Jesus, because you poured out your blood to satisfy the wrath of God against our sins, and we gratefully remember you who delivered us from sin as we do. Bless us now as we obey your command to remember you at the table. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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