

Thanks-Giving November 18, 2012

Intro – What do you look forward to the most at Thanksgiving dinner?

On Thursday of this week, we celebrate Thanksgiving, a uniquely American holiday. Let me transport you back in time to the early 17th century and describe the events leading to the first such celebration.



September 6, 1620 – The *Mayflower* set sail from Plymouth, England, with 103 passengers and 30 crew members aboard the 100-foot ship.

November 21, 1620 –The *Mayflower* arrived at Cape Cod. The following days, a landing party went ashore and laid out the village of Plymouth. They made contact with the Wampanoag Indians. They met Massasoit, who introduced them to Squanto.

December – six died.

January, 1621 – eight died. Fire destroyed the roof of the common house.

February – 17 died. Only five men were able to care for the sick. The dead were buried at night so that the Indians wouldn't discover their dwindling numbers.

March – 13 died. By now, 47 total had died, almost one-half of the original number who sailed for the new world. Thirteen out of the 18 wives had died. Only three families remained untouched with death. Such great losses, and yet the high point of their week remained the Sunday service.

April – Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant maize (corn), beans and squash.

October – They had a good harvest; brimming with gratitude to Squanto, the Wampanoags, and to their God who had honored their faith of obedience, Governor Bradford declared a public Thanksgiving. Massasoit was invited, and unexpectedly arrived early with 90 Indians. The Pilgrims had to pray hard to keep from giving in to despair. But then other Indians arrived with five deer and twelve turkeys.

November – The ship *Fortune* arrived enroute to Virginia with 35 colonists and a charter from the New England Company.

December 1621–March 1622 – Food was rationed to five kernels of corn daily per person.

April – Private farming was introduced. Drought struck the land. A special prayer service was held for rain. Their prayers were answered so unusually that some Indians were converted to Christ.

October 1622 – The second year of Thanksgiving. Massasoit was the guest of honor and brought 120 braves. Fortunately, he once again brought venison and turkey. The first course was served – on an empty plate in front of every person were five kernels of corn, lest anyone should forget.

Now you know why you were handed a baggie with five kernels of corn as you came in this morning. Yes, I know, they are candy corns, but...work with me folks!

The first Thanksgiving was proclaimed by the Continental Congress in 1777. It was a somber event like a Sabbath. National Thanksgivings were proclaimed by Presidents Washington, Adams and Monroe, but it fell out of custom after 1815.

The first familiar Thanksgiving proclamation did not come until 1863 when President Lincoln declared two: one for Thursday, August 6, and a second for the last Thursday of Thanksgiving. From that time on, some Thursday in autumn was annually declared a national day of Thanks until the fourth Thursday of November became traditional.

This week, as you gather for Thanksgiving, you might be mindful of the origin of this festive day, this day of giving thanks.

For the Christian, Thanks-giving should be a habit of life. The root word in “thanksgiving” is *charis*, which means “grace.” Thanks-giving is, literally, “grace-giving” – giving grace back to God, not in the sense that we give grace as he gives us grace. It is reflecting back to God his grace he has given us.

This morning, I would like you to consider the biblical view of giving thanks. There are five propositions that describe this view from Scripture.

I. Thanks-Giving is an Act of Obedience

Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (I Thessalonians 5:18).

Have you wondered what God’s will is for you? Here is part of it: that you would give thanks. Paul uses the imperative; this is a command. It’s not a suggestion, not a recommendation, but a command.

Giving thanks does not demand to see the outcome first. It exercises trust in God and his grace, and gives thanks out of the desire of obedience.

We must be careful, however, that this does not become in our thinking a way to manipulate God into action. It simply responds to God’s desire that we habitually choose to give thanks. And it is a choice.

Did you notice something? It is not a command that is subject to circumstances. Give thanks when everything is going swell. Give thanks when everything is breaking your way. Give thanks when you’ve just won a million bucks. Give thanks when the Redskins win a ball game.

Giving thanks is an expression of submission, which is inherent in obedience. A little boy was asked by his father to say grace at the table. While the rest of the family waited, the little guy eyed every dish of food his mother had prepared. After the examination, he bowed his head and honestly prayed, “Lord, I don’t like the looks of it, but I thank you for it, and I’ll eat it anyway.”

Give thanks – in everything, in every circumstance. Period! It is a choice we make. During the horrors of the Thirty Years’ War in the early 17th century, Pastor Martin Rinkart faithfully served the people in Eilenburg, Saxony. He conducted as many as 40 funerals a day, a total of over 4,000 during his ministry. Yet, out of this devastating experience, he wrote a “table grace” for his children, which today is used as a hymn of thanksgiving:

*Now thank we all our God,
With heart and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom the world rejoices.*

Thanks-giving – it is an act of submission, of obedience and a matter of choice. Can you give thanks today for God and his blessings in whatever circumstance you find yourself?

II. Thanks-Giving is an Acknowledgement of Who God Is

Not only is giving thanks an expression of submission, it is an expression of confidence. Indeed, I am able and willing to give thanks when I depend upon the character of God himself, with my eye fixed upon the unchangeable God, not my ever-changing circumstances.

Turn in your Bible to the psalms, please. **Psalm 95:1-5**

The very nature of God should compel us to thanks-giving. What happens when we focus on the character of God in thanks-giving? It elevates our perspective. It brings perspective. The result is this: if God chooses not to change our circumstances, he can still change us!

One of the problems, I think, of modern Christians is we think of God too little and we think too little of God. Look at David, the Hebrew king, addressing the people as his son, Solomon, succeeded him to the throne as king over Israel:

Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours.

Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, Our God, and praise your glorious name. – *I Chronicles 29:10-13*

Thanks-giving is an integral part of our worship: a focus on the character of God, which should result in giving thanks.

III. Thanks-Giving is an Attitude of Gratitude For What God Has Done

One writer put it this way:

Charis always demands the answer *eucharistia* (that is, grace always demands the answer of gratitude). Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice and echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightening. (*Karl Barth*)

Thanks-giving is an expression of appreciation. It considers the gracious work of God in one’s life, and responds in giving thanks. What about God’s grace in your life? I think sometimes, maybe oftentimes, we are so preoccupied, so distracted, so

insensitive and undiscerning, that we run right into God's grace, and we miss God altogether.

There is a story told of the German theologian, Karl Barth. He was on a bus in Basil, the Swiss city in which he lived and taught for so many years. One day, a man – a tourist – came and sat beside him. Barth struck up a conversation, “You are a visitor, yes? And what do you want to see in our city?”

The man said, “I would like to see the great theologian, Karl Barth. Do you know him?” “Oh, yes,” said Barth. “I shave him every day.” The man went away satisfied, telling his friends that he had met Barth's barber.

We need to pray, “Lord, open my eyes that I might behold the good from your hand, and may I see the Giver behind the gift and give thanks.”

IV. Thanks-Giving is an Anticipation of What God Will Do

Not only is there a focus on the past – what God has done; but also a view of the future – what God will do. This is often the continuation or the completion of the work he has begun. I am reminded of the great proposition Paul makes in his letter to the Philippians:

For I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. – *Philippians 1:6*

Thanks-giving can pull our thoughts into the future when we will experience the fullness of our salvation in eternity. John Newton, the former slave trader, later minister of the Gospel and hymnwriter, included this verse in his beloved *Amazing Grace*:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise,
Then when we've first begun.*

So, do that now in anticipation of the future. This is an expression of trust: the promises of God stand firm, guaranteed by his faithfulness. What he has promised, he will fulfill.

V. Thanks-Giving is an Appropriate Expression of my Life in Christ

Thanks-giving will increasingly mark your life if:

A. You are filled with the Spirit. Ephesians 5:18-20

This all comes down to control. Imagine a throne, a chair if you will, in the middle of your heart. Who sits on the throne? You? Other people? Your job? To the degree that we allow Christ to sit on the throne, we will find ourselves in the habit of giving thanks.

B. You are walking in a manner worthy of the Lord.

Colossians 1:9-12

When we set our will to his, when we live out the grace he has given to us, our hearts will be filled with thanks-giving. Out of an abundance of grace will flow a heart of giving thanks.

Thanks-giving will increasingly mark you life if:

C. You are filled with the peace of Christ and the word of Christ.

Colossians 3:15-17

When you experience the peace of Christ, and when you let God's word soak down into your life, defining your perspective, you will be a person who routinely practices the habit of giving thanks.

D. You are a worshiper of God. Look at this from Hebrews 13:15 –

Through him then (that is, Christ), let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to his name. – *Hebrews 13:15*

Thanks-giving becomes an expression of a maturing contentment – finding your identity in Christ, your fulfillment in Christ, your joy in Christ, your satisfaction in Christ, your significance in Christ.

So, let's look back over what we have seen about thanks-giving this morning.

Thanks-giving is:

- An expression of submission
- An expression of confidence
- An expression of appreciation
- An expression of trust

- An expression of life in Christ

Conclusion:

One of the most common objections there is to thanks-giving is this: “I don’t feel thankful. For me to give thanks would be hypocritical; it would not be genuine. I feel I would be faking it.”

Listen to how Eugene Peterson addresses this concern. I have shared this concept with you before.

I have put great emphasis on the fact that Christians worship because they want to, not because they are forced to. But I have never said that we worship because we feel like it. Feelings are great liars. If Christians only worshipped when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship that went on. Feelings are important in many areas, but completely unreliable in matters of faith. Paul Scherer is laconic: “The Bible wastes little time on the way we feel.”

... We think that if we don’t feel something there can be no authentic in doing it. But the wisdom of God says something different, namely, that we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting. Worship is an act which develops feelings for God, not a feeling for God which is expressed in an act of worship. When we obey the command to praise God in worship, our deep, essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured.