

NOVEMBER 22 2020

Thanksgiving

Thank you. Two simple words. We teach them to our children at a very young age, and hope that we teach them to be grateful. We expect them to say thank you when they receive a gift, or a compliment or even when the potatoes are passed. We expect them to say it when we are around and we hope they say it when we aren't. Many parents would echo Shakespeare's lament,

“How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.”

Cicero claimed

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others,”  
Gratefulness is the soil out of which every other virtue grows.

As we enter this season of Thanksgiving I am becoming more and more aware of how often I forget to give thanks for the things in my life. In the midst of living I find it easy to lose my focus. I can easily be distracted by what I don't have, rather than what I have. I must constantly be vigilant that I keep focused. We can also be distracted from Thanksgiving by thinking that we have somehow earned or deserved what we have. We tend to forget that Everything we have is a gift from God. As someone once said “from salvation to sneakers” everything comes from God. Our very life itself is a gift from God. Each breath we take is God given.

Elizabeth Elliot says

A list of things to be thankful for usually turns out to be merely a list of things we like. It ought rather, I think, to be a list of what we have been given... How can we reach that kind of maturity? You learn to swim by swimming. I am convinced that we can learn best to thank God by thanking him. Thanksgiving is itself a spiritual exercise, necessary for the building of a healthy soul...

Elizabeth Elliot, 'Thanksgiving for What is Given', Christianity Today, November 10, 1972, p.5.

One of the common names of the Lord's Supper is 'eucharist', 'giving of thanks': a word that implies intimacy with the person to whom thanks is given. The root word of thanksgiving is charis, 'grace'. We acknowledge this when we 'give thanks' or 'say grace' before meals.

At the end of his life Jesus and his friends were in the Upper Room. They were sharing the Last Supper together on the eve of his execution. He took bread and broke it - as a symbol of his body soon to be broken... Then he took a cup, filled it with wine - as a symbol of his blood soon to be poured forth onto the earth. And then he gave thanks! Have you ever thought about that? In his darkest hour, he gives thanks! With death almost upon him, he is grateful!

How does anyone get to be like that? There is only one answer: Jesus had the kind of relationship with a loving Father which never doubted that despite trouble and even calamity, God is good; beyond death there is always resurrection. And as the early Church Fathers were fond of saying, 'He became what we are, so we could become what he is.'

William Law asks us: Would you know who is the greatest saint in the world? It is not the one who prays most or fasts most; nor the one who gives most alms, or is most eminent for temperance, chastity, or justice; but the one who is always thankful to God, who wills everything that God wills, who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness, and has a heart always ready to praise God...

If any one would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, they must tell you to make a rule for yourself, to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing.

William Law, quoted in T. Carson, 'Thanksgiving', Sydney: Australian Missionary Tidings, 1st August 1958, p.115.

Ps 100 is often used as a reading for thanksgiving.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

As we hear this psalm, we are challenged to enter his gates with Thanksgiving and into his courts with praise. It's easy to enter church with thanksgiving in our hearts, but we must remember that we enter his presence not only when we enter the sanctuary but anytime we acknowledge him. God is present with us at all times and we are to be thankful at all times.

We have much to be thankful for.

Thoreau used to wake up every morning and, even before getting out of bed, would give thanks that he had been born. He often ran his mind over what he would have missed had he never been born...

In Psalm 103 David reminds us of some of the things we are to be thankful for.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits – who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit? who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's?

Firstly, he says the Lord forgives all our iniquity – our sin, our wrong doing. Boy am I glad of that. I wouldn't like to think that God is storing up all my misdoings and miscalculations to remind me of at a later date.

He heals all my diseases. Our God is a healing God. He loves us and wants us to have healthy bodies as we travel our journey to be with him.

He has redeemed our lives from the pit – he has offered salvation to us and he lifts us up when life seems to overwhelm us.

He crowns us with steadfast love and mercy – to crown; an interesting choice of words – to top one's head, to honor someone, he honors us with his love and his mercy

And he chooses to give us good as long as we live.

All that he gives us is good and we should be thankful.

But I wonder. How can we show we are thankful? Is verbally thanking him in a prayer once a day or even twice a day enough?

Scripture says

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.

With our whole heart – with everything that we are, our entire being.

This is not something where we can simply toss a prayer into the air to say thanks. It requires our being – our actions as well. Yes, I believe actions can say thanks as well as words. I wouldn't say they replace the words, but words put into concrete action speak loudly.

So how do we put praise and thanksgiving into action.

Wilfred A Peterson says we put it into action by thanks living.

'The Art of Thanksliving', in *The Treasure Chest*, Charles L Wallis (ed.), New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p.216  
The art of thanksgiving is thanksliving.

He says

It is gratitude in action... It is thanking God for the gift of life by living it triumphantly.

It is thanking God for your talents and abilities by accepting them as obligations to be invested for the common good.

It is thanking God for all that men and women have done for you by doing things for others...

It is thanking God for health and strength by the care and reverence you show your body...

It is thanking God for each new day by living it to the fullest.

It is thanking God by giving hands, arms, legs and voice to your thankful spirit.

It is adding to your prayers of thanksgiving, acts of thanksliving.

Above all, may we express our thanks, as Paul suggests, by offering our lives to God as a sacrifice (Romans 12:1,2). So much has God given us; let us give everything back to him.

.....

I want to end; with a prayer of WE Sangster:

You have given so much to me Give one thing more - a grateful heart... Not thankful when it pleases me, as if your blessings had spare days, But such a heart, whose pulse may be your praise.

W.E. Sangster, 'He Delights in our Gratitude', Westminster Sermons (vol. ii), London: Epworth, 1961, pp. 140-142.

A Benediction: To our gift-giving God, who has done wonderful things for us; who all our life is near us; who gives us constantly his love and joy and peace; to this bounteous God be thanks and praise for ever. Amen.