

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
November 28, 2021

## **Giving Thanks**

Colossians 2:6-7; 3:15-17

Gordon T. Smith tells about a time when he was a teenager in the back seat of the family car as they returned home from a trip to the coast. According to Smith:

My mother, as was her pattern, spoke the words "Thank God for traveling mercies" as we pulled into our driveway. I pointed out, with classic teenage wisdom, that there were thousands of cars on the road that day, so why should we presume that somehow the hand of God was upon our particular vehicle, guiding us along? Her response was poignant and timely: "Oh Gordon, yes indeed, the mercy and goodness of God is very much on each of the cars and trucks along the road. The difference is that Christians give thanks."<sup>1</sup>

During the course of this day, families will pull into driveways all across America, returning home from Thanksgiving travels. If ever there were a time to express gratitude for a safe journey, surely the conclusion of a holiday devoted to giving thanks is the opportunity. This should be especially true of Christians, whose basic posture in life is thankfulness.

Whether you stayed put this Thanksgiving, traveled locally, or left early to beat the holiday rush home, here you are in the Lord's house for another gathering of the grateful, ready to feast on a generous portion of God's word. In this gathering, we already know which individuals are going to lead us in prayer. But in your Thanksgiving Day gathering, it may not have been as clear cut. Once the table and chairs were set up, the food was set out, and everyone was assembled, the time came to decide who was going to say the blessing.

In our family, most eyes turned toward me. There's nothing like having a minister in the family, especially when the time comes for public prayer. I usually oblige, though there are some times when I'll try to spread out the responsibility to someone else, or maybe even beat others to the punch and ask someone else to say the prayer, before I myself get asked.

This Thanksgiving call to prayer can be an awkward moment of silence when heads drop or folks start looking at one another, waiting for a brave volunteer. At one level, it may seem like a mere holiday formality. But remember that there's important business going on during the blessing. It's the business of worship. Someone has been charged with the responsibility to lead everyone else into the presence of God, where gratitude is the basic posture. The rabbis had a saying: "In the future all sacrifices will cease, but the offering of thanks will not cease to all eternity." So think of your family's Thanksgiving prayer as a sacred moment in the ongoing, unending flow of gratitude that takes place in the presence of God. In those few moments of prayer, your family gathering is participating in an even greater cosmic gathering of eternal praise and thanks.

This is one of the reasons that page after page of Scripture calls us to give thanks to God. And the letters of Paul are part of that summons to gratitude. Paul certainly practices what

he preaches, as he regularly opens his letters by giving thanks for the brothers and sisters in Christ to whom he's writing. From there, he uses other parts of his letters to underscore the importance of living gratefully, especially in light of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. I'm struck by how one person has put it when he says: "Paul is a thanksgiving junkie. And he is so because he understands that thankfulness is not one of many virtues that characterize the Christian life, but *the* characteristic of faith."<sup>2</sup>

The way Paul sees it, unrighteousness and ungratefulness go hand in hand. Trace our pride and greed and envy and anger and lust and all our other sins to their root, and you'll find a failure to live thankfully. In Romans, Paul says of humankind, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God *nor gave thanks to him*, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (1:21). According to Paul, all the violence and chaos and despair that we experience on this planet is grounded in a worship problem, namely, our failure to give praise and thanks to God.

It's no wonder, then, that Paul consistently appeals to his fellow believers to devote themselves to lives of thankfulness. Maybe it's partly because so many other expressions of righteousness are rooted in thankfulness. Even the Roman philosopher Cicero was on to something when he said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others."<sup>3</sup> Maybe it's also because our default position seems to be ungratefulness. Or at least we're prone to take things for granted, and to live with a strong sense of entitlement.

In a YouTube segment from about ten years ago, a comedian appearing on one of the late-night talk shows commented about how frustrated people get when complications occur during their airline flights. "Everything is amazing right now and nobody's happy," he said. He went on to describe how he was on one of the first flights that offered Wi-Fi access to the internet. And yet, in a few minutes, when the service broke down, the man beside him swore in disgust. "How quickly the world owes him something that he didn't know existed 10 seconds ago," said the comedian.

He also talked about how many people describe less than perfect flights as if they were experiences from a horror film: "It was the worst day of my life. First of all, we didn't board for 20 minutes! And then we get on the plane and they made us sit there on the runway for 40 minutes!" Then he said, "Oh really. Did you fly through the air incredibly, like a bird? Did you partake in the miracle of human flight? . . . Everybody on every plane should be going, 'O my God, wow!' . . . You're sitting in a chair in the sky!" Then he mocked a passenger who tried to push his seat back and complained, "It doesn't go back a lot!"<sup>4</sup>

As others have noted, we can recognize ourselves in this humorous description. Our absolute frustration when things don't go as we had planned, or our impatience with technology, and with one another. All these remind us how much we take for granted, and how ungrateful we can be.

In Thornton Wilder's 1938 play *Our Town*, there's a character named Emily who is given one day to return to the world after her death. As she does so, she calls out:

Goodbye Grover's Corners—Mama and Papa. Goodbye to clocks ticking—and my butternut tree! —and Mama's sunflowers—and food and coffee—and new-ironed dresses and hot baths—and sleeping and waking up! Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you! Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?<sup>5</sup>

Living with gratitude requires an alertness, an awareness, of the daily, moment by moment gifts that easily become routine and invisible to us.

So Paul is on the right track when he urges continual thankfulness. In other words, not just an occasional expression of appreciation to God, or even a whole day set aside to reflect on giving thanks. No, thankfulness means something much broader and deeper. It means living in a constant state of gratitude. It means thanksgiving as a mode of being, as a way of life.

We can hear Paul urging this way of life in today's texts from Colossians. "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (2:6-7). Thankfulness, says Paul, is what happens when you're living out of a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. In other words, you're not grateful simply because somebody told you to be, though that can at least get us thinking about thankfulness. "Be thankful." "Count your blessings." "Your glass is half full not half empty." "You need to get an attitude of gratitude." These are the kinds of commands and exhortations that make a comeback around this time each year. They certainly have some truth in them, and they have their appropriate place. But they have their limits, and can only take us so far.

What we need more than anything is the grace of God creating thankfulness in our hearts. That's why Paul reminds the Colossians that receiving Christ was the beginning point of their faith, and cultivating their relationship with Christ is what will enable them to continue effectively. And the way to stay in solidarity with Christ is by nurturing that bond through worship and the word, through fellowship and service. Otherwise, all we're doing is trying to muster up some gratitude on our own, especially when late November rolls around.

But when the very life and power of Christ are working in us and through us, the result isn't just a moment of obedience or brief conformity to a command. It isn't a trickle of gratitude or a mere drop of appreciation. No, when you and I are in Christ, and are continually remembering what God has done for us through him, the result is a surplus of gratefulness. Gratitude starts filling us to the brim and beyond. We overflow with thankfulness.

Paul calls for something similar when he writes to the believers in Thessalonica. Whether praying, working, worshiping, witnessing, or waiting for the Lord, they're to do so with constant gratitude. "Give thanks in all circumstances," he tells them (1 Thess. 5:18).

There was a Scottish minister named Alexander Whyte who was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this." Much to his surprise, however, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this."

That's sort of a lighthearted example of giving thanks in all circumstances. But as we well know, there are lots of other much more severe circumstances where expressing gratitude seems like a very remote possibility. Situations of suffering and pain. Situations of injustice and oppression. Situations of disease, death, discord, disaster, and disappointment. When we affirm that we should always be giving thanks, that doesn't mean we should pretend that suffering and sorrow are only minor and momentary distractions. It doesn't mean that we should live in denial about realities that can cause us to doubt or question the goodness of God. Instead, we're to face and enter into life's darkest and most distressing experiences with honesty about the depth of our fear and the limits of our understanding. And yet at

the same time, we're to cultivate a sustained and durable gratitude that relies on the unchanging realities of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior, in every kind of condition and circumstance.

Maybe this explains some of the repetition in the second portion of today's texts from Colossians. In verse 15, Paul just comes straight out and says, "Be thankful." Then in verse 16, he reminds us that our worship assemblies are supposed to be a gathering of the grateful. And then, just in case we still haven't gotten the point, Paul reminds us that the entire scope of our lives, day in and day out, is to be characterized by gratitude. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through him" (3:17).

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Teach Us to Pray* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018) 41.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Galli, "The Impossibility of Thanksgiving." Christianity Today website. November 25, 2009. Accessed November 20, 2014 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/novemberweb-only/147-31.0.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Galli, "The Impossibility of Thanksgiving."

<sup>4</sup> Galli, "The Impossibility of Thanksgiving." See also Mollie Ziegler Hemingway, "The Parent of All Virtues." Christianity Today website. November 22, 2010. Accessed November 22, 2014 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/28.60.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Christopher de Vinck, "Tracing Thankfulness to Its Headwaters." *The Wall Street Journal Opinion* (April 17, 2016).