

## Thanksgiving: It's *More* Than A Holiday

Ephesians 5:20

Last week, we looked at the second characteristic of a life that is filled by God's Spirit which we saw in Ephesians 5:20: "...*always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" For too many Americans, "thanksgiving" comes one day a year. It is a holiday where we pay lip service to the memory of our forefathers who had so little and who relied on the kindness of God and others to protect them from starvation.

I say "lip service" because most Americans find it almost as awkward to *give thanks* to God the Father for everything as they do to ask Him "*give us this day our daily bread.*" We have had it so good for so long that it becomes easy to forget God's goodness and simply take it for granted. For those who recognize the implications and importance of being thankful, thanksgiving is *more* than a holiday—it is our *very reason for existing!* Do you believe that? If you struggle with that, then consider what David prayed in the sixth psalm, verses 4-5:

*Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. <sup>5</sup> No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?*

Are you getting the gist of this? David is saying: God save my life from death—because if you don't, *I won't be able to praise you!* Another unnamed psalmist prays along the same lines in behalf of the nation of Israel when he cries to God in Psalm 106:47:

*Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from the nations, **that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.***

Do you see the implications of this request? Not merely—"Save us because we are your people and you promised that one day you would restore our nation." The heart of this prayer is this: "God—everything you do—you *do* so that *we may give you thanks* and set your glory on display! If you take the time to trace this theme, you will see it in numerous passages—both Old Testament and New Testament:

- **Psalm 100:4-5:** <sup>4</sup> *Enter his gates **with thanksgiving** and his courts with praise; **give thanks** to him and praise his name.* <sup>5</sup> *For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.*
- **Psalm 118:28-29:** <sup>28</sup> *You are my God, and **I will give you thanks**; you are my God, and I will exalt you.* <sup>29</sup> **Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.**
- **2 Corinthians 9:15:** *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*
- **Philippians 4:6:** *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God.*

- ***I Thessalonians 5:16-18:*** <sup>16</sup> *Be joyful always;* <sup>17</sup> *pray continually;* <sup>18</sup> ***give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.***
- ***Revelation 5:11-13:*** *Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.* <sup>12</sup> *In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”* <sup>13</sup> *Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”*

For God’s people, *both* OT and NT and ultimately for all eternity, *thanksgiving* is more than *just* a holiday. It is our *very reason for existing*. And so God intends for it to be a *way of life* among those who name His name. That is why we find *thanksgiving* in this particular text. It is an essential part of what God is developing in the sanctification of His people. Ok. So far so good. But where are we supposed to go with this? How can we get our arms around this and embrace it more and more *as a way of life*? I have been giving a lot of thought to this in the last few years, because frankly, I have noticed a big gap in this area in my own life. If this is so important to God, why is it not more *evident* in my own life? As I have reflected on this, I have come to the realization of how I little I really have understood about this business of “giving thanks.” But as we look at this versed in light of the overall message of Ephesians, I think we can get a better handle on what it is and how we can pursue it as a way of life. As I read through the book of Ephesians, there are three truths I learn that help me to understand the heart of thanksgiving:

- I. Ephesians tells me that thanksgiving is a ***response*** to the revelation of God.

Before I explain that whole concept, let me point out what the Bible teaches over and over—but which we readily observe as well: *People were created to be responders*. Everybody responds to *something* or *things*. For the next three weeks, millions of people will be watching and responding to something called “March Madness.” People will yell, scream, celebrate, and commiserate. Why? Because they were created by their Creator with the capacity and the irresistible impulse to respond to that which they believe to be worthy of their wholehearted response. No one will have to tell them when they see a well-executed play that they need to respond—or how they ought to (illustrate). This sets us apart from all other creatures. As I have heard Paul Trip point out, when penguins dive into the water at the South Pole or at the zoo, you don’t see other penguins applauding or holding up sign saying: 9.5, 9.0, 9.9, 10!

***We*** respond because we were created to do so. But the thing that we were created to respond to and ultimately redeemed by Christ to respond to is God’s revelation—God’s revealing of Himself to us. That is what ought to bring out the most powerful and the most exuberant response of all. If people can go nuts next week over a well-executed ally oop and slam dunk—how much more should we

respond to the Living God and all that **He** has done! And so right away, you see the Apostle Paul modeling this for us in Ephesians 1:3-14:

<sup>3</sup> **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.** <sup>4</sup> **For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love** <sup>5</sup> **he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—** <sup>6</sup> **to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.** <sup>7</sup> **In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace** <sup>8</sup> **that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.** <sup>9</sup> **And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,** <sup>10</sup> **to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.**

<sup>11</sup> **In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,** <sup>12</sup> **in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.** <sup>13</sup> **And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,** <sup>14</sup> **who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.**

And the book goes on from this point further describing in detail what God has done to take this messed up, sin-cursed world and to fully restore and make it even better than before!! Chapter two explains just how messed up we were and just how bigger God's grace is. And chapter three personalizes it all by showing how we get to be directly involved in showcasing God's glory before the rest of Creation! (We get to be the trailer of the motion picture of God's completed redemption in Eternity; Like that sample you get at Baskin and Robbins, we get to be the foretaste of the glory yet to come. We get to show the world what future grace tastes like!)

Ok. I think its time to take a time out for a reality check. I mean this all sounds well and good. But is life **really this good?** Are you going to be able to wake up on Monday morning and really feel this “geeked” about what God has done? Are you going to be able to rejoice this way when you get a phone call from the principal about something that your son did this week at school? Or when your spouse lets you down? Or when the car decides its time for you to spend \$800 on

an unexpected repair? And that is where the rub is. We know all these sweet truths. But we live in a world that frankly tastes *bitter* much of the time. It was no different for Paul. Guess where is even as he writes this letter? He is in prison—or at least under house arrest!

On the surface, most would describe Paul as being out of touch with reality. *Is he?* Or is he in fact **very much** in touch with reality?! The ultimate reality of God's revelation which **IS REALITY!**

Transition: Which brings us to the second great truth that Ephesians tells me about thanksgiving...

## II. Thanksgiving is a **fruit** of the Spirit's work in us.

Ephesians reminds us that although there is an ultimate reality known only by God's special revelation—this reality is often inaccessible because of our sinful thinking. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 2:3 and 4:17-18 where he says:

*<sup>17</sup> So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. <sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.*

So we need to be first of all made alive (2:5), and then we need God's Spirit to give us insight and wisdom to see things not as they *seem*—but as they **are** because of God's Great Plan in Christ. Listen again to Paul's prayer in 3:16-19:

*<sup>16</sup> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Paul could see God's work **inside a prison**. Paul could see beyond the short-term circumstances and rejoice because the Spirit was answering for him what Paul was at the same time praying for the believers at Ephesus and the surrounding churches. "Open their eyes, Lord!"

Paul could rejoice and give thanks in prison because the Spirit gave him **eyes to see and rejoice** in the outcome before the game was over.

**Illustration:** Ever watch a game on video or TiVo that has already been played and you know the outcome. Kentucky/Duke back in 1998. Down by 18 points with less than 10 minutes to go. They won the game. Watched the tape afterwards. I wasn't even flustered when my team was down with  $\frac{3}{4}$  the game

over. I was loving it. Because I knew the outcome! And the seeming impossibility only heightened the drama. “Wow. This is going to be some comeback!” That is what the Holy Spirit did for Paul. And what Paul prays and you can pray that God’s Spirit will do for you and your brothers and sisters in Christ today!

Because of God’s revelation to you in Christ and in the Scriptures, you *can* give thanks. Because of God’s Spirit who gives you eyes to understand and apply those great truths to your present situation—you can give thanks!

**Transition:** But what exactly is the Spirit aiming to do in us—and what are *we* to do?

### III. Ephesians reminds us that thanksgiving must be a *practiced discipline*.

**Illustration:** *Put on your tennis shoes and pick up the tennis racket and ball. Explain your intent to play in the French Open in Mid-May.*

There is a problem with expecting to excel in a sport—or any area of life requiring skill, training, and practice—without actually devoting time, effort and a lot of discipline. And yet this is exactly what God is calling for in Ephesians 5: 18-21! We have already read this—but I want you to see the connection.

Ephesians 5:15-20:

*<sup>15</sup> Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. <sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with (lit. by) the Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Singing and making music in your heart to the Lord, <sup>20</sup> always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*

Do you see the connection here between our disciplined pursuit of *wisdom* and being filled *by* God’s Spirit? They are not mutually exclusive. In fact they *go together*. Look at verse 19. Do you think what Paul is describing here somehow happens *spontaneously*? How is it that God’s Spirit moves people to start speaking to each other in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? How is it that His Spirit causes us to sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord? Same with verse 20. How is it that He produces a heart of thanksgiving in us? It has to do with our obedient cooperation with His Spirit’s work in us. So what can you do to get in step with God’s Spirit and live a lifestyle of thanksgiving.

Some practical suggestions for “improving your game” of thanksgiving:

- Make use of the normal means of grace (Word; prayer; ordinances!). If you give yourself room to make excuses about not having enough time, admit that what

you really are lacking is an understanding of *what God is doing to make us like Christ—and just how powerless we are without His grace!*

- Dare to take your in seriously. Don't excuse it. Don't blame-shift to others. Take responsibility for owning your own sin. Don't be afraid of this. Instead, embrace the power of the Cross!!
- Take the public ministry of worship seriously rather than casually. Don't come haphazardly. Come like athlete prepared to take the gold medal (Prepare your whole body). Don't be like Bode Miller. You get out of it what you put into it.
- Keep a *journal of providences* (a record of God's current work as you observe it; answers to prayer; temptations overcome; idol's exposed; God's faithfulness to forgive; God's working in the lives of family members or brothers and sisters etc).
- Look for ways to minister what God is teaching you to others. You will be amazed at how it comes back to you and reinforces your own faith. This is why counseling cannot be entirely limited to a select few! By the way, this is why we need to be working on breaking down the body into bite-sized relational chunks so we can really minister to each other. Talk about fostering a spirit of thanksgiving in this body!
- Read/ listen to stimulating, Christ-centered preachers and writers (C. J. Mahaney; Paul Tripp; Joni Eareackson Tada; Older ones like J. C. Ryle; Spurgeon; Robert Murray McCheyne—who by the way died at age of 29—and yet saw more accomplished in his lifetime for Christ than most who lived three times longer).

Closing Poem:

### **Jehovah Tsidkenu**

By Robert Murray McCheyne

I once was a stranger to grace and to God,  
I knew not my danger, and felt not my load;  
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,  
*Jehovah Tsidkenu* was nothing to me.

I oft read with pleasure, to sooth or engage,  
Isaiah's wild measure and John's simple page;  
But e'en when they pictured the blood sprinkled tree  
*Jehovah Tsidkenu* seemed nothing to me.

Like tears from the daughters of Zion that roll,  
I wept when the waters went over His soul;  
Yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree  
*Jehovah Tsidkenu*—'twas nothing to me.

When free grace awoke me, by light from on high,  
Then legal fears shook me, I trembled to die;  
No refuge, no safety in self could I see—  
*Jehovah Tsidkenu* my Saviour must be.

My terrors all vanished before the sweet name;  
My guilty fears banished, with boldness I came  
To drink at the fountain, life giving and free—  
*Jehovah Tsidkenu* is all things to me.

*Jehovah Tsidkenu!* my treasure and boast,  
*Jehovah Tsidkenu!* I ne'er can be lost;  
In thee I shall conquer by flood and by field,  
My cable, my anchor, my breast-plate and shield!

Even treading the valley, the shadow of death,  
This "watchword" shall rally my faltering breath;  
For while from life's fever my God sets me free,  
*Jehovah Tsidkenu*, my death song shall be.