

"Being Thankful As a Way of Life"

This coming Thursday is Thanksgiving Day. Do you know how this national holiday came about?

In November 1621, after the Pilgrims' first corn harvest proved successful, Governor William Bradford organized a three-day celebration and feast. He invited some Native American Indians to join the colonists. No, there was no turkey, nor mashed potatoes, nor pumpkin pie. (They shot 5 deer for the meat). We look back and call this the "first Thanksgiving". But setting aside a day to give thanks was sporadic among the different settlements.

During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress designated one or more days of thanksgiving a year, and in 1789 George Washington issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation. In it he called upon Americans to be thankful for the successful ending of the war for independence, and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. His successors John Adams and James Madison also designated days of thanks during their presidencies.

In 1827, a noted magazine editor and prolific writer named Sara Hale, who also wrote the nursery rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb", launched a campaign to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. She campaigned vigorously and relentlessly for 36 years, until finally Abraham Lincoln heeded her request in 1863, earning her the nickname the "Mother of Thanksgiving." At the height of the Civil War, Lincoln issued a proclamation entreating all Americans to ask God to "commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife" and to "heal the wounds of the nation." Thanksgiving Day would be celebrated on the last Thursday in November.

But in 1939 President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the holiday up a week in an attempt to spur retail sales during the Great Depression! (Sound familiar?). Roosevelt's plan met with passionate opposition! It was dubbed "Franksgiving". And in 1941 the president reluctantly signed a bill making Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday in November. And so we have it!

I love Thanksgiving Day and the season of Thanksgiving! It easily gets swallowed up in Black Friday mania and the rush towards Christmas shopping. But I hope we never abandon Thanksgiving as a national holiday, a day to pause and reflect and give thanks for God's blessings to us – as individuals, and a nation.

But as good as it is to have a *special day* to give thanks, it's even better *being thankful as a way of life*. This really is the standard set in the Bible for followers of Jesus! 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

This verse says, "*Give thanks*". There's something winsome and attractive about thankful people, isn't there? Parents teach their children to be thankful. "Now don't forget to thank grandma and granddad for your Christmas gifts." We may know someone who has so much and is very blessed, and yet all they do is complain about every little inconvenience in their life. That's kind of an ugly thing, isn't it.

Then, 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says to give thanks *in all circumstances*. Ah...that's more difficult, isn't it! Don't we wish it said, "Give thanks in *some* circumstances", or "Be thankful when things are going well for you"? But it says to express gratitude in *all* circumstances. One translation says, "*In everything* give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." That means, to be thankful when we've got a miserable cold...when the biopsy result isn't what we hoped for...when our girl friend or boy friend ditches us...when we lose our job or don't get the raise we hope for. Most of us, if we're to pull that off, need divine help! *It is possible to give thanks in all circumstances if we have the power of Christ in us.*

1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us, "Give thanks in all circumstances; *for this is the will of God* in Christ Jesus for you." This is the way God wants us to act and live! *God wants our lifestyle to be one where we are thankful no matter what the circumstances of our life are!*

Being thankful, then, is a daily practice. A habit. Psalm 92:1-2 says, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love *in the morning*, and your faithfulness *by night*." Be thankful in the morning; be thankful at night; and throughout the day! Wouldn't it be so much better if instead of grumbling and complaining, we shifted our mindset and turned that into gratitude! It would make us a lot more pleasant to be around, and our life would glorify God much more!

We're thinking about being thankful *as a habit, a lifestyle*. What's the basis for this? What's the driving force or motivation behind a thankful heart? I think it's this: *We recognize that what we have has been given to us.*

Everything we have comes from God. There is a word we use in the church for this; it's the word "stewardship". A steward is a manager, a caretaker. God is the Owner, we are only managers of life and its gifts. To make this claim irritates some people. "What do you mean I don't own this? I worked hard to have what I have, to get where I am in life." Of course, and this isn't to take anything away from hard work, effort, achievement, and feeling good about it. But ultimately, it's God who's given us the ability we have, the health we have, the opportunities we have. My favorite comeback for those who have trouble believing that everything belongs to God, and is just loaned to us for a while is this: "Let's talk about this 100 years from now."

1 Corinthians 4:7 says, "What do you have that you didn't receive? And if you received it, then why are you bragging as if you didn't receive it?" There's a beautiful verse in the Book of James: "Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father" (James 1:17).

But also, *much of what we have comes from others*. Think of how much you've received that's come from others. My *parents* worked hard and sacrificed so I could go to college. I had a *music teacher* who taught me for 10 years, coaxed me to keep on taking lessons when I wanted to quit, and urged me to make something of my life; a *pastor* (Rocky Riedel) who took a personal interest in me and gave me a sound grounding in Scripture and faith; a *congregation* that has supported me and encouraged me these 4 plus years. I've been blessed by a myriad of

people who've helped shape my life – teachers, counselors, district superintendents, friends who've given me much! No one is a self-made man or woman! An attitude of gratitude percolates and emerges when we realize that *so much* has been *given* to us from other people, and from God!

We're thinking about being thankful as our *default mindset*. Giving thanks in all circumstances. And genuine thankfulness is born when we realize everything we have comes from God, and others. But it also leads to something. It *reciprocates*. There's a *payback*.

Genuine gratitude leads to generosity. It's like, I'm aware of how much I've *received*. And I want to *give*. When Jesus sent out His 12 disciples on a preaching/healing mission, He told them: "Freely you have received. Freely give" (Matthew 10:8). A great life principle! I think we know, don't we, that if we're really consistently thankful, we're going to want to be generous and share with others.

We talk about giving – generous giving – in the church. Look in the Bible, and we can see that Believers in the church in the New Testament. Churches need money to function. That's just a reality of life. We talk about "tithing" or the "tithe" – giving 10% or more of our income to the Lord. That's a standard, a measure for giving, that pretty much runs through Scripture. Giving generously, giving sacrificially. I hope that if your church means something to you, and you're thankful for it, that you will give generously, and even sacrificially, so that the church can get the message of salvation in Jesus Christ out to the world! What can be more important than that!

We can express our gratitude by giving generously to our communities. There are many organizations that are so important for healthy communities – fire companies, ambulance associations, libraries, service clubs, schools. Many of them depend on our generous giving in order to function. (And from what I can tell, it's much harder these days finding people to serve and do the work, not just give money). I voted in person this past Election Day. The election officials serving were located in the kitchen of the fire hall, standing behind a large plastic shield, wearing a plastic face shield. I appreciated what they were doing. I read a Facebook page posting of a friend speaking of the long day she had helping out in a polling place. Being generous in giving to these community causes, and helping where we can, is a great way of reciprocating, and showing our thanks, for what they do.

Then there is showing generosity for the poor and needy. This is a dominant theme in Scripture: to have compassion on the poor and needy, and being generous in providing for them. Scriptures promise God's blessings on those who share what they have with those in need. "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor." (Proverbs 22:9). "Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses" (Proverbs 28:27). Then there are these words from Isaiah: "If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs" (Isaiah 58:10-11).

Genuine Biblical faith always has a concern for those who are on the fringe of society, the powerless and oppressed, those who are truly needy. God's people are to give generously to alleviate human need and suffering.

One of the great ministries in our area is Water Street Mission. Nancy and I get their mailings. For a bit over \$25 we are able to feed 10 people this Thanksgiving. I have a special interest in Water Street Mission. Jack Crowley is their director. Jack and his family were in the Lima church I served. Jack was a teenager then. He grew up in an affluent suburb near Philadelphia. He graduated from Franklin & Marshall College and stayed in our area. He bought a home in Lancaster city. He's raising his family here. He's been with Water Street ministries many years. I'm so proud of Jack, and what he may have given up, to devote his life to the poor and homeless people in our area.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." I hope you have a blessed Thanksgiving Day! (Don't call it "Turkey Day". It's *Thanksgiving Day!*). Take time to thank God for all our blessings, and for the blessings we have in this country.

But let's work on being thankful as a way of life! Strive to make daily, consistent thanksgiving become ingrained in our personality. A gratitude motivated and driven by the realization that everything we have has been given to us. A gratitude that expresses itself in generosity!

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November 15, 2020

