

Give Thanks

DT- Be thankful for the unshakable kingdom of God.

Today we are starting a short series that we have simply titled Thanks-Giving. As we head towards the holiday of thanksgiving you may be thinking about the time you will get to spend with family and friends. You may be focused on the food of thanksgiving which we all tend to enjoy. You may be looking past thanksgiving towards Christmas because the retail stores certainly are. However you're thinking about thanksgiving we wanted to take a few Sundays and see what scripture has to say about offering our thanks and gratitude to God; and what does scripture have to say about giving. Today we start with thanks. Let's pray.

PRAY

How does a Christian show their thankfulness to God? What does it even mean to be thankful? Is there a wrong way to show your gratitude towards God and others? What are the signs that would show I may be struggling thankfulness? How can we be thankful when the situations of our life are really difficult? Am I missing opportunities to show my thankfulness? Do we understand just how encouraging a thankful and encouraging heart can be to others?

I hope to answer some of those questions in these next few sermons. This week I began to think about who are the most thankful people that I've been around in my life. I thought of an older professor at Ozark who has passed on now but when people would ask how he was doing he would always answer with a similar phrase, "Brother, I am saved, sanctified, and on my way to heaven."

Sometimes when you got around him you might think he was talking to himself, and perhaps at times he was, but often he was just talking to God, and many times if you could get close enough for long enough you would hear his prayers of thankfulness as he offered his gratitude to God for the smallest of things. Even finding a missing pencil that he had asked God to help him locate was an opportunity for thankfulness.

I also thought of my grandparents. My grandmother on my father's side of the family is the only grandparent still living, but they all grew up dealing with the aftermath of the great depression. That caused many of them to become hoarders for good reason, but it also created this beautiful heart of thankfulness. The gratitude and joy they had when receiving gifts of any kind was just different than everyone else's. Their prayers were even more thankful.

How do we grow and develop that kind of thankful heart; were we can say like the psalmists says in Psalm 27:13, "Yet I am confident I will see the Lord's goodness while I am here in the land of the living."

How do we develop that kind of confidence and thankfulness? To grow in this area of thankfulness we first must let gratitude win over greed.

1. Let gratitude win over greed.

Greed is the opposite of gratitude, and it runs rampant in our country and culture of excess. We can get so much so quickly and finance just about anything. It has caused us to have this struggle with greed which overshadows any gratitude we might have. Paul tells us how gratitude should win over greed in Colossians 2:6-7 he says, "And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness."

To overflow with thankfulness our lives must be built on Christ, our roots must grow down deep into him. Instead, our lives are built on 2-day shipping from Amazon. There's nothing wrong with ordering things from Amazon unless you're using that convenience to feed some measure of greed.

There's a perfect story from scripture that gives us a picture of the contrast between someone who has gratitude and someone who struggles with greed. This picture occurs around a table where the disciples are having a meal like our thanksgiving meal. It's Passover and the food is prepared to honor Jesus. John describes this meal in John 12:1-8, "Six days before the Passover celebration began, Jesus arrived in Bethany, the home of Lazarus—the man he had raised from the dead. A dinner was prepared in Jesus' honor. Martha served, and Lazarus was among those who ate with him. Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance. But Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would soon betray him, said, "That perfume was worth a year's wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor." Not that he cared for the poor—he was a thief, and since he was in charge of the disciples' money, he often stole some for himself. Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

In this story you have Mary breaking an incredibly expensive jar of perfume to pour over Jesus' feet and then uses her hair to wipe his feet. This is a remarkable expression of thanks and gratitude towards Jesus. Mary has a lot to be thankful for towards Jesus. He did just bring her brother Lazarus back to life. That's certainly a good reason to be grateful. Mary is also grateful that Jesus was her Messiah and he had come to bring everlasting life. She showed her thanks and gratitude with this expensive bottle of perfume.

In contrast to Mary's gratitude is Judas's greed. As the treasurer for the disciples Judas lives in that world of money. That's not a bad thing unless you let that fact affect your view of life. Unfortunately for Judas it did affect his view in a big way. His first reaction is to complain about how much the perfume was worth and how dare you use it in that way. Judas saw this act as wasteful, while Mary saw it as a way to give thanks.

Judas adds to his rebuke of Mary by telling her that if she was going to waste the perfume like that she should have at least sold it and given the money to the poor. Then John adds his commentary on Judas which is somewhat humorous when he says, "Not that he cared for the poor—he was a thief, and often stole some for himself."

Greed is what ruled Judas's life. He sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Judas heard the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:24 where it says, "You cannot serve both God and Money."

Unfortunately for him he chose to serve money, and greed won over gratitude. Before we trash Judas too hard we better take stock of our own lives. We can fall into this trap pretty easily as well. We

need to be like Mary, grateful for what God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives moving forward. To let gratitude win over greed we need to grow in gratitude.

2. Grow in gratitude:

How do you grow in thankfulness? Looking at the story of Mary and Judas it's fairly easy to tell that we need to let gratitude win the day but growing in thankfulness is not something we talk about very much so how do we grow to be more thankful? Most of the time what you look for you will find. What you think about is what you will become. If you always focus on the difficulties of your life, it will seem like your life is always difficult. If all you think about are the bitter people who have done you wrong, you will become a bitter person yourself.

You have a choice everyday to look for the things that will cause you to be ungrateful or the things that will cause you to overflow with thanksgiving. Do you wake up looking for trouble, wondering where the next shot is going to come from or do you wake up trying to spot the goodness of God in the land of the living. Gray Johnson in his book *Too Much: living with less in the land of more* says, "We cannot thank God too much. I have often thought, what would happen if we woke up today with only what we thanked God for yesterday? This is a sobering thought. We need God's help. Pray this prayer: "Dear God, teach me to be grateful for what I have before time forces me to be grateful for what I had."

To grow in gratitude we must wake up every day and spend the day with the Lord. Looking for the goodness of God in all the interactions we have. Psalm 103:1-5 says, "Let all that I am praise the Lord; with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name. Let all that I am praise the Lord; may I never forget the good things he does for me. He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases. He redeems me from death and crowns me with love and tender mercies. He fills my life with good things. My youth is renewed like the eagle's!"

If you want to grow in gratitude, grow in thankfulness then start your day with that kind of mindset, that kind of praise. The words that truly stand out to me in this psalm of David are at the end of verse 2. May I never forget the good things he does for me. Then David lists a handful of things that God does for us. He forgives all our sin, he heals us, he redeems us, and shows us love and mercy. If you truly want to grow in gratitude there are 2 simple, yet sometimes very difficult things you can do. First learn to be thankful in tough times.

- Learn to be thankful in tough times.

I'm not going to pretend like that's easy, but the more you practice it, and the more tough times you go through the easier it becomes if you lean into the Lord. I leaned into the Lord a little bit Thursday morning coming into work. Thursday marked 11 years since my father passed away. I got a text early in the morning from my best friend growing up just to let me know he was thinking about us. My dad had a pretty significant impact in his life.

I just sang along with a song that Shane & Shane have written that was inspired by Psalm 130. That psalm does a wonderful job of teaching us how to be thankful in tough times. Here's what Psalm 130 says, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the

morning. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins."

To truly be thankful in tough times you must put your hope in the Lord. Sometimes he makes us wait as this text points out, but we wait with an expecting hope. We look for the goodness of God during our difficulties and that allows us to be thankful to God in those tough times of life.

There have been several studies done to show the correlation between gratitude and joy, even between gratitude and your health. There was a study performed by 2 professors one from the University of California and one from the University of Miami. They asked participants to jot down a few sentences every week.

One group was asked to write down things for which they were grateful. The second group was asked to do just the opposite. They wrote down the regular annoyances and frustrations that occur in daily life. The third group was asked to simply write things down that occurred throughout their week, with no specific focus on either positive or negative experiences.

After 10 weeks, those who wrote about things for which they were grateful were markedly more optimistic and exhibited higher levels of joy in their lives than before the study. An unexpected byproduct of the study found that those participants who practiced writing down things for which they were grateful also exercised more and visited the doctor less.

Being grateful, being thankful no matter the situation makes us healthier physically, but what it does for us spiritually is sometimes beyond measure. Henri Nouwen once wrote an article titled "The Spiritual Work of Gratitude". In that article he says this, "To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives-the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections-that requires hard spiritual work."

Henri goes on to say, "Let's not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now and trust that we will soon see in it the guiding hand of a loving God." You want to grow in gratitude, learn to be thankful in tough times.

The second thing that can help us grow in gratitude is the opposite of what we just looked at. To grow in this area of thankfulness we also must learn to be thankful in good times.

- Learn to be thankful in good times.

Sometimes we get so excited about the good things going on in our lives that we forget who provided those things for us. We get a new job opportunity, or we get a big bonus, or we get some kind of recognition, or we just have ourselves a good day with our family without anyone arguing, fighting, hitting, or biting. On our worst days we can be thankful, so why wouldn't we be thankful on our best days. Psalm 100, which is titled as a song for giving thanks, says, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations."

Let's show him that kind of thanks, especially when things are going well, and the blessings of God are being poured out on us. We should be so thankful for the redeeming blood of Christ that changes everything for us. I am so thankful for his mercy and grace, but I am equally as thankful for his discipline and correction.

We talk a lot about the kingdom nowadays, which I think is great. We have these phrases like kingdom worker, kingdom minded, and kingdom focused. Something that we don't talk too often about is the fact that the kingdom of God is unshakable. That's not my assumption or my interpretation that's actually what scripture says. Hebrews 12, at the end of that chapter, is where we find this description of the kingdom. What I find very fitting is that the writer of Hebrews tells us we ought to be thankful, grateful, filled with thanksgiving because we have an unshakable kingdom.

Listen to how the writer describes the things that are shakable before he describes this unshakable kingdom that we now have. Hebrews 12:25-27 says, "Be careful that you do not refuse to listen to the One who is speaking. For if the people of Israel did not escape when they refused to listen to Moses, the earthly messenger, we will certainly not escape if we reject the One who speaks to us from heaven! When God spoke from Mount Sinai his voice shook the earth, but now he makes another promise: "Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also." This means that all of creation will be shaken and removed, so that only unshakable things will remain."

God will shake not just the earth but now he will shake heaven as well. Which means that only unshakable things will remain. What are the unshakable things? The kingdom. Hebrews 12:28 says, "Since we are receiving a Kingdom that is unshakable, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe."

Our thankfulness and gratitude for the unshakable kingdom of God should result in a pleasing worship that is filled with fear and awe. How wonderful it is to know that we are part of an unshakable kingdom. In tough times and good times that kingdom remains unshakable. In your fight to let gratitude win over greed; in your desire to grow in gratitude, to find thankfulness in bad times and good times, let the unshakable kingdom of God be your focus. If you need to fight back against greed start here. If you feel beat up and chewed up by the circumstances of your life right now, start here. If things couldn't be any better, don't forget God like the Israelites did time after time, instead start here. Start with the unshakable kingdom of God.

Be thankful for the unshakable kingdom of God, and turn that thanksgiving into a pleasing worship that is filled with fear and awe towards a God who deserves all the gratitude and all the thanks we can give him.