

A very happy Thanksgiving weekend to you. I hope your Thursday was full and your bellies fuller. Martha and I hosted her family and participated in a bit of tradition. **[SLIDE: Pic of bowl]** You see on the screen a bowl full of strips of paper. These pieces of paper each contained something someone in the family was thankful for and, later in the day, we each took turns pulling out one of these, reading it aloud to the rest of the family, and then trying to guess who wrote it. It was a meaningful, intimate, fun, and God-honoring time.

Each of you may have similar traditions, and the annual holiday of Thanksgiving is undoubtedly good. We pause on the fourth Thursday of each November to take stock of our lives and give thanks for what has happened in the past year. For Christians, we give that thanks to God, and include thanksgiving for who he is and what he has done. But for many of us, Thanksgiving is an exception, not a norm. It is an occasional response instead of a common practice. I believe many of us miss the incredible impact a life of thanksgiving can have.

The world of economics includes statistics and phenomena called indicators. Two common indicators are leading and lagging. Leading indicators are the causes or catalysts for something else happening. When you observe a leading indicator, you can expect this to follow. Lagging indicators are effects or results of something else happening. When you observe a lagging indicator, you can look back and expect to see something else has already happened.

For instance, since we all just celebrated Thanksgiving, let's talk about weight loss. If that's your goal, a decreasing number on the scale is a lagging indicator. It's the result, the effect, of something that happened before it. The leading indicator, though, would be calories in and calories out. This is the cause.

For many Christians, thanksgiving is exclusively a lagging indicator. It is a response to who God is and what he has done. It's the tradition of Thanksgiving. God moves, we thank him, and that's the end of it. And while that is totally appropriate, I believe many of us fail to see that thanksgiving can also be significantly impactful as a leading indicator; not just a moment in time that looks back, but a faithful posture and lifestyle that propels us forward and is a catalyst for us to live our lives more fully with God. **A life fueled by thanksgiving is a life on fire for God.**

Since you spent time in thanksgiving on Thursday, let me show you what might come because of it. Because just like us, the nation of Israel had yearly celebration days of remembrance and thanksgiving. This morning we are going to see five outcomes thanksgiving generates.

[2 Chronicles 30:21-22] ²¹ And the people of Israel who were present at Jerusalem kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with great gladness, and the Levites and the priests praised the LORD day by day, singing with all their might to the LORD. ²² And Hezekiah spoke encouragingly to all the Levites who showed good skill in the service of the LORD. So they ate the food of the festival for seven days, sacrificing peace offerings and giving thanks to the LORD, the God of their fathers.

God commanded the nation of Israel to observe several feasts every year to remember and celebrate who God is and what he had done for them. However, at the time of King Hezekiah's reign, the nation of Israel had been disobedient and was divided through civil war. There was the

northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The tribes of the north had been taken captive by the Assyrians, and the southern kingdom was under attack and threat from them as well. The nation had turned from God and was in disarray. So Hezekiah, who is referred to as one of the good kings because he sought the Lord, called together the people of Judah and those few who were not taken by the Assyrians to celebrate Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which commemorated and thanked God for their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. It was both an incredible time of celebration and thanksgiving for the nation as they looked back, but it was also a catalyst for significant change in their lives going forward.

When you give thanks, you get thankful. A life of thanksgiving begins with the first moment of giving thanks.

[2 Chronicles 30:23] ²³ Then the whole assembly agreed together to keep the feast for another seven days. So they kept it for another seven days with gladness.

The Israelites were so moved by keeping the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread that they all decided to keep the celebration going for another seven days. (Now, I know many of you like this idea because you want to turn a four-day weekend into an eleven-day weekend!) This was more than duty to God. This was beyond what the Law of Moses called for. This was a people whose satisfaction of the Law became tremendous personal satisfaction and a sincere desire to continue in thanksgiving.

This reminds me of something we instituted with our boys. In my attempt to be the world's most godly father, I would have my boys work through different aspects of prayer on any given night. It was good, but it was a lot. One day Martha and I decided that we would focus on one thing for a while; thanksgiving. So we would do our evening prayers and everyone was to say three things they were thankful for. As you might imagine, there was some resistance at the beginning, and oftentimes someone would stall out around the second thing. But, over time, guess what happened? The boys started initiating it. They would insist on praying on nights where we were all going in different directions. And lists of three became lists of four, five, six, ten things! A focus on thanksgiving led to an ongoing desire to regularly give thanks.

There is a phrase in Christianity that has been much maligned and is honestly repellant to some: Spiritual Disciplines. Just hearing that phrase induced feelings of guilt and shame in some of you. Others dislike it because the word "discipline" brings up negative connotation of punishment. But I don't want to get rid of that word. I want to reclaim it, because it has rich meaning to it, and it's where we get "disciple". **Discipline is godly training to develop godly character and a deeper relationship with the Lord.** But for many of us, myself included at times, spiritual rhythms don't come easily, and since they don't come easily, they don't get done. I have talked to far too many Christians who say, "I just can't get into (insert spiritual discipline here)", and the result is very little spiritual activity other than occasionally going to church. **The problem is that we see it more as a task to complete rather than a means to connect.**

But I want to encourage you with this passage this morning. If you look back at v. 5, we're told the Jews hadn't celebrated this feast in some time. They had become undisciplined around it. They had fallen out of practice. But, in faith, they stepped into it, and a "have to" became a "get

to”, because it wasn’t about checking the box, it was about connecting with their God. This holiday season is an opportunity for you to take a single step of faith by sincerely thanking God for one thing each day; even if it’s a begrudging, “Lord, I don’t really want to do this”, tedious task, and see what God does with it. See if he changes your “have to” to a “get to”. Maybe you’ll discover, by his grace, **what starts as duty becomes discipline, discipline becomes desire, and desire becomes delight.**

When you give thanks, you get giving. Too much turkey didn’t cause me to forget my grammar. What I mean is that a life of thanksgiving changes our attitude towards our stuff.

[2 Chronicles 30:24a] ²⁴ For Hezekiah king of Judah gave the assembly 1,000 bulls and 7,000 sheep for offerings, and the princes gave the assembly 1,000 bulls and 10,000 sheep.

Not only did the first week of thanksgiving move the Israelites to keep the feast going, it moved Hezekiah and the other wealthy leaders to give abundantly so that it could. These feasts included sacrifices and eating, so you needed animals to continue this work for God. **Their thanksgiving led to bold generosity.**

When we give thanks for what we have, we are reminded of who it’s from and what it’s given for. We acknowledge everything we have is a blessing from God, and it inspires in us a desire to bless others. It generates contentment, which is the first step towards generosity, and a change of heart that says “God didn’t give all this to me for me. He gave it to me to bless others.”

I know the idea of bold generosity might scare some of you. I get it. I grew up with some lean years and my instinct is to hold tightly to what I have. But I have been praying to God for a generous spirit, and that prayer always begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for what God has given me. And you know what it’s done? It’s loosened my grip. It’s freed me to be more generous. And guess what? I don’t miss it. In fact, it’s just the opposite. I am blessed by it, and I am thrilled to give back to God and to things he considers important. Now, I’m still a work in progress. I’m not a generosity hero. That was proven on Thursday. I discovered that when you host a big group, there are very few leftovers left over! So as I looked at my barren refrigerator last night, my spirit of generosity was momentarily diminished. But I know **the greater appreciation I have for what God has given me, the more generous I want to be with it.**

It’s the end of the calendar year, and you will likely be receiving fundraising requests from different organizations. That will include Fellowship. Our request is an opportunity to give to the work God has called us to and **do so expecting God to continue to move in and through us.** If you find yourself holding on tightly to what you have, consider how much gratitude you have expressed to God for it. **When you value what God has given, you give to what God values.**

When you give thanks, you get devoted. A life of thanksgiving changes the trajectory of the affections of your heart.

[2 Chronicles 30:24b, 31:1] And the priests consecrated themselves in great numbers...Now when all this was finished, all Israel who were present went out to the cities of Judah and broke in pieces the pillars and cut down the Asherim and broke down the high places and

the altars throughout all Judah and Benjamin, and in Ephraim and Manasseh, until they had destroyed them all. Then all the people of Israel returned to their cities, every man to his possession.

At the time of this feast, Israel had spent years in spiritual stagnancy, disobedience, and idolatry. This led to a split of the kingdom and God's judgment on Israel through the invading Assyrians. A time of thanksgiving was the catalyst to redirect Israel towards God. The priests, who had neglected their God-given purpose for so long, recommitted themselves to the work for which he had set them apart. And the people of Israel went throughout the land and destroyed all the idols and places to worship other gods. This is the fruit of repentance; turning from that which God opposes and turning towards him. But none of that happened until their thanksgiving expressed their value and love for the one true God and turned their hearts back towards him.

Idols are competition for the affections of our hearts. They are spiritual black holes that devour our devotion yet generate no light. Idols are idols because they hold too much value in our lives. Idols are idols because we value them more than we value God. Not only is it offensive to God, it causes us to move away from him and his purpose for us. **The direction our heart moves is the direction our lives go.** What I direct my thanksgiving towards increases its value in my heart, and the things I value are the things I devote myself to. Thanksgiving changes the trajectory of our hearts, and by doing so, changes the trajectory of our lives.

There are few things more satisfying in ministry than when someone asks me to help them get back on track with God, whether it's in their personal walk, their involvement in church, their marriage, or in some other capacity. My counsel often starts with encouragement to regular thanksgiving. Some of you have been living far from God. And while it would be easy for me to tell you to just stop it, I know, both by what I've observed as well as through my own personal wanderings, that **the devotion of our hearts must first change before the direction of our lives can change.** If you are here this morning and want to head in a new direction, want to get rid of idols and live devoted to God, begin by expressing your gratitude for who God is and what he has done. That will change your heart, and then it will change your life.

When you give thanks, you get full. This point has nothing to do with mashed potatoes and gravy. A life of thanksgiving changes our perspective on our circumstances.

[2 Chronicles 30:25-26] ²⁵ The whole assembly of Judah, and the priests and the Levites, and the whole assembly that came out of Israel, and the sojourners who came out of the land of Israel, and the sojourners who lived in Judah, rejoiced. ²⁶ So there was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem.

If I told you the United States had split over a civil war, that a large number of our fellow citizens had been captured and taken to a foreign land, and the rest of us here were under constant threat from our enemies, how would you feel? In the midst of destruction and division in Israel, despite dire circumstances, this people came to a place of joy. In fact, the writer tells us there had been nothing like it for a long time. Why? Focus on the right things, in spite of their circumstances.

What steals joy? Comparison, envy, discontentment, entitlement. We focus on what we don't have and look for someone to blame. Look no further than our national holiday called Black Friday. Mere hours after breaking bread, our world starts breaking heads. I'd be willing to bet that many of those you read about who are storming stores and assaulting others and trying to smuggle 65" flat screens under their shirts struggle to experience joy, and one of the reasons they may struggle with joy is because they struggle with thanksgiving. They want their stuff, and no one is going to get in their way.

But let me ask you, have you ever met an unhappy thankful person? **Thanksgiving is a catalyst for joy.** Thanksgiving focuses on what you do have, and for the believer in Christ, our thanksgiving isn't just about what we have, it focuses on who we have, both here and now, and for all of eternity, which can never be taken away from us. Thanksgiving expresses fulfillment, fulfillment in the presence and promises of God, and fulfillment leads to joy.

You know what else steals joy? Resentment and unforgiveness. This passage is timely for us because look what a season of thanksgiving has done for a divided nation. Unity. They have come together to thank and worship the Lord, and they are united in their desire to continue the celebration, and in their joy. The Hebrew word for "assembly" is *qahal*, and it gets translated to the Greek as *ekklesia*, which is the same word in the New Testament for "church". This is a people reunited not only nationally, but spiritually, because of a time of thanksgiving. That's because thanksgiving is an act of humility. Thanksgiving says someone has something to offer that benefits or blesses me, meaning I'm not self-sufficient. That leads to humility, and humble people seek reconciliation, making room for joy.

When you give thanks, you get connected. A life of thanksgiving is a doorway to an intimate relationship with God.

[2 Chronicles 30:27] ²⁷ Then the priests and the Levites arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven.

Thanksgiving isn't just an appreciation for stuff, it's an appreciation for who has given it to us. When you're praying at dinner, you don't offer thanksgiving to the food, you offer it to the one who gave it to you. It's why we teach our kids from a young age to say, "thank you". It's not just good manners, it honors and values the other person.

Those I know who are most in love with Jesus are the ones who are most thankful to Jesus. If you understand the gospel, if you truly comprehend that the only thing we really deserve is death, your heart will burst with thanksgiving. A "thank you" to God is an act of worship, an act of praise, and an act and posture that declares our dependence on God and our love with him. And when we do that, he hears us. Your words, spoken from your mouth or declared in your mind, travel to heaven and resound in the ears of God.

So, this morning, while my instruction is "go be thankful", my intent is for you to connect deeply with God. And the more you experience that connection, the more you'll want it going forward. And the more you connect with God through thanksgiving, the more you'll live your life for him.

There is something competing for the devotion of your heart. Confess it right now.

There is something stealing your joy. Tell God right now.

There is something in your life that you can thank God for. Do that right now.