

Give Thanks For the Gifts Jesus Gives You: A Thanksgiving Meditation on Ephesians 4

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by David Schrock

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."
— Ephesians 4:7–8 —

In this week of Thanksgiving, it is good to remember that thanksgiving is more than a feeling prompted by turkey and stuffing. Thanksgiving is a way of life for those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. And thanksgiving is one of the chief ways Jesus builds up his church.

Here's what I mean: Scripture teaches us that we are created to give thanks to God for all that he has given to us. We praise him for his good gifts in creation, and we adore him especially for his mercy in salvation. Yet, in Paul's letters to the churches, there is peculiar focus on giving thanks for the people whom Christ has given us. And it is worth considering this particular gift as we celebrate Thanksgiving. (On Sunday our church will practice this very thing during our time of Great Commission Prayer).

What Ephesians 4 Teaches Us About Giving Thanks

In Ephesians 4 we find Jesus gives gifts to his church. And importantly these gifts are people. As Paul applies Psalm 68:18, he indicates that Christ who *received* gifts from on high has now *given* them to the church. Notice, Paul changes the word "received" in Psalm 68:18 to "give" in Ephesians 4:8. This is because this Psalm now sits at a different place in redemptive history.

No longer is the messiah waiting to receive the people whom God promised him. Rather, in his ascension, he has received the people who he purchased at Calvary. Now he freely and gladly gives them as gifts his church—i.e., to local churches where their gifts build up the body of Christ.

In the immediate context of Ephesians, the focus is on ministers of the word (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers), but in connection with Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and 1 Peter 4, it is entirely appropriate to recognize every member of the body as a gift given to you—if you are in Christ.

Indeed, one of the strongest arguments for and sweetest blessings of church membership is receiving the gifts God has given you. When you become a member of a local church, Jesus is

blessing you with gifts in your fellow church members. Truly, Jesus was not speaking in hyperbole, when he told Peter that “there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29–30).

Jesus words are fulfilled in the church, where every child of God receives a family. If you are in Christ, and a member of a church, every member is a gift to you from Jesus. And if you are in Christ, and not a member of a church, then you are missing one of the primary means by which God intends to bless you in this age. Moreover, you are missing one of the chief ways Jesus intends to grow you and enlarge your thanksgiving.

Consider Paul: The Chief Giver of Thanks

Among all the New Testament saints, few were more aware of this blessing than Paul. In nearly every letter he wrote, he gave thanks. And importantly, he gave thanks for the people in the churches and the grace he saw manifested in them. Just consider the model he gives us, as he thanks God for saints in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica.

1 Corinthians 1:4–9

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ephesians 1:15–18

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

Philippians 1:3–5

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Colossians 1:3–8

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of

God in truth,⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 1:2–3

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 1:3–4

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

Each of these prayers of thanksgiving deserve their own reflection (and you can find that [here](#)), but collectively they make an important point. Paul give thanks to God for people who Christ purchased and for the way their lives are building up Christ's church.

Truly, these people are not perfect (consider the Corinthians), but they are proving their faith genuine. Paul thanks God for their spiritual gifts (Corinth), their love for the saints (Ephesus), their financial partnership in the gospel (Philippi), their understanding of grace (Colosse), and their exemplary gospel labors amidst persecution (Thessalonica). In all of these ways, Paul's faith is bolstered by way of his thanksgiving, but so are is the faith of the saints, because he tells them he is thankful for them!

Taking a page from Paul's playbook, we should do the same. We should look for the grace of God in others, and we should do this especially in our churches. We should give thanks to God for our fellow church members, and we should let them know it. For if Jesus has given gifts to us in the church, we should be vocal in thanking God for them. What would happen if we followed Paul's pattern in voicing thanksgiving for others in the church? How many church spats would be reduced if churches practiced giving thanks for one another?

Indeed, imitating Paul's practice should be something we do, not just at Thanksgiving but at all times. Yet, as the calendar calls attention to Thanksgiving this week, let it spur us on to give thanks for Christ and the church he has placed us in. For truly, this is what Paul did, and in his model we find a practice that glorifies Christ and strengthens the faith, hope, and love of all those who have been given to you. To that end, let us give thanks!

In practice, we will do this together on Sunday during Great Commission Prayer. In a special edition of our monthly time of prayer, we will be asking everyone to share a word of thanksgiving for other members of the church body. In particular, we will encourage people to give thanks for the ministries and/or ministers (i.e., other church members) that have encouraged them in 2019. Give some thought to who God has used to minister to you this year. We will share these words of thanksgiving on Sunday.

Happy Thanksgiving!