

Giving Thanks for the Gospel at Thanksgiving

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by David Schrock

In Romans 1:21, Paul makes it clear that sin and even idolatry is tied to the human condition of ingratitude. He writes, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (1:21). Although brief, this statement reveals that ingratitude is more than just poor form. It is a wicked condition of the heart that denies the goodness of God. At this time of year when we recall God's many blessings, it is worth probing deeper to examine the danger of ingratitude and the greatest reason to give thanks.

The Danger of Ingratitude

Knowing the danger of ingratitude, God fills his Word with commands and reasons to be thankful. In the Psalms, giving thanks to God is both praised ("It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High," 92:1) and commanded ("Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name," 100:4; cf. 30:4; 33:2; 105:1; 106:1; etc.). In the history of Israel, David calls us to give thanks ("Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! . . . Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever," 1 Chron 16:8, 34). Ezra too records the praises of the people ("And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.'")

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid," 3:11).

Likewise, the New Testament commands thanksgiving. Paul urges prayer with thanksgiving in Philippians 4:6. Colossians 3:17 reads, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." And 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says we ought to "give thanks in all circumstances," adding, "for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Moreover, Paul regularly expresses thanksgiving for the work of God in the lives of others (see 1 Cor 1:4; Eph 1:16; 1 Thess 1:2). In short, Paul models the importance of thanksgiving in the life of a believer.

Based on the danger of ingratitude outlined in Romans 1, it's not surprising that thanksgiving is such a major theme in the Bible. Especially when we remember God's judgment on Israel when they grumbled in the wilderness. For those who have tasted and seen the goodness of God, ingratitude has no place. But this leads to the practical question: How do we cultivate thanksgiving when we do not feel thankful? Is it enough to simply focus on thanksgiving like we do every November?

The Gospel at Thanksgiving

For too many Christians, confrontation with their own ingratitude leads them to produce a laundry lists of created things for which they are thankful. As a Thanksgiving discipline, I can see value in this. But is that enough? Man-made comprised of earthly things are good but fall short of the thanksgiving God requires and deserves.

Were we still living in Eden, such an enumeration of God's creation might be sufficient to fuel the praise he deserves. But tragically we don't. And so with fallen natures, we too easily deceive ourselves if the items we list simultaneously tempt us worship them.

Living in a fallen world, creation cannot be the genesis of our thanksgiving. Rather it must be the Lord himself, and more particularly, it must be the cross of Christ. It is the cross which secures forgiveness for our ingratitude. It is the redeeming work of Christ that offers fresh praise to God. This is what the angels long to look into (1 Peter 1:12) and what the saints in glory never tire of singing (Rev 5:9–14). The cross alone has the ability to lift our souls from the mire of this world and enable us to give God the thanksgiving he deserves.

Moreover, only the cross can purify our hearts so that we can thank God for everything in creation. 1 Timothy 4:1–4 instructs us to give thanks to God for food and marriage. The Psalms praise the Lord for redemption and creation. Because every good gift comes from our Heavenly Father (James 1:17), he deserves thanksgiving for his creation. Yet, such thanksgiving must be tethered to the cross. In seasons of plenty, we give thanks to God for giving abundantly more than we deserve. And in seasons of pain, we give thanks to the God that this world is not our home. Christ's triumphant cross gives us confidence that he turns death into life and turns ruin into resurrection.

In fact, the cross alone can take you in your ungrateful state and lead you to a place of resurrection hope and spiritual joy. How? Because the cross liberates you to admit how deeply sinful your ungratefulness is. At the cross, you don't have to veneer your sorrow with a paper mache list of happy thoughts. No. The cross calls to attention the glory of God, the sin of our failure to worship him with joy and give him thanks, and the hope that Christ died to pay the penalty for our failure to worship God as God or give him the thanks he deserves.

Indeed, in a world filled with good things that lead us to give thanks, it is the cross of Christ alone that enables us to give thanks to God in the face of death, devastation, and disease. In fact, because of the cross, these terrible tragedies actually elicit greater thanksgiving—not for the pain they inflict, but because they show again the power and victory of the cross. To a world full of sinners, the cross calls us to stop trying to find gratitude in things that rust, moth, and cancer can eat away. It invites us to give thanks for what cannot be destroyed—namely the kingdom of Christ and the forgiveness and eternal life given through our crucified Lord.

In this good news we find a reason to give thanks that transcends the season. And moreover we find a gateway to give thanks to God for all of creation, for Christ himself died to reconcile heaven and earth and make all things new. We can and must receive creation with thanksgiving to God.

Therefore, on this Thanksgiving do not neglect to thank God for family, friends, food, and football, but do it from the foot of the cross—the place where heaven touches earth and all good things were purchased by the blood of the Son.

For His Glory and your joy, Pastor David