

Turning Thanks into Thankfulness

There's a story I came across on the internet. Maybe you've read it. It's about a young man named John who was given a parrot as a gift. But the bird had a bad attitude and a nasty tongue. So John worked hard to change its behavior and clean up his language. But nothing helped. Finally one afternoon, as the parrot let loose with a new stream of profanity, John lost it. He yelled at the bird and shook the bird, but that only made the parrot angrier. So in a moment of desperation, he grabbed the bird by the neck and threw it in the freezer. For several minutes, the parrot squawked and screamed. Then it grew deathly quiet. Afraid he'd hurt him, John opened the freezer, and to his surprise, the bird walked out, calm as could be, and took a seat on John's arm. "I owe you an apology," the bird said. "I know I've offended you with my rude behavior, and I want you to know I'm sorry. I promise from this day forward I'm going to change my behavior." Surprised at the bird's change of heart, John was about to ask him why, when the bird continued, "By the way, it's none of my business, but may I ask you, what did the turkey do wrong?"

Just two more days, and Thanksgiving will have arrived. Can you believe it? And though we've all been taught to be thankful, I think there's still more that we can learn. I know that's true of me. Sometimes I'm just like that parrot, and the Bible says you are too—stubborn and uncooperative as your Master seeks to create a new spirit in you. Otherwise, why the warning in Psalm 32:9? "Do not be like the horse or the mule which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you." We get stuck in our ways, missing out on the joy God wants to give us. Listen to this poem from the pen of 14-year-old, Jason Lehman, a young man wise beyond his years. I think it captures the heart of our problem. He writes:

It was spring, but it was summer I wanted, the warm days and great outdoors. It was summer, but it was fall I wanted, the colorful leaves and cool, dry air. It was fall, but it was winter I wanted, the beautiful snow and joy of the holiday season. It was winter, but it was spring I wanted, the warmth and blossoming of nature. I was a child, but it was adulthood I wanted, the freedom and respect. I was 20, but it was 30 I wanted, to be mature and sophisticated. I was middle-aged, but it was 20 I wanted, the youth and free spirit. I was retired, but it was middle age I wanted, the presence of mind without limitations. My life was over, but I never got what I wanted.

Isn't that so often the case? The Bible says God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. But instead of being content with what we have, we're restless searching for something more to bring us fulfillment. But the good news is that with

the help of the Holy Spirit, that search can end today. 1 Timothy 6:6 says, “Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. Therefore, having food and clothing, with these let us be content.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16 adds, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”

And from Hebrews 13:5, our passage for today, the author says (no one knows who wrote it—Paul, James, Barnabas) but what he says is powerful. “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.” Thanksgiving, in other words, is one of the most important things we do as Christians, and to see why, I’d like to emphasize 3 facts about it.

I. Praise Is Pleasing to God.

Notice again what the author says. He calls it “a **sacrifice** of praise to God,” which immediately tells us something about it, because it’s a word which he repeats throughout the book of Hebrews—13 times to describe the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament and once to describe the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross to pay for our sins. That tells us that praise is as serious to God as a sacrifice offered for sin.

In fact, David says it’s more important than that! Psalm 69:31 says, “I will praise the name of God with a song, and magnify Him with thanksgiving. And it will please the Lord better than an ox or a young bull with horns and hoofs.” What is he saying? He’s saying that praise is more pleasing to God than all the lambs and bulls and goats sacrificed in the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple. Praise is our most pleasing sacrifice of all. And what was true then is just as true today. More valuable than all that we do for God—teaching, giving, serving—more important than all these things is the attitude with which we do them. Are we doing them with an attitude of gratitude and a heart of praise? Because what pleases God most is “a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips giving thanks to His name.”

Psalm 107 adds, “Oh that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing.” The point is: God has been good to us every day of our lives, and not only to us, but to all the children of men. Therefore, we ought to praise Him, not simply because He deserves it, but because He desires it. Isn’t that incredible? The King of the Universe desires our praise. Not out of a sense of need. Some people think the reason God created us was because He was lonely and needed someone to keep Him company. But nothing could be farther from the truth. A lonely God is an imperfect, incomplete God, and our God has never been incomplete. From eternity past, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

enjoyed perfect love with one another, which was so full that it overflowed and He created us, not because He needed us, but because He loves us and enjoys receiving our praise. Isn't that amazing! You and I can bring joy to the heart of God simply by giving Him praise. Of course, what pleases Him is also good for us. For example, just think how much of a day's unhappiness and temptation could be avoided if we simply learned to be content with what we have. Instead, we spend inordinate amounts of energy and emotion craving and scheming to get what we believe our all-knowing and all-loving God has forgotten to give us.

I love the way Garrison Keillor, the great storyteller of Lake Wobegon fame, puts it. He says, "Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted, but in getting what you have, which once you have it, you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known."

So, in answer to the question, "How important is praise to God?" The answer is: It's all-important—so important that when the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Bible, He made sure an entire book was dedicated to it. We call it the book of Psalms—the longest book in the Bible with praise emanating from every experience of life. That's fact #1: Praise is pleasing to God. Fact #2 is:

II. Praise Is Costly to the Worshiper.

That's why it's called a "sacrifice," not only because of its seriousness to God, but because of what it costs the worshiper to offer it. Remember the story that Nathan the prophet once told? King David committed adultery with the beautiful wife of a poor man assuming that as king, he could get away with it. But the woman became pregnant. So, to cover it up, the first thing David did was lie, and when that didn't work, he had the poor man killed. But God loved David too much to let him get away with it. So, He sent the prophet Nathan to confront him with his sin. But you have to be tactful when confronting someone with their sin, especially if it's a king. So, Nathan made up a story about a poor man who owned a lamb that was precious to him and his children. It shared his food, it drank from his cup, and it even slept in his arms. Then one day his rich neighbor had a visitor, but instead of butchering his own sheep to feed him, he stole the lamb of the poor man. And when he heard about it, David was furious until Nathan revealed to him, "You are that man, O King! God gave you everything your heart desired, but what did you do? You stole your neighbor's wife, and killed him to cover it up!"

David went on to repent of his sin. But the point is: The reason Nathan's story pricked the king's heart is because it was an experience familiar to every Jew. Every year at Passover each family was required to sacrifice a lamb in the Temple—a lamb that had become precious to them—raised as a family pet, loved by the children, and

allowed to roam in and out of the house at will. So, when the time came to lead it up the path to the Temple, there was sorrow in that experience, but also joy, because the worshiper was sacrificing something that was precious to him. As David himself said when he sacrificed the burnt offering and dedicated the altar to the Lord in Jerusalem, “I will not give to the Lord that which costs me nothing!” Because he knew that in order for our worship to be genuine, it has to cost us something.

We, of course, no longer offer sacrifices in an earthly Temple, for when Jesus died on the cross, He said, “It is finished! The work of salvation is done.” But we do have a sacrifice to make, and what’s that? Our text calls it a “sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips that give thanks to His name.” Why is it called “a sacrifice?” Because it isn’t always easy to do! A friend disappoints us. Our child rejects the values we’ve taught them and chooses to go the way of the world. Our health fails. Our retirement account takes a major hit. A loved one falls ill and dies. What do you do at times like these when you feel anything but thankful? You do what Job did! You says, “Naked came I from my mother’s womb and naked will I return. The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!” They say that talk is cheap and that anybody can praise the lord. But that isn’t true, not if it’s the right kind of talk and our praise is genuine. That kind of talk is both costly to the worshiper and highly pleasing to God, for it comes from a heart of faith.

Joseph Scriven knew what it was like to offer that kind of praise. His plan on graduating from Trinity College was to marry a beautiful Irish girl he’d fallen in love with. But the day before their wedding, his bride-to-be drowned in a river. Unable to find any comfort at home, Scriven left Ireland and sailed for Canada where tragedy struck again. Falling in love a second time, his fiancé contracted tuberculosis and died just days before the wedding. How does a person of faith cope with heartache like that? Scriven did it by writing words of praise which we still sing today:

***What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit! O what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!***

The truth is: Life is often comfortable for Christians in our country. Few of us have had to face the kind of persecution which is a daily experience for believers in other countries. That may change in days to come. In fact, I recently had a nightmare in which the Bible was outlawed in our land, and I was being tortured for my faith in Christ—beaten with a rod and teeth pulled out with pliers—because I wouldn’t stop preaching the truth. It was a terrifying dream from which I awoke thinking, “Gary, you’d better get a lot tougher than you are, because difficult days could be just around the corner. I hope that isn’t true. But it could be. And if you and I are ever asked to

suffer for our faith in Christ, what will our reaction be? Will it be like that of the disciples in Acts chapter 5? When flogged for their faith, it says afterwards, “They went on their way rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ.” Few of us have had to face that kind of suffering. Yet you know what? We can still bring great glory to God by taking whatever we suffer—illness, job loss, death of a loved one—and using it as an opportunity to offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name, saying, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

That’s the legacy of the Pilgrims, isn’t it, and why we talk about them each year at this time—not because they were the first people to thank God. The reason we remember them is because they did in the midst of great suffering and sadness.

Think of the hardships they faced. That first winter of 1620, they lost 47 of their 102 people to death—nearly half their original group! The death rate in February was two a day. 13 out of 18 wives died. Only 3 families were untouched by death. But by the second winter, things were better. So, they celebrated a thanksgiving meal with their Indian friends who gobbled up all their supplies. About this time, new settlers also began arriving from England, and their rations had to be cut to just 5 kernels of corn a day. How do you survive on 5 kernels of corn a day?

They endured great hardship that winter, but by the grace of God, no one died. So, when the third November came, and they saw the abundance of the crops, they held a great day of Thanksgiving, and again they invited the Indians—120 braves this time. And together they feasted on pork, turkey, venison, chicken, nuts, grapes, plums, and dozens of other delicacies. A fabulous feast with plenty for all! But what was the first item placed on everyone’s plate? 5 kernels of corn—just so they’d remember. Praise is pleasing to God, costly to the worshiper, and fact #3—

III. Praise Is to Be Our Habit.

How does Hebrews 13:15 put it? “Through Jesus, let us frequently offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name?” No, it says it’s something we’re to do continually, at all times and under all circumstances, no matter how rough the going gets. “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” Or as the Psalmist puts it, “I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth.” You see, the truth is: Anyone can praise God when the sun is shining and everything is right with the world. But what about those dark days when the future isn’t nearly as certain and we’re forced to walk by faith and not by sight? That’s when praise becomes precious and powerful because it proves to God and to everyone else who’s watching that we really do love and trust Him even when we aren’t sure what the outcome will be. And that takes work—hard work!

Mothers know this better than anyone else. For example, I'm thinking back right now to report card day and a promise I made to our girls because they'd done so well in school. I promised that I'd take each of them out to lunch at their favorite restaurant. Rebecca picked Dairy Queen—not exactly my idea of fine dining—but that's what she wanted. So, I said to her as I headed off to work, "Great! You get dressed, have Mom brush your hair, and I'll be back at noon to pick you up." So, I come home at 11:30, half an hour before we're to leave, and what do I find? I find her grousing and griping at her mother, frustrated that she's had to wait so long. So, what do I do? Here I am, about to take her out to lunch as a reward, and she has an attitude problem. And I don't want to reward her for that!

So, I send up a quick prayer, ask for wisdom, and suddenly I hear Cheryl, who was a fantastic mother, correcting her in the other room: "Now listen here, young lady, I've had enough of this. You're going to sit down on that couch and change your attitude, or you're not going anywhere. I want you to think of at least 5 things right now that you're thankful for. Do you hear me?" "Yes, Mom," she says. "Then get started!" And you know it wasn't but 2 minutes later that I heard her say, "OK, Mom, can I get up now?" "Have you thought of what you're thankful for?" "Yes, I have." "Then you come out here and tell me what they are." So, she did. She said, "I'm thankful for my school. I'm thankful for my church. I'm thankful for my Dad." And she listed several other things, and then she asked, "Mom, what are thankful for?" So, Cheryl named several things she was thankful for. And back and forth they went for at least 5 minutes. And you know it was amazing! By the time they finished, her attitude was altogether different. She was the happiest and most grateful little girl in the world, and we had a great time at lunch together.

Friends, you and I are no different. If we're complaining, our Heavenly Father isn't free to give us anything. But when we take time to realize how good He's been to us, it not only changes our attitude; it puts us on the path to developing a whole new habit of thanksgiving! And that's what praise is meant to be: a habit, a custom, and a whole new lifestyle in response to the never-ending goodness of God. So, let me ask you. What are you thankful for? Salvation in Jesus! The freedom to worship! The friends and loved ones God has given you. How does the hymn put it?

*Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,
And you will keep singing as the days go by.*

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*