

## GRATITUDE BORN OF HUMILITY

11-25-07  
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Romans 1:18-32

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, **they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him**, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. (20-21)*

### INTRODUCTION

As we come away from our Thanksgiving celebrations, a question that often troubles me is, “Why aren’t we more thankful?” Yes, we count our blessings at this time of year, but often it seems our being thankful is more of a Christian duty we know we must do, rather than a deeper, overflowing current of praise arising from the core of our beings. The fact that we need reminding to be thankful is a clue that it hasn’t penetrated to the deepest levels. And our current American commercialism hasn’t helped. Anymore, Thanksgiving seems like a brief interruption (if even that) to the press of buying more stuff for Christmas. This year, the Christmas music started in one of our popular stores the day after Halloween. And, isn’t the day after Thanksgiving the biggest shopping day of the year? So, we give thanks for our blessings and then rush right out early the next morning to begin the getting of more stuff, as though most of us don’t have enough stuff already. The other night on national news as they were spreading fear about the economy and that maybe people wouldn’t spend as much for Christmas, they interviewed one woman who was lamenting that instead of ten gifts per child, she may only be able to buy three per child this year. Polly and I felt a little like, “That’s hardship? I don’t think we ever bought more than three Christmas presents for our son when he was growing up— and he certainly had more than enough.

A few years ago, our youngest grandchild, Abbey, who was about three-years-old at the time, began asking her mom, Denise, in early November about when Christmas would come. Denise was trying to think of how to express the passage of time to a child to whom 50 days would be too abstract to grasp. Trying to tie it to something Abbey would remember, she said, “Remember Thanksgiving last year, where we went to Grandma and Grandpa’s house and had a big turkey dinner? First we have to have Thanksgiving, then we have Christmas.” Abbey responded, “Can’t we just skip Thanksgiving?”

I think Abbey captured some of the feeling of our times. While certainly we wouldn’t want to skip the holiday or the feasting— as far as the true meaning, the spiritual core— that is rather uninteresting to many. Often we do a similar thing with our prayers. We know we should give thanks to God for some blessings before we get on to our requests— after all, it seems only polite, and we don’t want to be in just a “gimme” mode. But the thanksgiving is often unimaginative and perfunctory, rushed through to get to the good stuff where we hope to get God to do what

we'd like. Again, "Why aren't we more thankful?"

Now, if you're thinking, "Yes, I need to try and remember to be more thankful," I am suggesting you're starting at the wrong end of things. Our lack of gratitude is actually seen Biblically as an extremely serious sin, and a symptom that something's wrong at a much deeper level. A lack of gratitude comes from a heart that is not humble. It is a symptom of pride. And generally, Biblically informed Christians have seen pride as the root of all sin. That thought is what I want to develop for you this morning.

Romans 1:18-32 is a chilling passage of Scripture as Paul describes the process of human degradation. While our focus is upon our text, verses 20-21,

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, **they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him**, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

I want you to get the full context.

READ: Romans 1:18-32

#### **WHERE THANKLESSNESS LEADS**

*For although they knew God, **they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him**, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

The heart of wickedness is a failure to glorify God and give Him thanks. Isn't that rather shocking? Many of us would not even consider not being thankful to God a sin. We'd probably place it in the category of all those things we really ought to do more of, like loving our neighbor better. But, out-right sin? It hardly seems very serious. But here, Paul places it at the core of wickedness, depravity, perversion, and total rebellion against God. It is so serious that three times we have that sobering phrase, "God gave them over..." to:

- "the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity..." (24)
- "shameful lusts..." (26)
- "depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done" (28).

In "giving them over" it feels like God has given up and said, "Okay, you can have it your way," with the chilling consequences listed. And, I might add, the results of that are exploding around us in our world in moral depravity— blatantly doing "what ought not to be done."

Of course, that could well be another sermon. But the point I'm making this morning is that all this terrible stuff that is bringing God's wrath begins with forgetting God and not worshipping Him for Who He is. No one is without excuse. Even for those who have never heard of God, the revelation in God's creation is sufficient to lead them to God.

At the root of every ungrateful heart is pride. Pride is thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought— thinking, "I did it all by myself!" We take all the credit. O yes, we know God, but fail to acknowledge that He is the source of all that is. Because we fail to glorify (worship Him as God)

or thank Him for His goodness, our thinking becomes confused, dogged with futility, hopelessness, with our minds darkened. Pride thinks the world should revolve around us and our needs.

Humility acknowledges, on the other hand, that we are recipients of God's grace in our creation, the creation of the world, and the provision of all we have ultimately come from Him. When we really feel that in the depths of our hearts, how will it come out? It will come forth in expressions of thanksgiving. When we feel undeserving of a magnificent gift, gratitude overwhelms us. BUT, if we see ourselves as pretty important and deserving of the gift, while we may still say, "Thank you" out of politeness, inside we feel we only are getting what we should have. Henry Ward Beecher summarizes this well when he writes,

"Pride slays thanksgiving, but a humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grow. A proud man is seldom a grateful man, but he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves."

As the children of Israel are about to enter the promised land, Moses gives them careful instructions in Deuteronomy. Among them are many warnings to not forget the Lord who provided all this for them. Listen to how it is expressed in Deut 8:10-18:

*When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. 11 Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. 12 Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, 13 and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 15 He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. 16 He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. 17 You may say to yourself, "**My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.**" 18 But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.*

Humility is always expressed in gratitude. Pride is manifested in a thankless heart.

Mark Buchanan is a pastor in British Columbia and an author of several worthwhile books. I appreciate his honesty in this example he gives in The Holy Wild. I'm just going to quote him, since he writes in such an engaging style.

"I was in Uganda, Africa, about a dozen years ago, in a little township called Wairaka. Every Sunday evening, about 100 Christians from the neighboring area would gather to worship. They met at the edge of a cornfield, under a lean-to with a rusty tin roof that cracked like gunfire when it rained. They sat— when they did sit— on rough wood benches. The floor was dirt. That band's instruments were old or handmade—bruised, scratched guitars with corroded strings and necks that had warped in the humidity; a plinky electric piano plugged into a crackling speaker; shakers made of tin

cans and stones. All of it kept straying out of tune.

One Sunday evening, I was too sour to join in. The music sounded squawky. I was miffed at someone on our missions team. I found the food bland, tasteless. I was feeling deprived and misunderstood. I found the joy of others hollow, mustered-up. I was miserable and I wanted to wallow in it.

The pastor asked if anyone had anything to share. Many people wanted to, but a tall, willowy woman in the back row danced and shouted loudest, so he called her forward. She came twirling her long limbs, trilling out praise.

“Oh, brothers and sisters, I love Jesus so much,” she said.

“Tell us, sister! Tell us!” the Ugandans shouted back.

“Oh, I love Him so much, I don’t know where to begin. He is so good to me. Where do I begin to tell you how good He is to me?”

“Begin right there, sister! Begin right there!”

“Oh,” she said, “He is so good. I praise Him all the time for how good He is. For three months, I prayed to Him for shoes. And look!” And with that the woman cocked up her leg so that we could see one foot. One very ordinary shoe covered it. “He gave me shoes.”

The Ugandans went wild. They claped, they cheered, they whistled, they yelled.

But not me. I was devastated. I sat there broken and grieving. In an instant, God snapped me out of my self-pity and plunged me into repentance. In all my life, I had not once prayed for shoes. It never even crossed my mind. And in all my life, I had not even once thanked God for the many, many shoes I had.

Then, Mark Buchanan goes on to observe, in keeping with our text, and his experience:

“Thanklessness becomes its own prison. Persisted in, it becomes its own hell, where there is outer darkness and gnashing of teeth. Thanklessness is the place where God doesn’t dwell, the place that, if we inhabit it too often, He turns us over.”

## REPENTANCE AND THANKSGIVING

Christians through most of history have understood the connection between thanksgiving and repentance. In fact, even in our nation’s proclamation of a national Day of Thanksgiving, there was an acknowledgment of a need for sober reflection and repentance. Yes, repentance is needed before thanksgiving can issue from the depths of our hearts. Here are three examples from the early Thanksgiving Day proclamations.

The first national Thanksgiving Proclamation was issued by the revolutionary Continental Congress on Nov. 1, 1777. It contained 360 words in a single sentence. It read in part:

“Forasmuch as it is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligation to him for benefits received... together **with penitent confession of their sins**, whereby they had forfeited every favor, and their humble and earnest supplications that it may please God through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance...”

George Washington in his proclamation in 1789 called upon Americans to spend a day in thanksgiving and prayer to,

“that great and glorious Being who is the Beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks.... **and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions....**”

President Lincoln, issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation in the midst of the Civil War in 1863 that was repeated for the following 75 years by subsequent presidents. It too includes a call to repentance.

“It has seemed to me fit and proper that (our bounties) should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice, by the whole American people. I do, therefore, invite my fellow citizens... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of Thanksgiving and prayer to our beneficent Father, who dwelleth in the heavens, and I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to God, for such singular deliverances and blessings, **they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience...**

Doesn't that sound foreign to our ears? Can you even imagine a president now calling upon the nation for “humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience?” But these early presidents grasped the Biblical truth that thanksgiving could only truly come from humble hearts— hearts humbled before God. When we are humbled before God, we are repentant of all our pride, all that exalts itself in place of God, all our willfulness, all our rebellion against God's holy laws, all our efforts to make life serve us and our needs.

Repentance, as taught in the Bible, is more than an emotion of sorrow. It is a turning around. It is acknowledging that the direction I have been going is wrong. It is a decision to turn to God and go His way.

## CONCLUSION

The Gospels begin with John the Baptist preaching repentance, preparing for Jesus. The first command from the lips of Jesus is, *Repent and believe the good news!* (Mk. 1:15). There is no getting around it. There is no following Jesus without first changing directions, repenting of our old ways, so we can believe and enter into the new life He offers.

Thus, it is most appropriate that Thanksgiving **with repentance** precedes Advent and Christmas. We can't get to the true essence of Christmas without humbled, penitent hearts. And one of the clues that we need to soberly reflect upon our lives and repent of our pride are hearts that are ungrateful or only superficially thankful.

Why aren't we more thankful? It is because we feel so little dependence upon God and that is pride, confidence in ourselves, looking to ourselves. The antidote is repentance that brings true

humility. And a humble heart cannot be kept from expressing continuous thanksgiving.