

Give Thanks: A Thanksgiving Reflection

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 October 2024

Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, October 13th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. So welcome to each of you this morning. It's great to see people, old faces, not literally, not chronologically.

I don't mean it that way. Familiar faces, that's better. See, I'm going to get myself in trouble again. Familiar faces and new ones.

It is good to see everyone. We also know that people tune in to the website and check out things before they come and visit. Or they listen to our phone line, which is available, or our podcast, which is another way of connecting.

Happy Thanksgiving. Have you heard that yet today? Happy Thanksgiving. Are there things that you are thankful for this morning? Here's a quote for you. Actress and singer Doris Day, maybe you know her or know of her, once said, Gratitude is riches, and complaint is poverty.

Powerful perspective, right? As we gather together today, hopefully with Thanksgiving on our minds, there's so much for which we can be grateful. So I have to confess.

[1 : 14] Boy, it's a day of confessions for me. I have to confess that I often take things for granted, which I ought to be the most grateful for them. So I'm grateful that I have a healthy and loving and supportive family, both nuclear and extended.

I'm grateful that I have a loving Heavenly Father who cares about me, who provides for my needs and the needs of my family, and who has called me to serve in a very specific way.

I'm grateful for a church family that seeks to love God and love one another. I'm grateful for so many things, and I recognize that I need to pray and thank God more often.

Maybe that's true for you. So I hope that while I was sharing those things, that you're busy thinking of all the things for which you are grateful as well. And I hope you're able to see, as Doris Day just touched on, how truly wealthy we are.

That gratitude is riches. And that God is at work in all of our lives. As you've probably guessed by now, our sermon is titled, Give Thanks.

[2 : 27] So, as we talk about thanksgiving and the idea of giving thanks, it's about thanksgiving, but it's also about gratitude. It's about gratefulness.

The ancient Roman philosopher Cicero said, Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.

Isn't that interesting? Suggesting that everything stems from gratitude. It's also well documented by science-y people that being grateful has incredible mental and physical and spiritual benefits.

In fact, 1 Thessalonians 5, 16-18, which is our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica.

He says, Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. For? Why? For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

[3 : 35] Did you catch that last part? The one where Paul revealed that giving thanks in all circumstances isn't just a suggestion. Isn't just a good idea.

It puts us into the very will of God, into the center of his will. So I believe many of us may struggle with the will of God.

Do you struggle with wondering what God's will is for you? Christians often talk about that. I need to know God's will for my life. I want to be in God's will.

So we may cry out to him desperately in prayer. We may ask him to show us what we should do. Where we should live.

Who we should marry. And that list probably goes on and on. And it's not wrong. We're seeking God's will in every circumstance in our life. And it's not bad.

[4 : 32] It's not wrong for us to ask him those things. But what if God's response to us when we ask those things was, I just want you to be grateful. I just want you to be grateful no matter the circumstances.

Grateful for the job you have. Grateful for the spouse and children you have. Grateful for the home and city where you live. Grateful for all of it.

Grateful for the home and city where you live in. What if this Thanksgiving we, you and I, took some time to really slow down and take a gratitude inventory? What am I talking about?

Good question. What if you wrote out line by line, this is your homework. I won't check it next week so don't panic. What if you wrote out line by line everything for which you are grateful?

That's my challenge to you. From big things to small things. From the home that you live in to the Keurig machine that automatically makes your coffee when you press the little button in the morning.

[5 : 36] But you have to put the pod in. What a hassle. What if nothing was off limits from your gratitude inventory? How about that? What would you say?

What would you write down? My inventory, I thought about it, would include my comfy bed. And so even though I have pain every night, I'm dealing with chronic pain right now in my life, I love my comfy bed still.

Even though we wrestle every night, I like my comfy bed. The fact that my vehicle works. It's not pretty, but it gets me from A to B. Gets me from place to place and where I need to be.

The fact that I am able to own my own home. When so many people in the world do not have that.

The fact that I usually have options for what I want to have for a meal.

And we joke about it at home. It's the most common marriage conversation. What should we have for supper tonight? Ugh. Night after night after night.

[6 : 36] So the answer in our home quite often is cereal for supper. Perfect. Perfect. For me, one of the things I'm grateful for is the fact that peanut butter and chocolate really do go so well together.

It's like God had a plan. And the list goes on and on if you stop and think about it, right? The big things, as I said. The small things. There's actual power in naming things for which we are grateful. Why? Because it helps set our focus. It helps set our focus on positive things rather than negative ones. It helps us to avoid the negative cloud of complaining.

And if we do it often enough, if we name things for which we are grateful often enough, I believe we develop habits of gratitude in our lives. And these kinds of habits are very important when adversity enters the picture.

Because why? It's so easy for us to be grateful when things are going well, right? You can nod. But when things get difficult, we're quick to default back to complaining and grumbling, aren't we?

[7 : 49] Well, I knew it. Right? Well, this couldn't have lasted forever. There's no chocolate left for my peanut butter. See? Like grumbling, we get out of the perspective of gratitude and we begin to complain and become people who are seeing less than in our lives.

And so that's why I think the Apostle Paul advises us to be grateful in every circumstance. See the bright side in everything.

Every circumstance. But, I think we can all agree that it's not always easy to be grateful in every circumstance. Right? Are you dealing with chronic pain?

Do you lie there in the middle of the night like I do sometimes and think there's got to be like, could, sometimes I think to wake Michelle up and get a frying pan. Just put me out for the night.

But even in that, even in chronic pain situations, I am reminded that I am alive. I am reminded that my body wasn't like this and won't be again.

[8 : 55] There's hope. So there's so many situations, you have some, I have some, in which it's hard to imagine how to even begin to be grateful.

Is that fair? There are questions that may never get answered this side of heaven. Right? And yet we're called to be faithful.

We're called to trust. We are called to stand firm in our faith. So there's one story in particular from John 11, verses 1 to 7.

Some of you will know where I'm going. I'm going to try and get this without cracking, get through this without cracking. This is a very powerful story for me. John 11, verses 1 to 7.

You can turn there in your Bibles or listen as I read it for us. Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

[9 : 51] This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick.

When he heard this, Jesus said, This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. And then he said to his disciples, Let us go back to Judea. When Jesus receives word from Mary and Martha that Lazarus is sick, when you do the math, scholars say he's about a day's journey away from where they are.

And it's also important to note that Lazarus wasn't just a school chum of Jesus. Wasn't just somebody Jesus had met in passing, someone he knew of but didn't really know well, someone who they crossed paths once in a while.

[11 : 02] The note that Mary and Martha sent to Jesus said, The Lord, the one you love, is sick. That's important to recognize. And our passage goes on to say that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

So this was a family that Jesus not only knew very well, but he had a special and intimate relationship with them. So think for a moment of someone in your life that's not necessarily a family member, but is like a family member to you.

Someone you love. Now imagine, while you have that in your mind, imagine you've just received news that that person is very sick. So I want you to imagine now, let's pair this up with the story. You've heard this news. This is someone you care about. So you wait an extra two days after hearing the news. Is that inconceivable to you? Would that person feel that you loved them? Probably not. Yet for some reason, this is exactly how Jesus responds to this news about Lazarus. Why is that?

[12 : 20] Jesus stays where he is. He just keeps on ministering before telling his disciples, okay, let's go back to Judea. So I don't know about you, but it seems confusing to us.

But actually, Jesus has already given divine insight into what's really happening here. Do you remember in verse 4? Jesus says that this sickness will not end in death.

No. It is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it. Jesus has given that prophetic view of what's going on here.

God knows what he is doing. Do you need to hear that this morning? I do. God knows exactly what he is doing.

It may not appear that way to the disciples around Jesus. To the sisters back in Bethany tending to their dying brother, we sent the note, where is he?

[13 : 25] But this is a reality that we all must embrace. Even when we don't understand it, God knows exactly what he is doing. He's working in and through the situations in our lives.

Do you believe that? I see some nods. So in your worst possible circumstances, do you believe God is still at work in your life? Not always easy, right?

The challenge for us is to remain faithful, to remain steadfast, even when we don't get what we want. Those are hard words, right?

Even when we don't get what we want, God is still at work and he is still on our side. He still sees us and hears our prayers.

Even when our prayers seem to go unanswered, God is still at work. Let's pick up the story again in John 11, verse 17, and we'll continue to 22.

[14 : 33] So if you still have your Bible open, turn to that. John 11, beginning at 17 and continuing to 22. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask.

So we hear there that when Jesus finally gets to town, finally arrives in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. When Martha comes out to meet him, she says, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

And then eventually, Mary stayed back, remember. Mary eventually comes out to meet Jesus as well and says exactly the same thing her sister Martha did. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

[15:48] So Mary and Martha, in different ways, their responses are slightly different, but their feelings are the same. That if Jesus had been there, if he had shown up as they asked him to, in the way they expected him to, Lazarus would not have died.

They wanted and expected Jesus to answer their prayers in the way that they wanted. They were obviously sad that Jesus didn't come in time to save their brother.

This is a rhetorical question, so no one has to put your hand up or acknowledge or say anything out loud. Have you ever felt frustrated with God? Better be 100%.

Maybe you've even said the same thing at some point in your life that Mary and Martha said. Lord, if you had been here. Lord, if you had only done exactly how I wanted it to go.

Lord, where were you? But it's important to remember that, and we know this, it's important to be reminded that Jesus was operating on a different and divine timeline.

[16:59] He had an ultimate purpose and plan for showing up when and how he did. God knows what he is doing. But we learn that a bit later in the story.

So let's hear the words of John 11, 38 to 44, continuing the story of Lazarus. Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb.

It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. Take away the stone, he said. But Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days.

Jesus said, Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

[18:13] The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, Take off the grave clothes and let him go.

In this section, as I said, it was coming, right? In this section, we learn that Jesus knew Lazarus would live. He knew this event would bring glory to the Father.

So when thinking about a grateful life, it's important to catch something Jesus says in this section. Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. See what he does there?

Jesus thanks the Father for hearing him and actually mentions the Father always hears him. God knows what he is doing.

[19:19] This truth is so important for us to remember as we consider the difficulty of being grateful, of being thankful through every circumstance of our life.

So, we must remember, you can see it on the slide, the Father loves us. He has a plan and a purpose in all things.

Most importantly, he always hears our prayers. You read this and you think, Oh, Pastor Kent, yak, yak, yak. I know all this stuff. Do you know it here?

But do you remember it here? Is it head knowledge or heart knowledge? Is it something you know? But does it bring you comfort?

Not that God always answers prayer the way we would want. That's something to be reminded about. But he always hears us, and he always, remember, knows what he's doing.

[20:21] God knows what we need. I believe that when we root ourselves in the sovereignty and the love of God the Father, we have all we need for any and every circumstance that may arise in our lives.

Hear what I said? All we need. All we want? That's not the point. All we need. Even when things aren't going the way that we want them to, we can still say humbly, Thank you, Lord.

Thank you for listening to me. Thank you for knowing me. Thank you for providing for my needs. I am truly rich in you and your love.

So, if gratitude is riches, remember we talked about that, how about we try to focus this season, not just this season, but every day, on living extravagant lives that are filled with grateful praise.

Instead of focusing on all that we do not have, human nature, right? Or all that we think we should have, entitlement, human nature, why don't we focus, seek to focus on what we do have?

[21 : 49] Let's specifically thank God for all of it, sparing nothing from his glory. 2 Corinthians 9, verses 6 to 8 is such a great gratitude passage.

So, hear these words. Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. And whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

My friends, as you live gratefully, remember to sow generously. God is ready and able to supply all that you and I need, all that we need to then be generous with others in each and every situation. So think about how this applies, not just to seasons like Thanksgiving, but to all of life, lives of grateful praise. Where do you need to sow more generously in your daily life?

[23 : 14] Sow praise and encouragement. Praise to God, encouragement of others. Show an attitude and a perspective of thankfulness for what you do have rather than grumbling about what you don't.

Where do you need to trade complaint for gratitude? Or, contrary to the world's view, perhaps riches, literal and figurative, for poverty, for the benefit of someone else.

Is there any specific situation or circumstance that you are withholding from the grace of gratitude? Food for thought. Because the ultimate goal for all of us as followers of Jesus is to give it all over to God.

To trust Him completely. To abide in His good and perfect will for our lives. As 1 Thessalonians 5, 16-18 reminds us to rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

It's only then that we'll be able to proclaim just like the Apostle Paul did in 2 Corinthians 9, 15. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

[24 : 46] Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God indeed. Amen.