

“Thanksgiving”
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There once was a father who loved his children and wanted to give them a gift. His kids had been asking him for a video game system, so he knew that they would appreciate that gift. He thought, “There’s no harm in them playing some games now and then. I know they will love this gift, so I’ll give it to them.” So, the father went out and bought the video game system and a popular video game and he surprised his kids with it. Sure enough, the children were delighted. They hugged their father and said, “Thanks, Dad!” Then they set up the system and began playing. They even invited their father to play with them.

The next day, when the father came home from work, he found the kids playing video games. When the father came in the door, the kids would pause the game, turn to face their father, and say, “Thanks again, Dad! We really love playing this game.” Then, after talking to their father for a minute, they would turn their attention back to the game.

The second day, when the father came home from work, the kids didn’t pause the game. But as they played, they said, “Hi, Dad.” And the father would talk to them for a moment before he left them alone to play their game.

The third day, when the father came home, the kids didn’t greet him. They were too engrossed in playing the game. The father, not wanting to bother them, entered the house silently and left them alone.

The fourth day, when the father came, his kids paused the game, looked at him with accusing eyes, and asked, “Dad, why did you get us only one game? This one is boring. We’ve already beaten it.”

That story, may I suggest, captures a very important truth: One of the biggest problems that human beings have is that we are not thankful. And one of the great tragedies is when children do not thank their parents. In Shakespeare’s play, *King Lear*, Lear says, “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is/To have a thankless child!”¹ Part of the story of the Bible is that human beings are children who don’t thank their Father. Our greatest problem is not that we lack

¹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I.4.284–285.

money or education. Our greatest problem is not who's in government. Perhaps our greatest problem is that we are a bunch of ingrates.

Consider one very famous passage in the Bible. This is Paul's account of our rebellion against God. I'll start by reading Romans 1:18–23:

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ 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. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.²

Outside of Genesis 3 itself, this passage is the one that best describes what we call “The Fall,” when human beings turned away from God and sin entered God's good creation. But I want us to see a clause we might read over quickly and not pay attention to. Paul tells us that even though everyone knows God because we live in his creation, “they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” The root of all sin begins with not honoring God, not recognizing him for who he is. But it continues with not thanking God for what he has given us. When we don't trust that God is God and that God is good, then we're not thankful for what he has given us. And when we don't honor God, trust him, or thank him, we act like spoiled children.

We can think of several stories in the Bible that show this truth. First, there's the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. (See Genesis 1–3, as well as some sermons I gave over a year ago).³ God put Adam in a garden paradise and he told him he could eat anything except the fruit of one tree. He gave him a job to do, to guard and keep the garden, and he gave him the honor of naming the animals. And then God gave Adam a wife. He gave them the responsibility of ruling over the world by coming under his rule. God could hardly have given them anything more. Did Adam and Eve honor God, trust that he is good, and thank him for all these gifts? No. They didn't. And because they didn't, they had to leave the garden paradise and go into the wilderness. And that's where humanity has been ever since.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³ See the sermons, “Image Bearers” (October 4, 2015) and “The Fall” (October 11, 2015), <http://wbcommunity.org/story-of-the-bible>.

Second, there's the story of Israel after they left Egypt. God rescued them out of slavery, where their life was miserable. And immediately after that, what did Israel do? They complained. This is Exodus 16:1–3:

¹ They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

These Israelites were slaves. Their lives were bitter. They didn't have freedom and they were made to work very hard. We're told that “the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help” (Exod. 2:23). God answered that cry. He miraculously brought them out of slavery. It's true that the Israelites praised God in Exodus 15, but it wasn't long that they complained about not having water, and not having food. Though God gave them water, and gave them a bread called manna, and also gave them quail, they continued to grumble. If you want to read a commentary on this situation, read Psalm 78. Verse 32 of that Psalm says, Psalm

In spite of all this, they still sinned;
despite his wonders, they did not believe.

Third, there's the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. A father has two sons, and one of them, the younger son, approaches the father and asks for his inheritance. Normally, a son would receive an inheritance only after the father died. So the son is essentially saying to the father, “I wish you were dead so I could get what's coming to me.” This younger son shows a sense of entitlement (as does the older son; see vv. 29–30). He thinks he is owed this inheritance. And then he goes and squanders it all.

There are more stories in the Bible that display the human proclivity to be ungrateful. But those stories give us various images of ingratitude. Our lack of thankfulness separates us from God.

But why is this such a problem? Why should we be so thankful? Is God so insecure that he demands our thanks? Is he like a needy mother who says, “You never call; you never write”?

To understand why ingratitude is such a problem, we need to understand this: Everything in our lives, even the existence of the universe itself, is a gift. God is the only necessary being.

He has always existed. Without him, there is nothing. But he didn't have to create the universe. He didn't have to create human beings. We didn't have to exist. That's a bit abstract to think about, but it's true. God was under no obligation to create anything. It's not as if he needed to.

Now, I think there is something fitting to God creating the universe and to creating people. I think God delights in creating things and he delights in his people. But we can imagine a scenario in which we didn't exist.

That means we should be thankful for our very lives. We should say, "Thank you, God, for making me!" As the English writer G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?"⁴

We should also be thankful that God has put us in this particular time and place. In the book of Acts, when Paul was in Athens, he told his listeners

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24–27).

God has decided to put us in this time and in this place, for reasons that he hasn't revealed to us. And, let's face it, there are a lot of worse times and places that people have lived in. We have a tremendous amount of freedom and wealth compared to most civilizations in world history. If you have a smart phone, you have more information and entertainment in your pocket than most people who have ever lived.

God has also given us our various abilities and talents. Before Israel went into the Promised Land, Moses warned them not to forget that it was God who gave them everything they had, including their ability to make money. He said,

¹⁷ Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' ¹⁸ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he

⁴ Justin Taylor, "6 Quotes from G. K. Chesterton on Gratitude and Thanksgiving," *The Gospel Coalition*, November 26, 2015, <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2015/11/26/6-quotes-from-g-k-chesterton-on-gratitude-and-thanksgiving>, accessed November 19, 2016.

who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day (Deut. 8:17–18).

So, the reality is that all of life is a gift from God. And when we're not thankful to God for what he has given us, we're showing that we don't realize that everything is a gift. Though we often act as if we're owed things, we're not entitled to anything.

Also, when we're not grateful to God for what he has given us, it shows that we want to be God. We want to be in control. That's what happened with Adam and Eve. Sometimes it's hard to understand the beginning of Genesis, but what is clear is that God gave them limits. He told them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they were supposed to trust that God would reveal to them what was good and evil. When Satan tempted them, he lied, saying, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). They desired to be God, to know everything and be in control. That shows us that when we're not thankful for what God is given us, we always want more and more. We want to be like God, to be all-knowing, all-wise, and the owner of everything. We don't want to accept our God-given limits. And, really, that is why a lack of thanksgiving is such a big issue. It's one thing to look a gift horse in the mouth; it's another thing to look at the Maker of horses and be angry.

The other issue is that God has given us these gifts so that we would acknowledge the Giver. The good gifts are nice to enjoy, but they are meant to bring us to a place where we love, thank, and worship the Giver. If you receive birthday gifts from family and friends and don't love and thank them, it's odd. People will think you're selfish. How much more, then, should we love and thank God for what he has given us? But God is different from any other giver of gifts because he's the one who also made the gifts, and not in the way that someone will knit you a sweater. God has made all matter in the universe out of nothing. Your sweater-knitting aunt can't make that claim. God is a unique Giver, because he has given us everything. And that means we should honor him.

Now, up to this point, I've only presented bad news. God is a loving Father who has given us good gifts and we are his petulant, spoiled children with a sense of entitlement who take his gifts for granted and are not satisfied, always wanting something else or something more than we have. And because of our attitude, God lets us go our own way. If that were the end of the story, it would be a terrible tragedy.

But that's not the end, of course. The good news is that God has given the world the most precious gift he could give: His only, one-of-a-kind Son. God gave his Son, who willingly left his home in heaven to become a man, to live among us ingrates and to show us how to live. Jesus, the Son of God, the God-man, also gave thanks to his Father. He thanked the Father for revealing truth to those who have a childlike faith (Matt. 11:25). When Jesus fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and some fish, he gave thanks (Matt. 15:36). When Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, he thanked the Father (John 11:41). When Jesus took the Last Supper with his disciples, he gave thanks (Matt. 26:27). Though Jesus was and is the Creator of the world and the King of kings and Lord of lords, he didn't have an entitlement mentality. He didn't act like a spoiled brat. He was thankful.

But, of course, Jesus wasn't just an example of thankfulness. He lived the perfect life not just to show us how to live, but so that God's could have a perfect covenant partner. God wants his children to be perfectly obedient. But we're not. The good news is that Jesus is. And when we are united to Jesus, we are credited with his status. We're given his righteousness, his moral perfection.⁵

But, wait, there's more: Since God is a perfect judge, he can't let sin go unpunished. Yet if God punished us for our ingratitude, we would be finished. However, Jesus stood in our place, taking what we deserve for our lack of thanks. Jesus bore the sin of all his people when he died on the cross. In that way, God can forgive us. Forgiveness always demands a cost. If you borrow my car and damage it, I can choose to forgive you, but someone has to pay for the damage, or else the car will remain broken. And if I forgive you, I'm probably the one who is going to pay for it. God doesn't want his world to remain broken, so someone has to pay for the damage. When God forgives us, God is the one who absorbs the cost. More specifically, God the Son absorbed the cost when he died.

⁵ A story that NFL tight end Benjamin Watson tells captures the meaning of the imputation of Jesus' righteousness: "In 2004 I was a rookie wanting to earn the respect of veterans, but I tore my ACL. I didn't want to wear the [Super Bowl] ring because I felt it was for the guys who played in the game. It wasn't until years later, when I had a struggle with perfectionism and grasping God's grace, that I realized accepting that ring is like how we have to accept His grace. We walk around as champions in Christ, as conquerors, not because of anything we did, but because of everything He did. So I can wear the ring with pride, even though I didn't play, because it was done on my behalf by the guys on the team. It's like the imputed righteousness of Christ." J. C. Derrick, "Benjamin Watson: Heart and Grace," *WORLD*, August 5, 2016, https://world.wng.org/2016/08/benjamin_watson_heart_and_grace, accessed November 20, 2016.

For some of us, this good news is so familiar that it has become old news. We've lost our sense of wonder. If you're here today and you're not as familiar with Christianity, this news may seem not like old news, but like odd news. Let me try to give you a personal story to illustrate what it's like to experience this forgiveness.

Before moving back to Massachusetts, I lived in Washington State with my family. Before Kathy and I had kids, we bought a house. When Kathy was very much with child, in the early summer of 2010, I decided that I was going to cut a small tree that was at the corner of the house. It was a small, unhealthy tree that was leaning up against the roof. So I took an electric chainsaw that the previous owners had left. Cutting down the tree was easy, since it was small. What was more difficult was cutting up the tree into pieces. I wanted to separate the larger pieces that I could burn in our woodstove from the smaller branches and leaves that would go into our yard waste bin.

I decided to cut the smaller branches with the chainsaw. Somehow, as I was cutting them, I lost control of the chainsaw and the blade sort of jumped to the left, toward my left shoe. I should explain that as I was doing this, I was dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and running shoes. I was able to stop the chain from moving and regain control of the blade. It was then that I could see that the chainsaw had cut through the toe of my shoe, making a gash of about an inch-and-a-half long. I was shocked, because I didn't cut myself. I easily could have lost my big toe for not being careful, but I didn't hurt myself at all.

As I thought about that, it reminded me of the gospel. Because I wasn't being careful, I could have cut off my big toe. But God was merciful. He didn't give me over to what I deserved. He spared me a painful fate. Now, of course, I could have cut off my big toe and still lived. And if I had cut off my toe, it's not like God would have loved me any less. God doesn't promise us we aren't going to hurt ourselves in this life. But the point is that I didn't get what I easily could have received. As I thought about all of this, I was thankful. I praised God that I didn't get hurt.

Now, that's not really a great analogy for the gospel. But it gives you an idea of why we should be thankful. A better analogy would be if I were explicitly told not to use a chainsaw, and because of my rebellion, I used it anyway. And then when I was doing something foolish, about to cut off one of my limbs and bleed to death, Jesus stepped in and was cut by my chainsaw so that I didn't have to die. In that story, Jesus would be torn apart so that I didn't have to be.

Yes, that's a gruesome image. But that's what happened to Jesus on the cross. He was treated like a criminal. He was treated like an enemy of the state, someone who committed treason. The cross was an instrument of torture and death reserved for those who threatened the Roman Empire. And Jesus took that death in our place. We deserve death because we have committed treason against God, refusing to honor him and thank him and worship him the way that we should. Instead of acknowledging God's rule over our lives, we believe that we can set the terms for our own lives. Yet God is gracious. He has given us a way to punish sin without punishing us forever. He is a righteous judge who makes sure crimes are paid for, but he's also a loving Father who rescues his children.

If you truly understand the gospel, you should be the most thankful person who has ever lived. Last week, I said that love should be one of the identifying characteristics of a Christian. Thankfulness should be another mark of a Christian. We should be the most grateful people. We should be like the woman in Luke 7:36–50 who anoints Jesus' feet with ointment while weeping. Jesus said that she loved much because her many sins were forgiven. He said, "But he who is forgiven little, loves little" (v. 47).

Jesus is the one who paid the debt that we racked up and could never repay. He is the one who sacrifices his life for our own. There's nothing more that he could give us. He has given himself to us, and that is the best gift of all.

So, my question to you today is, Are you thankful? Or do you think you're entitled to all of God's good gifts? Do you think you deserve them?

David Brooks, in a column he wrote for the *New York Times* last year, talked about the importance of gratitude. He compared what he calls "capitalist meritocracy" with "dispositional gratitude." Capitalist meritocracy is the idea that we merit certain things—we've earned them. Dispositional gratitude means we have a disposition or an attitude of being grateful. Brooks writes,

We live in a capitalist meritocracy. This meritocracy encourages people to be self-sufficient — masters of their own fate. But people with dispositional gratitude are hyperaware of their continual dependence on others. They treasure the way they have been fashioned by parents, friends and ancestors who were in some ways their superiors. They're glad the ideal of individual autonomy is an illusion because if they were relying on themselves they'd be much worse off.

The basic logic of the capitalist meritocracy is that you get what you pay for, that you earn what you deserve. But people with dispositional gratitude are continually struck by the fact that they are given far more than they pay for — and

are much richer than they deserve. Their families, schools and summer camps put far more into them than they give back. There's a lot of surplus goodness in daily life that can't be explained by the logic of equal exchange. . . .

Gratitude is also a form of social glue. In the capitalist economy, debt is to be repaid to the lender. But a debt of gratitude is repaid forward, to another person who also doesn't deserve it. In this way each gift ripples outward and yokes circles of people in bonds of affection.⁶

Brooks is speaking of our day-to-day interactions with others. People who are grateful realize their "continual dependence on others." Such gratitude "is repaid forward, to another person who also doesn't deserve it." Do you realize your continual dependence upon God. Does your gratitude toward God ripple out to others?

If we're not thankful, something has gone wrong. I cannot answer the question of whether you are thankful or not. I can't tell you why you're not thankful. But I can say that if you're not thankful, you either don't realize the importance of the gospel or you have forgotten it somehow. And, I must admit, I often find myself not grateful, and I must repent of that. I must turn back to the gospel. All of us are prone to wander. I just read a book on the Pilgrims and the origins of Thanksgiving. In 1644, many of the original Pilgrims had moved away from Plymouth Colony to acquire larger farms. William Bradford, the governor, said the Plymouth church was like "an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children."⁷ Our prosperity has a way of making us forget how much we have.

Here are at least three ways to remain thankful to God.

One, preach the gospel to yourself. Remind yourself of what Jesus has done for you. The gospel isn't just for people about to become Christians. It is for the most seasoned of saints. In Philippians 4:4–9, the apostle Paul writes,

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁶ David Brooks, "The Structure of Gratitude," *New York Times*, July 28, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/28/opinion/david-brooks-the-structure-of-gratitude.html?ref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fdavid-brooks&action=click&contentCollection=opinion®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection&_r=2, accessed November 19, 2016.

⁷ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 370, quoted in Robert Tracy McKenzie, *The First Thanksgiving: What the Real Story Tells Us about Loving God and Learning from History* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 191.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul doesn't just say "rejoice." He says, "rejoice *in the Lord*." Take joy in what Jesus has done for you. If you are thankful for that, you have no need to be anxious. Even as you pray, be thankful. And think about the good things, the true, honorable, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praise-worthy things God has done for you. When you do that, you'll find peace. Perhaps we should write lists of things God has done for us and thank him for each one. Thank God for all the little things you have. Your life could always be much worse.

Two, receive good gifts with thanksgiving. We can enjoy the things of this world if we don't misuse them and if we receive them with thanksgiving. Christianity isn't Buddhism. It doesn't teach that this world is an illusion, or that we must deny all our desires. Christianity teaches that we can enjoy food and pleasure. This is what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:1–4:

¹ Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,

Notice that it's demonic to forbid marriage (and therefore sex) and to require people not to eat certain foods. Of course, Paul knows that gluttony is wrong, and that marriage is the one-flesh union of a man and a woman, and that we should have sex only in the context of such a marriage, and that we shouldn't get drunk. We have a tendency to misuse and pervert God's good gifts. But if we're using God's gifts according to the way he designed them and we're thankful to him, we are doing what is right.

So, if you're enjoying a good meal, thank God for that. But don't just stop with a meal. Earlier, I quoted G. K. Chesterton. He also wrote,

You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a

book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.⁸

Okay, maybe you don't go to the opera and the play. But if you enjoy music, or a beautiful sunset, or time with your loved ones, thank God. Thank God for a body that works (if yours is working) or a car that works. Thank him for a house, clothes, a bed, warmth, food, and all that you have.

Three, if you aren't enjoying the good things of this world, but you're going through a difficult time, find a way to be thankful in your circumstances. Perhaps your car is broken down, or your body is breaking down, or you have relationships that feel broken. We're still supposed to feel thankful in the midst of difficulties. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18,

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

The will of God is for us to rejoice, pray, and give thanks, among other things. That doesn't mean you have to enjoy every circumstance. But we all need to find things we're thankful for. One of the things we believe is that God has a purpose for everything that happens to us. In the end, there is no waste in God's economy. Everything matters. Every dashed hope, every broken dream, every pain, every failure—all of it has a purpose, even if we don't know what that purpose is. So, as you're going through a hard time, thank God for it. Realize that God is doing something. He is at work in your pain. He is at work in your depression. He might be using such times to draw you closer to him. He might be teaching you to trust him more. Perhaps he's using it to humble you. Or he may be doing this not for you, but for the sake of someone else around you. Our problem is we think we're at the center of the universe, when in reality, of course, we're not. Regardless of what is happening, thank God that he is using you. He is at work in you and through you to achieve his purposes. So, even if you don't understand what is happening, even if you don't like what is happening, thank God that he is using all things for his glory and for your good (Rom. 8:28).

Of course, all of that assumes that you are a child of God, that you've been adopted by the Father because you are related to the Son. But if you're here today and you haven't put your

⁸ Justin Taylor, "6 Quotes from G. K. Chesterton on Gratitude and Thanksgiving," *The Gospel Coalition*, November 26, 2015, <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2015/11/26/6-quotes-from-g-k-chesterton-on-gratitude-and-thanksgiving>, accessed November 19, 2016.

trust in Jesus, I would urge you to do that. All the benefits that come from Jesus—forgiveness, adoption into God’s family, eternal life—are only for those who have a right relationship with him. If you have that relationship, your life will be transformed. And if your life has been transformed, you’ll know it because you’ll be grateful to God.