



GIVING THANKS
Psalm 100; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9
1 Thessalonians 5:18

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

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A minister went to his doctor and was advised not to speak for several weeks because he was suffering from what the doctor described as voice fatigue. A minister friend asked him how he felt about not being able to speak. He said, "Well, I don't mind it so much except I have so many things I would really like to shout about." There are an awful lot of feelings at Thanksgiving which arise within us and want to be expressed with a great exuberant voice. Too often, however, many of us have developed voice fatigue when it comes to expressing thanksgiving.

Those of us from Virginia like to remind folks that the *first* Thanksgiving celebration in our country was observed in 1619 at the Berkeley Plantation, located on the James River between Williamsburg and Richmond, Virginia. In 1623 William Bradford signed the proclamation which established the "first" *official* Thanksgiving in our country. But it had been observed four years before this official dating. The early settlers and pilgrims found those first years after landing in the new world very difficult. We have all read about the hardships which they underwent. Many of them lost their lives and, from our perspective, the remaining few had very little for which to be grateful. Nevertheless the settlers at Berkeley Plantation in 1619 and a few years later the group of pilgrims gathered together in 1623 and expressed their thanksgiving to God for their lives and the small victory they had won in this new land. It seems strange that 388 years later, with an abundance of blessings, many of us suffer from voice fatigue when it comes to expressing thanksgiving. We simply take our blessings for granted. We somehow assume that all that we have has always been and always will be. So, many do not really bother with expressing gratitude to anyone.

Ingratitude Is Too Common Today

Unfortunately, ingratitude almost seems to be a part of our culture itself today. It has deep roots. Over a hundred years ago off Lake Michigan, on a freezing winter day, a ship sank near Evanston, Illinois. Some students from Northwestern University swam through the cold water to rescue the people who were drowning. One young man rescued seventeen people. He swam back and forth repeatedly

through the icy water until they were all safe. He spent so much time in the freezing water that he came down with an incurable illness which left him an invalid for life.

When someone was talking to this young man later, they asked him if he regretted what he had done. “No, I do not regret what I did,” he said. “I think I have done the very best that I could under the circumstances. But the one thing that I cannot understand is this: Of the seventeen people whose lives I saved that day, not a single one of them has ever come to see me. Not one has ever written me a thank you note, nor expressed appreciation in any way at all, or offered any help to me during my illness - not a single one.”

We Take Too Much for Granted

Too often we simply accept what is done for us without verbalizing any kind of expression of appreciation. Many assume that others are simply supposed to do those things for us, because that is their job. They are parents; they are teachers; they are merely fulfilling their functions. We take so much for granted.

Many never expect to express appreciation, but boy can they express complaints if everything is not just right! Complaints and gripes quickly rush to our mouths to be expressed. A man had worked hard at his job all day. He had a job where he had to stand on his feet all day. He got on the bus to go home one afternoon and he really felt weary and tired. The bus was crowded but he found a seat. An older woman got on later and he got up and gave her his seat. After she sat down he looked at her and said: “Beg your pardon, did you say something?” She replied: “No, I didn’t say anything.” He said, “Oh, I thought you said ‘thank you’, excuse me.” Isn’t it amazing how difficult it is for the words “thank you” to come to our lips, whereas complaints can come rushing forward like storm troopers.

Thanksgiving: A Holy Day

Thanksgiving is a very distinctive American holiday, and I guess it is good that we have one day that we set aside to remind us to be thankful because if we didn’t have that one day, I wonder sometimes, when some of us would ever get around to expressing thanksgiving. Any time we use the word holiday, it should remind us of its derivation, which is “holy day.” Thanksgiving should be a reminder to us that every day ought to be a day of thanksgiving. The Psalms are filled with expression of gratitude to God. “I will enter God’s courts with Thanksgiving.” “I will sing unto the Lord songs of Thanksgiving.” “I will praise the Lord.” “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” The Psalmists were constantly praising God for his bounty and blessings. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian and Thessalonian churches and expressed his thanksgiving to God for them and for the gifts which God had given them. He was thankful for them and the gifts he had seen

among them.

When Did You Last Express Thanks?

It is awful easy, it seems, to receive so much and still have a difficult time expressing gratitude. We take so much for granted. When was the last time you expressed thanks to God because you can think? It has not been too recently, I expect. We simply take the fact that we can think, that we can solve problems that we can look at something and arrive at a solution, for granted.

I know a middle-age attorney who developed a disease that slowly took away his ability to recall and he had to give up his practice because he could no longer think properly. He had one of the finest practices in the city but he could no longer remember where he was. His physical body was perfectly healthy but his mind was slowly going. When he would go to the Y to exercise, he might see you and know that he was supposed to know you but he could not recall your name. He might say hello to you and then in a moment speak to you again because he could not remember from one moment to the next who you were or that he had already spoken. When was the last time you thanked God for your ability to think?

When was the last time you thanked God that you can see? We take our sight for granted. My brother, who recently had a detached retina and other eye problems, reminded me of the difficulty he was having in seeing. We take our eyes for granted until we cannot see. When was the last time you expressed thanksgiving for your hearing? Several years ago, I lost partial hearing in one of my ears. Thankfully, I regained my hearing in that ear several weeks later. Since that time, I have always been much more appreciative and understanding of people who have difficulty in hearing. When was the last time you expressed thanksgiving for your ability to hear?

When was the last time you simply thanked God that your body functions properly? In the hospital recently, someone complained to me about a problem that they were having with their bodily functions. We take all of these things for granted and never express thanksgiving to God for them. We just assume that everything will always work until it no longer does. We take for granted the food on our table, the clothes we wear, and the homes we live in, and the job we have. All of these we simply take for granted.

When was the last time you thanked God that we have a church building? Most people usually take their church building for granted. Others before us may have sacrificed that we could worship in this special place today. Surely we ought to express a sense of gratitude for this house of worship. When was the last time you expressed thanksgiving to God or your parents, or children, your wife, or your husband, or our friends? We take them for granted until we can no longer express

thanksgiving to them because they are no longer here. Death or distance may have removed them from us. Have you ever thanked God for the person who first led you into your spiritual awareness of God? Have you expressed thanks for the person who introduced you to God and to Jesus Christ? Have you expressed thanks for those who taught you about right and wrong and guided you to seek high moral values in life? Have you ever paused to thank God for your parents, your Sunday School teachers, your ministers, grandparents, or whoever were the first ones who led you to God?

There is an old legend that states that God once sent two angels down to earth. One was to gather a basket filled with petitions, all of the requests which people were asking of God. The other angel was to collect a basket filled with thanksgivings from the people. The angel who returned with the basket of requests could hardly carry it because it was so heavy. But the one with the basket of thanksgiving expressions hardly had any notes in it at all. Why is it so difficult for us to give thanks to God for the great bounty that we have?

In All Things Give Thanks

In writing to the Thessalonians, as recorded in the fifth chapter, the eighteenth verse, Paul admonished, "In all things give thanks to God." Paul didn't say give thanks for all things but in all things. Thanksgiving is not reserved just for the good times. Paul urged his readers to learn the difficult lesson of expressing thanksgiving in the midst of the bad times as well as in the good times. A vital faith makes us want to lift up our voices in praise: "Now thank we all our God." We need to learn to praise God on rainy days as well as on bright sunny days. We need to learn to praise God on dark days as well as on bright days. We need to learn to praise God in days of discouragement as well as in times when we are on the mountaintops filled with enthusiasm. We need to learn to express praise to God in times of illness as well as in times of health. We need to learn to express thanksgiving to God in times of death as well as in times of life. We exclaim with Job: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

A small book has an interesting title, *The Choice is Always Ours*. It is an anthology of religious writings built around the theme that in every situation in life persons can make a choice. The writers acknowledge that we cannot always control what happens to us but we can control our response to the situation. Our response can make a difference. Do we give in, give up, panic, quit or see what other possibilities there might be. Learning to be grateful can be a meaningful choice in many situations.

We can learn to verbalize praise in all things when we know that nothing can separate us from the presence of God. Whether times are good or bad, God is still present with us to sustain us in everything that happens. Israel learned some of its

greatest lessons about God in the wilderness. Paul had suffered greatly for God through persecution, imprisonment, and rejection. But in the midst of all of his suffering, he could still say, “In all things, give thanks unto God.”

Thankfulness Requires Effort and Teaching

I am not convinced that we simply become a thankful people without working at it. Thankfulness takes effort. It should be cultivated in our lives and taught to our children and others. We begin by trying to teach our children to learn to be thankful for the small things of life. We teach them to be thankful for their clothes, food, home, parents, church, and all things large and small. They should be taught to verbalize and express thankfulness to others for the things they receive such as gifts, their food, education, toys, etc. I noticed at our Thanksgiving dinner how our grandson, J. T., graciously said “Thank you” and “No thank you” at our table. This, of course, is a product of his mother’s, our daughter’s, training. We all have to work at it. Another step in learning thankfulness is to express thanks to God. We learn to express our thanks at mealtime as we praise God for the bounty we have large or small. We remind our children that all gifts ultimately come to us from the hand of a loving God.

An unknown poet has expressed our call to thank God for little things in life.

Thank you, God, for little things
that often come our way –
Things we take for granted
but don’t mention when we pray –
The unexpected courtesy,
the thoughtful, kindly deed –
A hand reached out to help us
in the time of sudden need –
Oh, make us more aware, dear God,
of little daily graces
That come to us with “sweet surprise”
from never-dreamed-of places.

Thankfulness Helps Us Remember

When we learn to be thankful, it enables us to remember, and when we remember what others have done for us—parents, teachers, and friends—then we remember to be more grateful. When we are more grateful, we are able to express our gratitude more realistically because we remember. We remember that many of our blessings are not really of our own doing so much but are the result of what others have done for us through their time, effort, energy, love, and devotion.

Everything has not come to us simply by our own strength.

As we remember, it also makes us more humble because we realize that none of us is totally self-made. We can never be selfish because we have received so much from others in life, and we express our gratitude to God for them. Having received so much from others, we acknowledge our indebtedness to them and express our gratitude for them and the great blessings they have shared with us. Most of all we praise God for his great blessings to us.

Cultivate Gratitude

We need to cultivate gratitude. William James has reminded us that the fundamental desire of human nature is to be appreciated. It is a longing everyone has. Work at it. Drop notes to others and express your thankfulness. Let us remind our children not to take what we have and are for granted. When is the last time, husbands, you thanked your wife for your meals and the many other things at home she does for you? Too often we take them for granted. When is the last time you expressed appreciation to your wife and didn't just assume that she knew it? Wives, when was the last time you verbalized appreciation to your husband or said, I love you? Children, when have you last expressed your love and appreciation for your parents and, you, parents, for your children? We simply take each other for granted too often.

The parents of a young man killed in one of our wars presented their church with a substantial gift to be used as a memorial for their son. The mother of another soldier learned of the gift and suggested that they also make a contribution. "Why should we?" the husband asked. "Our son came back home from the war." "That is precisely the point," the mother exclaimed. "Let's make a gift of thanksgiving because he did come home."

When was the last time you took a moment to express appreciation to somebody who meant a great deal to you? I challenge you this week to drop a note of thanksgiving to somebody – some teacher, a friend, a relative, who has enriched your life. You can never imagine what it may mean to them. After all, you do know what it means to receive one of these kinds of notes. Think what it might mean to someone if you would take the time to address one to them and say: "Hey, what you did for me when I was young or down was helpful. I want you to know it." If not a note, express a word of appreciation verbally to your husband, wife, child, or parent. Let us express our thanksgiving unto God and learn to do so "in all things."

O God, we thank you for the great gift you have given to us through Christ Jesus. We express our thanksgiving for the greatest of all gifts—the life we receive through him. Having received so much, teach us to remember to be grateful and to

express this gratitude cheerfully in the name of Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we come in prayer to you this day with a sense of thanksgiving for all the gifts that we have received from your hand. We thank you for the gift of life, for love, for work, play, hopes and dreams, and tasks to be done. We thank you for the sacrifices and ideals we have inherited from our forefathers and foremothers who made the way that we might live and exist in this particular time in our history as a nation.

We confess today that too often we come to you only with our problems. So this day we pause to say thank you. We thank you for accepting us when we are really unacceptable. We thank you for hope when we have lost our dreams, for your presence when we feel abandoned. Thank you for all of the wonder, mystery and beauty in our world; for the touch of friends when the burdens of life get heavy, for moments of silence in a busy world. We thank you for your hand of assurance when life crashes in upon us, for the joy of helping others when they are in need, for the assurance that you have made a place for each of us when we feel inadequate.

We thank you for the gift of life when we feel defeated, for the struggles of life when we become too complacent. We thank you for your peace in times of fear; for forgiveness when we fail and sin and for your love when we feel unloved. We thank you for the freedom we have in this country. But above all, Loving God, we are grateful for the sense of your sustaining power that has come through your grace that continuously blesses us. Give us now in this service a sense of thanksgiving that is so real that all that is within us will constantly praise your name. Through Jesus Christ, who loves us and gave himself for us, we pray. Amen. ■