

# A Thanksgiving Perspective

By Mark Jarvinen

Thanksgiving Day is right around the corner and it's one day that we set aside time in our busy schedules to give thanks to God. A Thanksgiving Day is a good idea, but the Bible calls us to a life of thanksgiving as the normative daily experience of the Christian.

***Ephesians 5:19-20*** tells Christians to ***“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ALWAYS giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

And ***I Thess. 5:16-18*** says, ***“Be joyful ALWAYS; pray CONTINUALLY; give thanks IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”***

Notice from these two passages that Paul’s main subject is **PRAISE** and **THANKSGIVING**. Notice also the other important words in these passages – **“ALWAYS, CONTINUALLY, and IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.”** The Ephesians passage almost sounds like Paul is giving instructions for a worship service. But he isn’t limiting it to one hour per week. He’s speaking of a continual attitude for Christians, an attitude of the heart. But how are we to have this attitude continually, especially ***“in all circumstances?”*** The answer lies in our perspective on thanksgiving. Perspective is important – it’s seeing God for who He is, and viewing circumstances for what they are. Only then will we be able to give thanks as a way of life.

## I. OBSTACLES TO THANKSGIVING.

There are many attitudes that rob us of gratitude, but I'd like to mention three.

A) **PRIDE** – This is the attitude that says, ***“There’s no free lunch, I’ve worked hard for everything I have.”*** A proud person feels he has no one to thank but himself and his own efforts. **Alex Haley**, the author of the well known novel, **Roots**, had an unusual picture hanging on his office wall. It was a picture of a turtle on top of a fence post. When asked, ***“Why is that there?”*** Alex Haley answered, ***“Every time I write something significant, every time I read my words and think that they are wonderful, and begin to feel proud of myself, I look at the turtle on top of the fence post and remember that he didn’t get there on his own. He had help.”*** Pride gets in the way of a thankful spirit.

B) **A COMPLAINING SPIRIT** – A lady known as an incurable grumbler constantly complained about everything. At last her pastor thought he had found something about which she could be happy. Her farm crop was the finest for miles around and he said to her with a beaming smile,

***“You must be very happy. Everyone is saying what a nice crop of potatoes you have this year.”***

***“True, they’re pretty good,”*** she said, ***“but what am I going to do when I need bad ones to feed the pigs.”*** Those with a critical or complaining spirit tend to see the glass half empty instead of half full. In this negative mindset, frustration is amplified and discouragement and discontent are magnified. In short,

complaining makes us miserable. Instead of seeing a glass half empty, or even half full, how much better to envision our cup running over, which happens when a gratitude attitude takes over.

**C) CARELESSNESS** – The Israelites under Moses received a bread-like substance called **manna** from heaven as a miracle every day during their wilderness wanderings. How did they respond? They complained that they had the same menu every day – evidence of a careless attitude and an ungrateful spirit, especially since the alternative was either slavery in Egypt or starvation in the wilderness.

***If any nation ought to be thankful today, it's America – and particularly the Christians who live here. Let's not let negative attitudes get in the way.***

## **II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THANKSGIVING.**

***Allow me to express four things we learn about thanksgiving from the Bible.***

### **A) TRUE THANKSGIVING IS EXPRESSED.**

Psalm 100 says, ***“Enter his gates with thanksgiving in your heart. Psalm 107 says, “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.”*** Our thanks is something that issues forth from a heart of gratitude for God's goodness and what He has done for us. It's not kept to ourselves, it's shared with others.

We heard earlier of the **ten lepers** in **Luke 17** who were cleansed by Jesus, and how only one of them went back to thank Jesus for the miracle performed in his life. To that one, Jesus said, ***“Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”*** Why did he say these words to the

one who came back? The other nine had been healed as well, hadn't they? Of course they had. Jesus acted in compassion to the most obvious need of all ten, but faith was not created in the hearts of the nine. In the heart of the one who returned, however, the healing was more than merely physical. It was a spiritual and an emotional healing as well. Jesus made him whole, and somehow, by the work of God, the man realized it and received it. The fact that one of the healed lepers returned to say thank you to Jesus indicates that full salvation had taken place in his life. Thanksgiving flows out of the wholeness that salvation brings when we come to faith in Jesus Christ. Faith and thanksgiving merge in the lives of those for whom salvation has become a reality.

Furthermore, as we think of thanksgiving as something that is most often expressed, we know that saying thank you endears us to others and others to us. Not too long ago, I thanked my 91 year-old father for the way he had raised me and for the example he had set. I could tell it touched his heart. As I left him that day, we warmly embraced. But not only that, **GOD APPRECIATES OUR THANKS TOO.** It lifts him up and glorifies him. It endears Him to us and draws us closer. Conversely, an unthankful heart can have the opposite effect. Listen to **Romans 1:21** where Paul writes:

***“For although they knew God, (by observing His creation) they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”***

This passage implies that ungrateful people who rely on self tend to fall away from God because their hearts become hardened.

True thanksgiving is expressed, and secondly, ...

## **B. TRUE THANKSGIVING IS EXPANSIVE.**

Our thanksgiving will expand into many aspects of life but let me mention just *three*.

**1) THE BLESSINGS OF LIFE** – After eating a great meal cooked by my lovely wife, I stand in our kitchen before a sink full of dishes and give thanks to God for them. WRONG. I want like anything to walk away and pretend they're not there. But I probably should give thanks. Why? Because a sink full of dirty dishes means that we have been blessed by God with daily food and water in a world where 2/3 of all people go to bed hungry at night. We have so much to be thankful for in the everyday blessings of life.

**2) THE BURDENS OF LIFE** – This of course is a tough one. Give thanks in **ALL** circumstances. Our sister-law texted on Thursday to tell us that her daughter, our niece, has been diagnosed with breast cancer, calling for 5 months of chemo-therapy, surgery, and possible radiation. Yet, we are called to *“always give thanks,”* scripture says. In case we think that Paul somehow had it easier than we do today, may I remind you of his *“thorn in the flesh,”* spoken of in **II Corinthians 12**. He also had been run out of town, beaten, whipped, imprisoned, betrayed by friends, naked, cold, hungry, shipwrecked, and stoned because of his faith. Yet, Paul never stopped giving thanks.

**How about a woman with leprosy on the island of Tobago, mentioned by author, Max Lucado?** A short-term missionary met this leprous woman on a mission trip. On the final day of the trip, the group was worshipping in a leper colony. We know that leprosy is a

disease that eats away at the body's tissue. The missionary asked if anyone had a favorite song. A woman raised her hand and as she turned her head to face him, the missionary saw the most ghastly, disfigured face he'd ever seen. She had no ears and no nose. Her lips were gone. But she raised her fingerless hand and asked, ***"Could we sing 'Count Your Many Blessings?'"*** The missionary started to sing the song, but couldn't finish. Someone later commented, ***"I suppose you'll never be able to sing that song again."*** He answered, ***"No, I'll sing it again. Just never in the same way."*** What an example of expansive thanksgiving in the midst of the burdens of life!

**3) THE BENEFITS OF LIFE** – When the Israelites in the Bible focused on what they didn't have, they failed to see ALL that they DID have. **Doug McKnight**, also mentioned in one of Max Lucado's books, was a man, who at age 32 was diagnosed with **Multiple Sclerosis**. Over the years this disease took its toll, first on his career, then his mobility. At various points he battled depression and fear, but he never lost his gratitude. On one occasion, when his friends from church asked him for a prayer list of his needs, they were astonished to find that it contained 18 praises and 6 requests. His blessings outweighed his needs by 3 times. **How about us? Are we adding to our praise list as much or more than we add to our request list?** May we be expansive in our thanksgiving for the benefits of life, even when weighed down by our difficulties.

**C. TRUE THANKSGIVING IS EXPECTED.**

Paul says we are to ***“give thanks in all circumstances, BECAUSE this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18)***. God knows that if we give thanks, our lives will be changed.

**Our thanks is expected because ...**

**1) It is the mark of the Growing Christian.** Have you ever been around a baby with colic. None of ours had it, but both of Martha’s sister’s kids did. In fact during seminary in Fergus Falls, we lived in their upstairs apartment and helped care for their new born son, **Benjamin**. We’d walk the floor with him for long stretches of time. When we’d put him down, he just cried a little louder. Benjamin was too young to thank us for holding him at that point in his life. But even when a child reaches the age of cognition, he still has to be taught to say thank you. It doesn’t come naturally. But when we realize how blessed we are and thank God for those blessings, it’s a sign that we’re growing in our faith.

**2) It’s a mark of a Giving Christian.** When we realize how much God has done for us and how much he continues to do, we desire to give something back to him. This desire expresses itself through stewardship - the giving of our time, talents, and financial resources toward the work of God’s kingdom.

**3) It’s also a mark of the Glowing Christian.** Thankful people have a glow about them. They are not critical and pessimistic, even when difficult times come their way. Their attitude is like Paul’s who said:

***“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So***

***we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen” (II Cor. 4:8).***

***Most of all, Thanksgiving is gifted to us by a Gracious God, Who enables us to extend a spirit of thankfulness to others.***

***D. TRUE THANKSGIVING IS EXTENDED.***

Thankfulness is God’s will for us, but are we always thankful? Is gratitude, especially in trials and testing, always our first thought? Unfortunately, no. Sometimes the old nature gets in the way and we fall short of God’s expectations. Even though we have been declared righteous through the merits of Christ on our behalf, we sometimes stumble and fall. **Thank God for His grace and for what Jesus did for us on the cross.** With the cross as our focus, and our thoughts directed toward what Jesus did for us there, thankfulness and praise become our dominant perspective, lifting our spirits to glorify God and become a blessing to others. This is the perspective from which we are asked to face not only Thanksgiving Day, but everyday. Let’s give ample thought to this as we enter into Thanksgiving week.

***A-men.***