

DO YOU GIVE THANKS TO GOD CONTINUALLY?

HEBREWS 13:11-16

Sometimes being thankful doesn't come easily. I've read that in some parts of Mexico, natural hot springs and cold springs can come flowing out of the ground side by side. Now this is a wonderful natural phenomenon in poorer, more primitive areas of Mexico where clothes are still washed by hand. Mexican women bring their laundry and boil their clothes in the hot springs and then rinse them in the cold springs. Talk about convenience! One day, a tourist was watching this procedure and he commented to his Mexican friend, "I imagine that they think old Mother Nature is pretty generous to supply such ample, clean water – both hot water and cold water side by side – free of charge." His Mexican friend sighed, shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, "No, señor, there is much grumbling because there is no soap!" For many people, ungratefulness, thanklessness and lack of appreciation are their default settings.

As you know, we're just a few days away from Thanksgiving Day. Besides it being an appropriate time to review again what the Bible says about gratitude, today's message is a great way to bring this series of messages on worship to a fitting conclusion. Worship is a verb! It's not something done to us or for us but by us. Today, the final verb form of worship are the words "give thanks." And here's the question I want you to ask yourself: Do you give thanks to God continually? Are you in the habit of expressing your gratitude to God perpetually? Do you show appreciation to God for all that He is and all that He's done constantly? Giving thanks is an important way to worship God.

True gratitude doesn't depend on everything going well in your life all the time. That's what the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews had to remind his readers about. Most biblical scholars believe that he was writing to a group of Christians who were being mistreated for their faith in Jesus. Let's read a little of what he says just now. That word – "thanksgiving" – is made up of two other words: "thanks" and "giving." What is "thanks"? It's the expression of gratitude or the grateful acknowledgement of something received by you or done for you. What is "giving?" Giving is the intentional act of parting with something that belongs to you for some cause. It might be your time, your money, your energy or something else that's in your power to give away. As we read verses 15-16 again, listen for those two aspects of thanksgiving – thanks and giving – even though the word "thanksgiving" itself is never actually used. "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (Heb 13:15-16 NIV) What emerges there are two ways to give thanks to God continually.

THE GIVING OF THANKS

You can never force someone to be thankful. You can't command gratitude precisely because it's a response that springs up in a person's own mind and

heart. The Bible suggests that a thankful heart is a sign that you belong to God and know Him. It says, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and his faithfulness continues to each generation. (Ps 100:4-5 NLT) It also says, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done." (Ph 4:6 NLT) When you're following Jesus and when you're filled with the Holy Spirit, thankfulness flows out of you. That's what Hebrews 13:15-16 are saying – let gratitude be the distinguishing mark of your Christian experience no matter what difficulties you might be enduring at the present time.

One way you can tell if someone is close to God or growing in the knowledge of God is a consistent attitude of gratitude. Godly people are thankful people. You know people who seem to make a career out of complaining, grumbling, whining, murmuring, moaning and groaning. Sure, they may have legitimate struggles in life, but their negative outlook on life - which manifests itself in a complete lack of thankfulness - makes it almost impossible to be around them for very long. Do you enjoy being around someone with a persistently sour outlook on life? They suck the life and energy right out of you, don't they? I'll tell you who I enjoy being around. It's the person who's had his or her fair share of hard knocks and deep disappointments in life, but has somehow still learned to rise above all of it and keep a robust spirit of gratitude. I get energy from someone like that. I learn from a person like that. I get blessed and pumped up spiritually by a person like that. If you enjoy being around a thankful person, you can be sure God does, too.

I've met my share of consistently disgruntled, cranky and unhappy people who claim to love and know Jesus personally. I beg to differ with them. You might have had some kind of religious or emotional experience years ago, but you can't claim Jesus is the Lord of your life or that the Holy Spirit is in control of your life. A cranky, complaining spirit reveals a person who doesn't really want to please God. After all the Bible says, "Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus." (1 Th 5:18 NLT) Being thankful matters to God. It's evidence that you know God in a vital, real and authentic way. Thankfulness reveals that you've met Him personally and life can now never be the same for you again. Having met Jesus makes life worth living. When you work out vigorously, you sweat. Gratitude just pours out of Spirit-filled Christians anywhere and anytime, just like sweat pours out of an athlete who works out continually. How the world needs to see Christians like that!

Charles Krulak, a retired Marine Corps general, tells about a time when, as a non-Christian, he was first confronted with a person truly committed to Jesus. "[Years] ago I was a young 2nd lieutenant just graduated from the Naval Academy, married fourteen days after I graduated. My wife and I went down to Quantico, Virginia, home of the basic school where officers learn about honor, courage and commitment. At that time in my life, I thought I was a cross between John Wayne and Tom Cruise. I shared a room with another married

officer named John Listerman. John was a wonderful human [being]. He exuded goodness. If I'd have asked him for his arm, he would have said, 'Where do you want me to cut it off? At the wrist? At the elbow?' John was a Christian. That meant nothing to me.... Upon graduating from basic school, John and I went to Camp Pendleton, California, where we joined the battalion preparing to go to Vietnam. I saw another side of John Listerman [there]. He was a tremendous leader – aggressive and technically proficient. People loved him. He was committed to his troops; his troops were committed to him.”

“On a December morning in 1965 John and I went to war. John Listerman’s war lasted one day. We were on a patrol moving down a trail through the jungle. We came around a corner in that trail and we ran into an ambush. John took the first round, a 50 caliber round right in his kneecap.... It threw him up in the air. The second round hit him right below the heart and exited out his side. I was wounded also but nowhere near as badly. I saw John about 30 meters away on his back, his leg blown off. I crawled up to him, and I wanted to say, ‘Are you OK? Can I do anything?’ But before I could do that, his head turned to me and he said, ‘How are you doing, Chucker? Are you OK?’ I said, ‘Yes, John. I’m OK.’ He said, ‘Are my men safe?’ I said, ‘John, your people are OK.’ At that point, John turned his head and looked to the sky and repeated over and over again, ‘Thank You, Lord. Thank You, Lord. Thank You for caring for my people. Thank You for caring for me.’ I was dumbfounded.” Both John Listerman and Charles Krulak survived that terrible day. Charles Krulak became a follower of Jesus. A thankful spirit has great power to draw people to Jesus.

What does that phrase mean there in v. 15 – “continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise”? The word “sacrifice” can mean three things in the Bible. One, it can refer to a literal animal sacrifice that was practiced as a part of one’s faith in Old Testament times. Two, it’s used of Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. Jesus gave Himself up so that your sins might be forgiven and that you’d have the opportunity to enter into an eternal relationship with God Himself. Three, sacrifice can also refer to what you offer to God in terms of your everyday, walk around life – your time, your energy, your resources and – above all – your heart.

Ironically, all three of those uses of the word “sacrifice” are used right here in this passage. The writer of Hebrews points out that there’s a very important connection between what Jesus did on the cross and the system of animal sacrifice in the Old Testament. You may recall that in the Old Testament, animals were killed on the Temple grounds and their blood sprinkled as a sacrifice for sin. Sin deserves death, but God permitted people to kill innocent animals as a substitute for their own punishment. On some occasions, the carcass was taken outside of the Temple area and the city itself and discarded as yet another symbol that sin is to be forever removed from God’s holy presence. When Jesus died on the cross, He fulfilled for all time and eternity what the whole system of Old Testament animal sacrifice pointed to. Killing animals was never really an adequate punishment for people’s sins. The only

really substitute was Jesus when He died in your place on the cross and His blood was shed there instead of your blood. Jesus even died outside of the Temple area and the city gates thus fulfilling the symbolism of sin being removed from God's holy presence. God can't look upon sin and for a period of time God the Father couldn't even look upon God the Son in the person of Jesus as He was bearing away your sin and your guilt. That was sacrifice.

Did you know that the first Christians were picked on and misunderstood precisely because they had no sacrificial system, no sacred buildings, no altars and no priests? Many of their neighbors couldn't understand this lack of religious paraphernalia and considered Christians to be atheists of all things! Those first followers of Jesus knew that didn't need to offer animals on a sacrificial altar anymore. So what could they offer up to God? A different kind of sacrifice – an offering of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Here's why you can be constantly and continually thankful to God despite the inevitable bad days that come along. Jesus paid your debt on the cross. Your sins are forgiven. The absolute power of sin, Satan, self and hell itself over you has been broken. You can now know God as your Father. You can know His love, His grace, His peace, His joy today and forever. Your life now has a new cosmic and eternal significance and value because God has made you a part of His family forever. For all those reasons and so many more, you can confess to God – you can offer up to God – the fruit of your lips. In other words, you can continually and consistently give Him praise, worship, adoration and gratitude.

During a visit to Grandma and Grandpa's home, two young girls watched from the breakfast table as a stranger came to the back door. When the visitor left, Grandpa explained that the man was an appraiser. The youngest child asked, "What's an appraiser?" Before her grandpa had a chance to explain, the older sister quickly cleared up any confusion: "He's a praiser. He goes to church every Sunday." Are you a praiser? Do you give thanks to God continually?

Why bother to come to church today or on any Sunday? The most important reason is simply to offer up to God the fruit of your lips – to express your personal praise, thankfulness and gratitude to God. When that's done sincerely and thoughtfully, God considers it an acceptable offering. But thankfulness should mark your life every hour of every day – not just Sundays from 10:15 to Noon. You can walk around all day long with a heart full of gratitude to God that shows itself in your attitudes, your thoughts, your words, your work, in how you treat your family, in how you treat strangers, in how you treat those in need, in how you interact with those who don't know Jesus yet. You can offer up the sacrifice of praise in everything you do all day long. We've been thinking about the giving of thanks. Now, let me mention...

THE THANKS IN GIVING

When you truly love God, you enjoy expressing it personally, but that love also compels you to express it in and through your actions as well. Thanksgiving is an attitude, but it's more than an attitude. It's an attitude that compels you to act – to give of yourself in some way, shape or form. That's the other aspect of that word "thanksgiving" that I want to highlight – the thanks in giving. On Sunday, you don't need to bring an ox or a sheep to church and offer it up as a sacrifice on an altar somewhere in here, right? No, please leave your livestock at home! What then is an acceptable sacrifice? The fruit of your lips – personal words of praise and thanksgiving. True enough! But v. 16 says that you can also offer up kindness, good deeds and the sharing of your resources with others. "And don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God." (Heb 13:16 NLT) Remember, doing those things doesn't make you right with God. They don't earn you salvation, Heaven or eternal life. By doing nice things for others you don't somehow delete the bad things you did against others and God. Sin and its guilt only gets deleted by Jesus. But you can offer up good deeds, acts of kindness and the sharing of your time, energy and resources because you simply want to please your Heavenly Father. When you're grateful, no one can stop you from just doing stuff that you know will please the heart of the one you love.

So what does this look like? Some years ago now, we started hearing about "random acts of kindness" or RAKs for short. It simply means doing something kind, thoughtful or gracious for someone else simply because you love God. Paying the food order of the person behind you in the fast food drive through line. Doing a chore around the home without having to be asked. Providing a few hours of childcare for an overwhelmed mother. Raking up the leaves in your neighbor's yard. This whole Advent Conspiracy effort you heard about this morning is built on this premise. No, they may not be random acts, to be sure, but they are expressions of thankfulness to God by giving to others. Why do it? Because God enjoys it so much when you do stuff like that!

Do something good for someone else because you're so thankful to God. Be kind to someone because God's been kind to you. Speak a word of encouragement or appreciation into someone's life because you're so thankful to God for all He's done for you. Share Jesus with someone. Invite someone to church with you next Sunday. The Bible says, "Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith." (Gal 6:10 NLT) That's one reason to be a part of a church like this one. It gives you a whole bunch of people to be kind to, to care about, to love, to be merciful to, to pray for, to be there for, to encourage, to bless, to do things for. I hope this Thanksgiving and Christmas season that the Holy Spirit will prompt you to offer one random act of kindness for a fellow brother or sister in this church. I hope it will prompt you to do something for a neighbor, a friend, an acquaintance at work or at school, and especially for someone who lives in the community around this church. If you are truly grateful to God, just go and do something – something kind, something good and something that honors Jesus.

Let me mention another very important demonstration of thanks in giving – those of who you serve in ministries throughout this church. Almost all of our ministries require weekly, monthly and certainly regular commitment. Not all of your giving should be spontaneous, random or spur of the moment. A lot of it needs to be regular, consistent and faithful. I want to thank each and every one of you who are serving the Lord through ministries in our church: all those of you who teach and work with children and students, those of you who teach adults, those of you who cook and clean, those of you who pray faithfully, those of you who count money and pay bills, those of you who greet old-timers and first-timers and usher at our worship services, those of you who lead us in song and play instruments, those of you who fix things around the building, those of you who give out food and those of you who help us in all things technological. I'm probably forgetting to mention some folk, and I apologize. But you know who you are. More importantly, God knows who you are. Thank you! Bless you! I'm grateful to God for each of you. Why do you do what you do? I hope it's because you love Jesus and you need to express it by doing something good for others.

The passage we've focused on today alludes to the fact that not everything you do in life has the same long term effect or value. It says, "For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come." (Heb 13:14 NLT) I believe he's talking about Heaven there. There's no lasting permanence on this planet the way it is today. Everything changes. Everything has its season. Everyone dies. But there are things that have eternal value and permanence nonetheless. Like what? Like God Himself. Like your relationship with Him. Like His children. Like what you do – what you give - because you're just so grateful to God for all He's done for you. We need to remind ourselves often to give ourselves to those things that have eternal, permanent value.

One Thanksgiving Day, a family was seated around the table looking at the delicious turkey in front of them. From the oldest to the youngest, they expressed something in prayer to God for which they were thankful. When they came to the five year old in the family, he began by expressing his thanks for the turkey, saying that although he hadn't tasted it yet, he knew it would be very good. But he didn't stop there. He thanked God for his mother who cooked the turkey and for his father who bought the turkey. But he didn't stop even there. He thanked God for the checker at the grocery store who rang up the purchase of the turkey on her machine. He thanked God for the grocery store people who put the turkey in the store. He thanked God for the farmer who made the turkey fat and for the man who made the food for the turkey to eat. He traced this turkey from its origin all the way to his plate. And then at the end of his prayer, he solemnly said, "Did I leave anybody out?" His brother, somewhat embarrassed by all these proceedings, said, "What about God?" Without missing a beat, the five year old said, "I was about to get to Him." That's the real question this and any Thanksgiving, isn't it? In all of your celebrating, eating, and enjoying family and friends this week, will you ever get to Him? Who? Will you get around to God? To praising Him? To giving thanks continually to Him and for Him?