

BEING THANKFUL

It used to be that every year when Thanksgiving came around and we were all urged to be thankful for the blessings we had received, I would find myself getting irritated. I knew they were right—that I ought to be appreciative of all the blessings God had given me and the fact that I didn't feel that way made me feel guilty. And since I didn't like feeling guilty, I would get irritated with people who made me feel guilty by telling me I ought to be thankful. When I was a kid there was a popular song that went, *"When you're worried and you can't sleep; Count your blessings instead of sheep—and you'll fall asleep counting your blessings."* Well, the song proved to be true. Every time I would try to summon up a sense of thankfulness by counting my blessings I would go to sleep. I finally came to the conclusion that I couldn't talk myself into feeling thankful; it was like trying to convince yourself to love someone when you didn't. Or to forgive someone with whom you were still angry.

Then one day it dawned on me that the reason I couldn't come up with love and forgiveness and thankfulness on my own was that those things don't come from us: they come from God. Being naturally selfish, we can't produce love and forgiveness and thankfulness out of ourselves: we can only receive them as gifts from a loving and a forgiving Father, and we have to receive them before we can give them. The good news is that God is willing to give us as much love and forgiveness and thankfulness as we are willing to receive. The bad news is that we have a perverse tendency to put limits on how much of them we're willing to receive. It's not a supply problem; it's a demand problem. And I think the problem is that we're a little confused about what it is we should be thankful FOR. We tend to focus on the gifts rather than the Giver of the gifts.

Take our country, for example. God has showered America with an incredible harvest of blessings. Few countries have been blessed with the natural resources America possesses. Few countries have been blessed with the agricultural resources our country has. When I was in the business world I spent a lot of time on planes. Whenever I would fly west, it wasn't the "purple mountain majesties" that impressed me as much as it was the magnitude of the "fruited plains." Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska—state after state of "pastures of plenty." The agricultural production of this country is almost unbelievable! Between the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, lies a breadbasket that literally could feed most of the rest of world. If we could just figure out a proper distribution system that would deliver the food to the people who really need it, we could come close to eliminating world hunger. It's not a lack of generosity on the part of the the American people that gets in the way—it's the logistics.

Few countries have been endowed with such an ingenious form of governance as America has. A republican form of government that is constituted by a democratic electorate, along with a Constitution that enshrines human dignity and freedom has made America's system of political governance the object of envy and admiration around the world. We have military and economic security, our standard of living is among the highest in the world, and for a century and a half we have led the world in scientific discoveries, technological innovation and industrial production. Add to these blessings a massive system of public education, a free-enterprise economy that rewards initiative and hard work, the freedom to speak our opinions and gather together in public assembly and worship when and where we please, and it may fairly be said that America's cup literally overflows with blessings. In many ways America has fulfilled what Theodore Roosevelt called our "manifest destiny."

America is the best place in the world to live—which is why people from all over the world are trying to come here.

We do have one problem in America, however, which can easily undermine all the rest of our blessings—and it's the same problem ancient Israel had. Put simply: we have begun to worship the gifts rather than the Giver of the gifts. The great Old Testament prophet Ezekiel wrote that the people of Israel had come to think of the land of Israel as *their possession* rather than as a gift from God—and that this would bring about a day of reckoning. Jeremiah said that the people of Jerusalem had come to place their confidence in the magnificent temple Solomon had built—rather than in the One who dwelt in the temple—Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts—and that this would bring about a day of reckoning. The Israelites had been blessed with their land and their temple along with many other gifts so that they could, in turn, be a blessing to other peoples according to God's covenant with Abraham. But the Israelites had chosen to hoard their gifts rather than share them, to regard God's gifts as evidence of their privileged status with God rather than as undeserved blessings to be shared with others. As they focused more and more on the gifts rather than the Giver, they increasingly placed a higher value on material blessings like kids, cattle and crops than they did on the One who could satisfy their deepest needs: the need to have their sins forgiven so that they would love the Lord their God with all their hearts and minds and souls and strength and their need to love their neighbors as themselves. They put the gifts ahead of the Giver and when people begin to exalt gifts over the Giver of the gifts they have embraced an idol.

You see, an idol is anything other than God that we count on for security and happiness. Idols come in all shapes and sizes. An idol can take the form of a political leader we trust to solve all our problems. It can take the form of an ideology or a political philosophy which we believe will usher in the perfect society. It can come in the form of our own children. And, of course, it can—and often does—come in the form of money—or, as we like to say, "financial security." Whatever

we trust the most to keep us safe and happy is our god. And if our god isn't God Himself, it will be an idol.

The people of ancient Israel paid a terrible price for their idolatry. They lost their temple, they lost their worship, they lost Jerusalem, and they lost their land, and they lost their freedom. They went into exile for 142 years. And make no mistake, we are headed down the same path the Israelites trod. What we desperately need—and what God is willing to provide if we will only ask him—is a spirit of thankfulness in our people. Thankfulness is the God-given ability to see through the gift and discern the Giver.

I think that this is what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples with some of the miracles he performed. When he fed 5000 people on five loaves of bread and two fish, wasn't he just doing in shorthand form what God is always doing in fields of wheat and in rivers and lakes and oceans: multiplying loaves and fishes to feed his children? When he turned water into wine at Cana, wasn't he just giving them a "shorthand version" of what God is always doing in a vineyard—using soil and sunshine to turn water into wine? When he healed the sick with the touch of his hand, wasn't he just doing what God does everyday through prayer and medical science: healing diseases and restoring people's health? God works miraculously in his creation every day to bless us with life-sustaining gifts. We just don't see it because we've become so used to it. That's why Jesus showed it to us in a way that we wouldn't forget.

But one of God's greatest miracles—one which he stands ready to perform any time we ask him—is to convert selfish hearts into thankful hearts. Having a thankful heart is one of the greatest blessings a Christian can receive. Thankfulness is the essence of worship, for true worship is simply a heart which acknowledges and praises its Creator and Redeemer. A thankful heart is the living sacrifice which God both requires—and gives to His children. Thankfulness is the ability to see the Giver behind the gift.

So let's praise God this Thanksgiving and ask him to give each one of us a thankful heart. And once we've received this thankfulness, why don't we let others see it so that God can work through us to instill the blessing of thankfulness in other people's hearts.

We are so blessed! Let us resolve to BE a blessing. For to a selfish heart, God's gifts are just lifeless idols. But to a thankful heart, they are love letters from the Giver of life and salvation.

Happy Thanksgiving! Amen

Colossians 2:6-15 Alive in Christ

⁶Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

John 6:1-14 Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

⁶After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ²And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” ¹⁰Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”