

## Praise And Thanksgiving

Every Thanksgiving we are encouraged to pause and give thanks to God for all the blessings He has given us.

We are reminded that we are the richest country on earth, that we have the best political and economic systems ever devised by man, and that we ought to be more thankful than we are for all these splendid gifts.

And all of this is true.

But the question I would like to ask today is this: *why do we need to be reminded to be thankful?*

The dictionary defines thankfulness or gratitude as *“an appreciative awareness of benefits received.”*

Well, we know we've received many benefits, so why aren't we more *“appreciatively aware?”*

Why do we have to make a conscious effort to stop and say, *“Wait a minute: I DO have a lot to be thankful for!”*

Why doesn't thankfulness just flow naturally from our blessed hearts?

Well, if it will make you feel any better, God's people have always had a problem with being thankful.

In our *Old Testament* reading for today from *Deuteronomy*, Moses urges the Israelites to be thankful after they have entered the Promised Land God is about to give them and to remember that He is the source of all their blessings: *“When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.”*

After this gentle reminder, Moses goes on to warn the Israelites in much stronger terms what will happen if they forget to be thankful: *“Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God...when you settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied....you may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ ”*

If you should ever begin to think that way, Moses says, God's response will be devastating: *“If you ever forget the Lord your God...I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed.”*

But the Israelites did not heed Moses' warning.

They did exactly what he had cautioned them against doing: they took credit themselves for the abundance they enjoyed and forgot that it was a gift from God.

They came to believe that "chosen people" meant that they had been chosen to enjoy a privileged status in God's eyes rather than that they had been chosen to serve God as "a light to the nations," a blessing to the rest of mankind.

They concerned themselves less with the things that were important to God like justice and righteousness and thankfulness and became more and more preoccupied with things that were important to them like kids and cattle and crops.

Their hearts became fastened upon material things rather than "God-things" and they began to worship created things rather than their Creator.

There is a name for this: it's called idolatry.

Idolatry is worship of gifts rather than the Giver of gifts.

Among ancient peoples it took the form of nature worship, where living objects and other things were thought to be inhabited by supernatural spirits which they called gods.

There was a god of the fire, a god of the storm, gods of the waters and so forth.

And they worshiped these gods by offering up sacrifices to them in hopes that the gods would respond by providing them with things they wanted.

This, in a nutshell, is paganism and idolatry.

Moses had prophesied that if the Israelites ever began to worship anything or anyone other than God they would be destroyed.

But generation after generation of Israelites refused to heed that warning and so his prophecy was fulfilled centuries later when God sent the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Judea and haul the people off to Babylon as prisoners of war.

The Israelites lost everything: their country, their king, the city of Jerusalem, Solomon's temple and the sacrifices that were performed there to atone for their sins.

Such is the price to be paid by those with proud and thankless hearts.

Now just consider the contrast between the thankless Israelites and the thankful Samaritan whom Jesus healed in today's Gospel lesson.

The Samaritans were the end product of seven centuries of intermarriage between the ten northern tribes of Israel and the Assyrians who had conquered them.

They were despised by the Jews, who regarded them as "halfbreeds"—part Jewish, part Assyrian, and totally worthless

To the Jews, being partially gentile made you all gentile, and being gentile made you unclean.

If a pious Jew wanted to travel from Jerusalem to Galilee, rather than pass through Samaria, which was the direct route to Galilee, he would cross over the Jordan River and go through pagan lands in order to avoid coming into contact with Samaritans.

So it's ironic that of the ten men Jesus cleansed of their leprosy, nine "clean" Jews showed no gratitude and only the "unclean" Samaritan, came back to thank Him.

They all received the same cleansing, the same blessing, but only the unclean one had "an appreciative awareness of benefits bestowed."

Why was he alone thankful?

***Because he was aware of the extent of his own uncleanness.***

Being a Samaritan in the company of Jews, he would have been made to feel unclean to begin with.

Being a leper, he would have been an outcast and a source of revulsion to other people.

It would be hard to imagine a more isolated, reviled creature than a Samaritan leper in Israel.

He would have longed for compassion from anyone willing to show it.

To quote Bruce Springsteen: he would have had a hungry heart.

Apparently the hearts of the nine Jews who were with him were not hungry, but the Samaritan knew full well what a precious gift he had received.

In the same way, when we minimize or ignore our own sinfulness, we don't hunger for forgiveness.

And a heart that doesn't hunger and thirst for the forgiveness of sins, doesn't rejoice when its sins are forgiven.

The Israelites to whom Moses was speaking had spent forty years in the desert,

They knew what hunger and thirst were.

When they first arrived in the land of milk and honey they were thankful to God for giving it to them.

But it didn't take long for them to start taking credit themselves for the milk and honey.

They were like the farmer who was showing his pastor around his farm. The pastor kept saying, "Isn't it wonderful what God and man can accomplish when they work together?"

After hearing that one too many times, the farmer said, "Yes, Pastor, but you should have seen this place when God worked it alone."

The Israelites' gratitude for God's former gifts—delivering them out of Egyptian slavery, saving them from Pharaoh's army, feeding them for forty years on manna and quail, giving them a form of worship through which their sins would be forgiven, and leading them to a land of milk and honey—faded from their consciousness and were replaced by "Look at what I have accomplished!"

They came to believe that all the abundance the land had produced for them was the product of their own labors rather than a gift from God.

Once we crowd God out of the picture, it's amazing how proud we can become of ourselves!

Martin Luther once wrote that a person's god is whoever or whatever he trusts the most to keep him safe and make him happy, and if that "god" is not God Himself, it will be an idol.

When they were still in the desert, the Israelites found it easy to trust in God and depend upon Him for everything *because they had nothing else*.

But once they were settled in their new land and their wealth increased and their safety seemed assured, they began to trust in themselves.

They began to trust in their military strength, their king, their economy, the fertility of their land and their ability to forge advantageous trade arrangements with other countries.

As they came to trust in these things for their safety and comfort, God was crowded out of the picture.

God sent prophet after prophet to warn them that their pride and self esteem was a formula for disaster, but they ignored the prophets and even abused them.

So Moses' prophecy was fulfilled: *"...if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."*

And it came to pass, for God's Word cannot be broken and His will must be done.

And what of us?

Who—or what—do we trust the most to keep us safe and make us happy?

Our military strength? Our economy? Our form of government? Our fertile farmland? Advantageous trade agreements with other countries?

If these are the things we trust to keep us safe and make us happy then we have made them our idols and we are headed for the same disaster that devastated Israel.

The price which must be paid by proud and thankless hearts hasn't changed.

The cost of idolatry is self-destruction.

That's why we have to be reminded to be thankful.

There is a sin nature in each and every one of us which urges us to take pride in ourselves and discount what God is doing.

And it is at work in us every single day.

And pride leaves no room for gratitude and idolatry leaves no room for God.

When we ignore our sins and engage in shallow repentance we lose humility and begin to think of ourselves—or our “human potential”—as gods.

With pride and idolatry we pave the road to our own destruction.

*But if we force ourselves down upon our knees and face the fact that after all is said and done we are beggars, and if we beg the Lord to give us humble and grateful hearts, He will do it.*

And that is a gift for which we can truly be thankful.

The last words Martin Luther spoke before he died were: “We are all beggars, this is sure.”

So my advice to you—and to myself—this Thanksgiving is to get down on our knees, ask God to show us all of our sins, and to thank God from the bottom of our hungry hearts for forgiving them.

That will make this a truly great Thanksgiving!

Amen.

Father in heaven, teach us to be thankful every hour of every day of our lives. Awaken our consciences and remind us of our sins. Lead us to repentance and turn our hearts to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Then give us the joy that comes with Your grace!

Father we pray that you will be with Donna Pospisil tomorrow as she undergoes hip replacement surgery. Guide the surgeons and the other medical staff who will attend her to do their very best work and restore her to health soon.

Be with Mark Vernick as he begins radiation therapy for cancer. Give him faith and comfort.

Draw close to Cheryl Tomiselli's mother and lift her spirits, and strengthen Cheryl as she ministers to her mother.

Keep Ed Hartung safe and healthy as he adjusts to living alone.