

REMEMBER TO BE THANKFUL

Readings: Deuteronomy 8:6-20

⁶ Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him. ⁷ For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; ⁸ a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; ⁹ a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ¹⁵ He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶ He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. ¹⁷ You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

¹⁹ If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. ²⁰ Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God.

Ephesians 2:1-10 Made Alive in Christ

² As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Luke 17:11-19 Jesus Heals Ten Men With Leprosy

¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice.

¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

MESSAGE:

Every Thanksgiving we are told that we need 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, that after all is said and done we are a Christian nation, 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 naturally flow from our hearts?”

God’s people seem to have always had a problem 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 he cautions them 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 to them 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 they should ever begin to think that, Moses says, God’s response will be devastating: “*If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, 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 became proud and self-reliant and forgot about their debt of gratitude to 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 chosen to be “a light to the nations,” a blessing to the rest of mankind. And gradually, they began to worship what Moses called “their own power and the strength of their hands” rather than God. In effect,

they became their own gods. And so, over time, they concerned themselves less and less with God and more and more concerned themselves with their material well-being. As a result, many centuries later Moses' prophecy was fulfilled when God sent the great Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Judea and haul his people off to Babylon as prisoners of war. The Israelites lost everything: their temple, their worship, their city and their land. Such is the price to be paid by those with proud and thankless hearts.

By way of contrast, consider the gratitude shown by the Samaritan, the "foreigner" Jesus heals 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 hated Assyrians who had conquered them. Samaritans were despised by the Jews, who regarded them as half Jewish, half Assyrian, and altogether 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 he would go miles out of his way in order to avoid passing through Samaria so that he wouldn't defile himself by being in the company of gentiles. 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 received."

Why was the Samaritan alone thankful? All we can infer from the text is that he must have understood the value of what he had received in a way that the others did not. 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 made to feel that he was doubly unclean—not only a source of defilement to Jews but to all other human beings. It would be hard to imagine a more isolated, reviled creature than a Samaritan leper among the Jews. He must have had a terrible longing for love from anyone willing to bestow it. In other words, he must have had a heart which hungered and thirsted for cleansing. Apparently the hearts of the nine Jews who were with him were less hungry.

On the other hand, the Israelites to whom Moses was speaking had spent forty years in the desert. They knew what hunger and thirst were. I'm sure they felt a lot of gratitude toward God for bringing them to a land of milk and honey, as would we if we were in their place. Still, it didn't take long for them to start regarding the milk and honey as products of their own efforts. In their thinking, the former gifts—God's delivering them out of Egyptian slavery and His gift of the Promised Land—were commodities. And once they had adopted this way of thinking, it wasn't long before they made the lethal mistake of starting to believe that all the wealth and riches the land had produced for them, were the product of "their own power and the strength of their hands" rather than blessings from God's hand. 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 satisfy his needs, and that that "god" will either be God Himself, or it will be an idol. When they were still in the desert, the Israelites were more inclined to trust in God and depend upon Him for everything *because they had nothing else*. They had hungry hearts. But once they were settled in their new land and their wealth increased and their safety seemed assured, they began to trust in other things, things like their armies, their superior intelligence, advantageous trade arrangements with other

countries, questionable military alliances and their gross national product. These enterprises had, in effect, become their gods. In short, they had become idolaters. And so after they had ignored the warnings of prophet after prophet, Moses' prophecy was finally 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 so 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 meet our needs? Our military strength? Our superior intelligence? Our democratic system of government? Advantageous trade agreements? Our scientific knowledge? Our free enterprise economy? Our work ethic? These are all things of which we can be thankful to be sure, but if we trust them for our ultimate security and prosperity, if we trust them above all else to meet our needs and keep us safe, then we have made them our gods and we are headed for the same destiny as Israel's. The price that must be paid by proud and thankless hearts hasn't changed. The cost of idolatry is still death.

We live at a time when pride and thanklessness pervade our culture. There is a word for this: it is called narcissism, or self-worship. Many forces in our society have combined to persuade us that we are the center of our universe and that what is good for us should be our chief concern. A recent author has proposed that instead of worshipping the Holy Trinity, most Americans worship the unholy trinity of me, myself and I. A good example of this is that several years ago someone wrote a song entitled "Learning to Love the Lord is the Greatest Love of All." The song went nowhere; few people ever even heard of it. Then some marketing genius changed the title to "Learning to love YourSELF is the Greatest Love of All." Whitney Houston recorded the song and it became a megahit. One of the most overused words in the English language right now is the word, "self." We have self-awareness, self-improvement, self-esteem, self-worth, self-discovery, self-everything. We have made our SELVES rather than God the objects of our worship and the source and object of all good. And we have only ourselves to thank for it.

And this is why we have to be reminded to be thankful. Because like the Israelites we too have proud and rebellious hearts and we are incurable idolaters. And pride leaves no room for thankfulness and idolatry leaves no room for God. And when we crowd thankfulness and God out of our lives, we begin to think of ourselves—or our "human potential"—as our gods. And so 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 nothing but 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 wrote before he died were: *"We are all beggars, it is true."*

Have a blessed and Thanksgiving!

Amen.