

THANKFULNESS

Series: “7 Spiritually Healthy Habits”

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INTRODUCTION:

Thanksgiving week is upon us. As both a holiday and a 'national spirit' this concept of Thanksgiving has both been taken for granted and criticized. We've long heard the debates regarding the circumstances and realities of the earliest Colonial 'Thanksgivings.' The politics have always been contentious, and that is to be unexpected. However, the one thing most everyone could seemingly agree on was the positive value of the spirit of thankfulness. **Yet, today, even that is being questioned.** Such as:

Is an attitude of gratitude really good for humanity? Does it represent our best interests? Or is it perhaps something foisted upon us to weaken and control us? How can one honor, respect and advance oneself while crediting everything to outside influences and sources? Doesn't thankfulness, then, inhibit our own sense of self-worth, self-esteem, confidence and ambition? Does not that, in turn, unnecessarily restrain and limit the potential achievements of both the individual and collective humanity?

Friends, these are serious questions that are being increasingly asked and taught in our society – especially by our schools, counselors and philosophers. We live in a time in which it is openly being questioned whether thankfulness is really a virtue or a vice. Increasingly, the answer being propagated is that it is a handicap. This is especially and doubly true in respect to an attitude of thanks toward a 'greater power' or 'Being!'

One voice that continues to grow in volume and influence is that of the self-proclaimed atheist, Christopher Hitchens. He is probably best known for his fairly recent book, “God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.” A couple of years ago he debated Dinesh D'Souza, a fellow at Hoover Institution at Stanford University. During this debate, he negatively described Christians as people who are “*condemned to live in this posture of gratitude, permanent gratitude, to an unalterable dictatorship in whose installation we had no say.*”

Consider also the words of the retired and proudly controversial former bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, John Shelby Spong. In his book, Jesus for the Non-Religious, he contends that the traditional understanding of the cross of Christ has enslaved Christians to a condition of gratitude that has harmed them greatly. Specifically, Spong writes:

“What does the cross mean? How is it to be understood? Clearly the old pattern of seeing the cross as the place where the price of the fall was paid is totally inappropriate. Aside from encouraging guilt, justifying the need for divine punishment and causing an incipient sadomasochism that has endured with a relentless tenacity through the centuries, the traditional understanding of the cross of Christ has become inoperative on every level. As I have noted previously, a rescuing deity results in gratitude, never in expanded humanity. Constant gratitude, which the story of the cross seems to encourage, creates only weakness, childishness and dependency” (pg. 277).

Could there be truth to these comments? How are we to respond? **This morning, it is my intent to present from Scripture a defense of the positive value of Thanksgiving as not only good but necessary for our individual and corporate spiritual, emotional and societal health!**

PRAYER

To this end, let us re-examine the main questions about the impact of a spirit of thankfulness in our lives. What, truly, are its results:

- 1.) FORCED DEPENDENCY or PERMITTED LIBERTY
- 2.) WEAKNESS or STRENGTH
- 3.) CHILDISHNESS or MATURITY
- 4.) INWARD or OUTWARD

1.) FORCED DEPENDENCY or PERMITTED LIBERTY

- The modern, humanistic claim is that to be focused on thankfulness is to accept and submit to a dependency toward the object of your thanks. Therefore, they argue, it is an attitude that can only lead to slavery.
- Scripture, however, clearly teaches that we are ALL born slaves to sin and that the only path to freedom is to seek, accept and appreciate God Almighty's merciful favor!
- Jesus began His public ministry with this fulfillment of Scripture:

Luke 4:17-19 *The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him, and unrolling the scroll, He found the place where it was written: **The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.***

- After and because of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross on our behalf and the opportunity for all who believe by faith through grace to be spiritually re-born and filled with His Holy Spirit, we are further encouraged:

Romans 8:1-6 *Therefore, no condemnation now exists for those in Christ Jesus, because the Spirit's law of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. What the law could not do since it was limited by the flesh, God did. He condemned sin in the flesh by sending His own Son in flesh like ours under sin's domain, and as a sin offering, in order that the law's requirement would be accomplished in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those whose lives are according to the flesh think about the things of the flesh, but those whose lives are according to the Spirit, about the things of the Spirit. For the mind-set of the flesh is death, but the mind-set of the Spirit is life and peace.*

- We are to live with spirits of thanksgiving unto the LORD for, because of our dependence on Him, we live in true liberty!

2.) WEAKNESS or STRENGTH

- The common view and teaching of the world is that acknowledging our needs for outside help is the truest indication of personal weakness.
- Scripture, however, exclaims that the ONLY means by which we can acquire and maintain real and lasting strength is precisely through recognizing our weaknesses and gratefully accepting Christ's help and blessings as our strength!

2Corinthians 12:5-10 *I will boast about this person [Jesus], but not about myself, except of my weaknesses. For if I want to boast, I will not be a fool, because I will be*

telling the truth. But I will spare you, so that no one can credit me with something beyond what he sees in me or hears from me, especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so I would not exalt myself. Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me. But He said to me, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."** Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So because of Christ, I am pleased in weaknesses, in insults, in catastrophes, in persecutions, and in pressures. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Romans 5:1-5 Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Also through Him, we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

1Corinthians 15:56-58 Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Nehemiah 8:8-10 Do not grieve, because your strength comes from rejoicing in the LORD."

- If I were challenged to prove myself against Jeremy Bohm in a weight-lifting competition and, afraid of losing 'face', I took him on myself is there any doubt I'd lose? If, on the other hand, I exercised my right to appoint a champion to represent me in my stead and that champion was Giants' running back Brandon Jacobs what would the result likely be?
- Sure, I'd still be susceptible to all kinds of criticism about needing a champion while Jeremy did it himself, etc. But what is the actual outcome?
- **Our greatest strength and victory is when we thankfully call upon Jesus to help us and then not hesitate to give Him all the real credit!**

3.) **CHILDISHNESS or MATURITY**

- The third contention of worldly wisdom is that "constant gratitude" just produces "childishness."
- **Really?!** Let's think about this.
- How many children have you ever known who were *naturally* thankful?
- How many have you known who came into the world believing that the world owes them whatever they want?
- **Illustration:** *Too often we are too much like the little boy who was given an orange by a man. The boy's mother asked, "What do you say to the nice man?" The little boy thought and handed the orange back and said, "Peel it."*
- Is this boy demonstrating maturity by presuming a right or entitlement for which he owes nothing – even thankfulness? Or is he exhibiting childishness?
- When we call someone an 'ingrate' is that a compliment?
- Do we sometimes act the same way toward God and His gifts? . . . ouch!

Illustration: *A large family sat around the breakfast table one morning. As the custom, the father returned thanks and blessed God for the food. Immediately after, however, as was his habit, he began to grumble about hard times, the poor quality of the food he was forced to eat, the way it was cooked, and much more. His little daughter interrupted him, "Dad, do you suppose God heard what you said a little while ago when you were giving thanks?" "Certainly," the father replied a confident air. "And did He hear what you said about the bacon and the coffee?" "Of course," replied the father with a note of caution. Then his daughter asked, "Dad, which did God believe?" . . . ouch again!*

- Who, in this example, is demonstrating maturity? The man who says one thing but acts another? The one who blesses with one side of his mouth and curses with the other?

1Corinthians 2:1-7 *When I came to you, brothers, announcing the testimony of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power, so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power. However, among the mature we do speak a wisdom, but not a wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. On the contrary, we speak God's hidden wisdom in a mystery, which God predestined before the ages for our glory.*

- We may do and benefit so, because we beseech Him with humility and thankfulness.

4.) **INWARD or OUTWARD**

- The final argument of the world against thankfulness as a virtue is that it takes away from the self. To credit another, they argue, is to discredit oneself.
- If we are always looking without to give credit, how can we find, let alone bask in, our own 'strength within'?
- All of life and existence, according to evolutionary theory, is about one thing and only one thing: the survival of the individual through self-improvement as independently as possible.
- Survival of the fittest. The greatest are those who have within themselves the most ability to dominate others.
- **The world says greatness lies within the individual. Jesus, however, says that true greatness is attained only by the individual who looks and reaches outward.**

Luke 22:24-26 *Then a dispute also arose among them about who should be considered the greatest. But He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles dominate them, and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever is greatest among you must become like the youngest, and whoever leads, like the one serving.*

- You know who 'benefactors' are? John Piper pointedly describes them as: "people who don't want to say thank you to others, but like it when people say thank you to them."
- No price is too great to demand their own praise and honor. On the other hand, no price is great enough for them to give praise to another.

CONCLUSION: TO GIVE THANKS IS TO **CELEBRATE!**

Augustine from Hippo: “*The Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot!*”

John Piper: “*God wants us to grow up into mature, thoughtful, wise, humble, thankful people. The opposite is childish . . . When I am ungrateful, I am selfish and immature. When I am overflowing with gratitude I am healthy, other-oriented, servant-minded, Christ-exalting, and joyful.*” (Ganging Up on Gratitude, Nov. 21,2007).

Philippians 4:4-8 *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable--if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise--dwell on these things.*

1Th 5:16-18 *Rejoice always! Pray constantly. Give thanks in everything, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*