

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving Day so I'm going to preach on thanksgiving this morning. As I mentioned last week in the evening, I've been saving up the references to thanksgiving in verses 15-17 for this thanksgiving sermon. Thanksgiving is mentioned in each of these three verses. Verse 15, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful." Verse 16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." And verse 17, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Now Thanksgiving Day is focused on thanksgiving for the harvest and by extension on God providing for our needs and these references to thanksgiving in Colossians are not primarily about thanksgiving for the harvest. But the idea of thanksgiving in Paul's writings is very broad and would certainly include thanksgiving for the harvest and by extension all the plenty and prosperity that we enjoy. The reality is that thanksgiving for the harvest is only a small part of thanksgiving in the Bible and the biblical teaching about thanksgiving will not allow us to be too narrow in what we are thankful for. I'm not saying that there is never reason to thank the Lord for a good harvest, but like so much else in the Bible any thanksgiving to God can only be rightly understood as part of our relationship with God. Even expressions of thanksgiving in the OT for the harvest were always part of a broader thanksgiving that God had chosen Israel to be his people and rescued them from the slavery in Egypt and brought them to the promised land.

All thanksgiving in the Bible for the incredibly rich blessings of this early life, always is a subset of the larger category of thanksgiving that God is our God and that we are his people. Nothing in the Christian life is understood outside of that blessing of all blessings that God has chosen us to be his people – in NT terms that he has chosen us in Christ to save us from our sins and adopt us to be his children. Indeed if we think of thanksgiving outside of the overarching category of our saving relationship with God, it is really no different than the thanksgiving of the world.

The world can be thankful in some sense. It can be thankful without a very clear idea of who it is thankful to. I recently bought one of those inexpensive kindle deals called *Positive Psychology For Overcoming Depression*. I don't recommend it if you are struggling with depression. Ed Welch's book entitled simple *Depression* is thoroughly Christian and the best single resource that is out there. But I wanted to skim this secular book just to see if there was anything interesting and useful in it and just observe how the world deals with that subject.

Anyway, my point is that this book has a whole chapter on gratitude. Current secular advice for dealing with depression puts considerable emphasis on gratitude. The definition of gratitude in this book is "A feeling of thankfulness, wonder and appreciation for life." There is no doubt that nurturing that kind of gratitude has helped many secular people deal with their depression, but this kind of definition of gratitude is completely incompatible with biblical gratitude, because biblical gratitude is always focused on God and it is never understood apart from a saving relationship with God. If there is one thing to be said about biblical gratitude it

is that it is profoundly God-focused, but also profoundly salvation-focused so that any gratitude for the material and social blessings of this life are expressions of gratitude for specific instances of God's saving generosity to us in our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Any gratitude that is not gratitude to God is really a form of idolatry. And any gratitude from us as Christians is always gratitude for God's goodness to us in Christ because apart from Christ we are under God's wrath.

Let's review how Paul expresses thanksgiving in this letter and how he exhorts the Colossians to express their thanksgiving. In chapter 1:3-4 Paul tells the Colossians that he always thanks God for them for their faith in Jesus and their love for the all the saints. He doesn't thank the Colossians for their faith and love. He thanks God for their faith and love. That shows us how radically God-focused biblical thanksgiving is. The Colossians had believed. The Colossians were loving one another. But Paul thanks God for their faith and love and not the Colossians.

One implication of this is that any time we are blessed through other people, the ultimate object of our thanksgiving is to be God because he is blessing us through them. We see this same point made in Paul's instructions to the Corinthians regarding contributing to the collection he was organizing for the poor saints in Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians 9:11 Paul encourages the Corinthians to give generously for the struggling saints in Jerusalem by mentioning that doing so will produce thanksgiving to God. Verse 12, "For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God." This demonstrates that even when we are blessed by other people, while it is appropriate to thank them, it is even more important to thank God for the way that he has blessed us through them.

The next time Paul mentions thanksgiving in his letter to the Colossians is 1:12. In that verse he tells them to give "thanks to the Father, who has qualified [them] to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." He is talking about their salvation. He is telling them to thank God for their salvation. There is nothing that comes close to that as a reason for thanksgiving. The reason that our daily bread and our comfortable homes are such a great blessing is that they come to us as blessings from the God who has saved us and who is our loving Father for Jesus' sake. The thanksgiving that God is looking for from us is a response to his saving love in Christ so that the best thing about the blessings of this life is the love of God in them. So even if we are giving thanks for a fruitful harvest, the thanksgiving does not stop with the harvest, but sees beyond it to the love of God in Christ in the harvest. And that is the case for all of God's wonderful provision for us.

The next reference to thanksgiving in Colossians is 2:6, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." The short version is - walk in Christ abounding in thanksgiving. Paul is talking about following Christ in dependence upon Christ and growing in faith and obedience and all of that is to be characterized by abounding in thanksgiving. So as we live the Christian life – seeking to grow as Christians we are to be

characterized by abounding in thanksgiving – overflowing with thanksgiving. The whole context here is salvation in Christ. That is what Paul is talking about in this letter. The description of Jesus and what he has done for us and what he is doing in us are all reasons for us to abound in thanksgiving.

Earlier Paul had written, 1:21 “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him....” This is why we are to be abounding in thanksgiving. As we live our lives and seek to serve Christ in them, we are reconciled to God and God is at work in us to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before him. No matter what we are thankful for, this is at the core.

And so we come to the references to thanksgiving in our text. The first one in verse 15 comes right at the end of Paul’s exhortation to put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving one another, putting on love and letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. All of these things describe the kind of people that God is renewing us to be. And then, having given this exhortation he continues, “And be thankful.”

Be thankful that God is at work in you – renewing you in his image so that you are growing in these areas. Be thankful about this aspect of salvation – that it involves changing us so that we are able to grow in kindness and love and allowing the peace of Christ to dwell in our hearts. The close proximity here of the call to thankfulness to the exhortation to put on these Christian virtues suggests that thanksgiving is to motivate us to nurture these virtues and it is to characterize us as we nurture these virtues. We can also say that nurturing these virtues and exercising them is one of the ways that we express our thanksgiving to God.

One of the great truths about thanksgiving of the people of God in the Bible is that it is much more than a feeling. Remember that definition of gratitude from the secular book that I just mentioned, “A feeling of thankfulness, wonder and appreciation for life.” Certainly gratitude to God is a feeling, but it is also expressed by doing.

We see this connection in Romans 12:1 which says, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” This text does not use the word thanksgiving, but the idea is certainly present. Presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice to God is a response to the mercies of God and the sacrifice that Paul is alluding here to is a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The Heidelberg Catechism famously makes this point in its structure of guilt, grace and gratitude following the logic of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In answering the question of why we should do good works it teaches, “Because Christ having redeemed us by his blood, is also renewing us by his Spirit into his image, so that with the whole of our lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits.”

So we see how the life of kindness, humility, meekness, and patience is an important part of the way that we express our thanksgiving to God for his salvation and for all the benefits that come to us through that

salvation. Thanksgiving is certainly about feeling grateful and about expressing our gratitude, but it is also about obedience. It is also about seeking to be the kind of people God in Christ is renewing us to be. It is also about being thankful for the renewing work that God is doing in us through his word and Spirit.

Let's move on to verse 16 in Colossians 3. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." We saw last week that Paul's point in this verse is that we are to teach and admonish one another by singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We considered how we minister the word of Christ to one another by participating in singing together. In the last part of the verse Paul says that we are to do this "with thankfulness in [our] hearts to God."

What we see here is that part of the whole experience of singing together to minister to one another is thanksgiving. Of course what we are doing when we are letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly by singing is nurturing one another in love and delight in God and thanksgiving is an important part of that picture.

There is an emotional aspect to thanksgiving. This verse speaks about "thankfulness in your hearts to God." And singing contributes to that. Singing helps us feel thankful. And being in a congregation that is singing with thankfulness in their hearts to God, helps each member sing with thankfulness in their hearts to God. That is why singing is such an important part of any thanksgiving service. Of course, every service is a service of thanksgiving, but we are blessed to have services of thanksgiving for specific occasions and singing is always an important part of that.

But the point here too is that thanksgiving is an expression of worship. The text makes the point that singing has a teaching and admonishing function, but by explicitly mentioning thanksgiving in connection with singing, it reminds us that thanksgiving is an expression of worship. Praise and thanksgiving are very closely related to one another.

Thanksgiving is a form of praise and thanksgiving is always nearby when we praise the Lord. You can imagine praising God simply for who he is, but when we look at praise in the Bible, there is almost always the thought of who God is as our God and what he has done for us. God reveals himself to us in the Bible not simply as a God who exists, but as a God who has created and saved us for relationship with him and so wherever there is praise, thanksgiving is not far away.

This gets back to the God-centered nature of thanksgiving. We are thankful for things – for the kinds of things that we think about on thanksgiving day – but the nature of biblical thanksgiving is that God's grace and generosity in giving us the things is more important than the things themselves. If we are interested only in the things and not in the love and favor of God behind the gifts, that is not thankfulness but idolatry – it is worshipping the gifts rather than the giver. So thanksgiving is worship. It is delighting in God. It is praising God. It is exulting in the goodness and the power and the providence of God.

Thanksgiving acknowledges that God is the one who gives us life and breath and all things. Thanksgiving acknowledges that “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...” (James 1:17). Thanksgiving worships God as the God of providence which the Heidelberg Catechism defines as “the almighty and ever-present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty – all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.”

So thanksgiving and worship go together. Another aspect of this is that thanksgiving expresses dependence upon God. When we are thankful to God for his salvation and for all the gifts that come with that salvation, we are acknowledging that God is the giver and we are the receivers. All the things that we are thankful for, are completely beyond us to provide for ourselves. Our life comes from God. Our salvation is completely a gift of grace that we do not merit or deserve. And every good thing in our lives comes from God. Even those good things in our lives that we receive through our own efforts, ultimately come from God as well because he gives us life and strength and skills. He is the one behind any success. We are absolutely dependent upon God and thanksgiving is an acknowledgement of that.

This attitude belongs to thanksgiving and worship. Part of the way that we glorify God is to acknowledge that he is God and that we are beings that he has made, that he upholds in life from moment to moment. Thanksgiving acknowledges that we have nothing that we have not received. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:31, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Finally we consider verse 17 of Colossians 3. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, so everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” First we are to do everything that we do in the name of the Lord Jesus. To do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus is to do everything has his representatives and by his power. So everything that we do, in word or in deed we are to do as Christ’s representatives. In our work and in our conversations and in our service to the church and to the people of God – whatever we do in our lives we are not to think of ourselves as isolated people, but as followers of Jesus Christ representing him. Everything we do we do we are to do in his name. Paul says something similar when in 1 Corinthians 10:31 he says, “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

And all of that is to be an expression of thanksgiving. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” So as we do everything in our lives as representatives of Christ in service to him thanksgiving is to be going on by it and through it and with it. Just as we are to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus so we are to do everything with thanksgiving.

And this thanksgiving is to be expressed to the God the Father through Jesus. That is the language of mediation. We have access to the Father through Jesus. Jesus intercedes for us. We always pray to the Father in Jesus’s name because we are always mindful of the fact that we are sinners who can only approach the

Father on the basis of Jesus' righteousness and not our own. Our whole relationship with God is through Jesus and so our thanksgiving is also through Jesus.

Now this great emphasis on thanksgiving in this letter and in these verses is striking. Verse 15, "And be thankful." Verse 16, "with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Verse 17, "giving thanks to God the Father through him." This great emphasis and repetition is not nagging. It is a reminder to be sure, but like everything else that we are told to do as Christians it belongs to the blessedness of salvation. The life that we are called to live is the life that Jesus' died to enable us to live. It belongs to the gift of salvation. It is itself a great blessing. So Paul is reminding us to do something wonderful. Thanksgiving is not onerous. It is delightful. It is a way of delighting in God's goodness and love and it is a way of enjoying fellowship with God. It is a way of glorifying God and enjoying him.

The Psalms do not give the impression that thanksgiving is an onerous duty. Psalm 92:1, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High." Psalm 95, "Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise."

We are being told to do something that is enjoyable, delightful, pleasant, and encouraging. Thanksgiving is honoring to God, but it is also lifegiving and life enhancing for us. It is wonderful to think of God's love to us in Christ. It is wonderful to think of what it means to be forgiven all our sins and enfolded in the love of our gracious Father. It is wonderful to think of the richness of our lives and all the blessings that we enjoy and savor them as expressions of the favor that Christ has purchased for us on the cross. And it is wonderful to do thanksgiving in our lives as we seek to show our thanksgiving by seeking to please God in all that we do.

So let us heed the call to give thanks. There is so much to be thankful for. Its true that we are currently going through a hard time in this pandemic and its ramifications for our lives. Its true that in various ways we are facing hard things in our lives. Some of us are dealing with great trials. Some of us are dealing with chronic pain or inner struggles or relationship issues or sometimes just being overwhelmed with life. Thanksgiving does not mean that there are no hardships and struggles to be faced.

But thanksgiving is about things that are good and wonderful even when we struggle and suffer because it is ultimately about the love of God in Christ, salvation in Christ and the hope of eternal life and all of life viewed from that perspective. It is about being grateful to God for all of that as well as all the blessings that we enjoy even if we are dealing with hard things in our lives. May God enable us to think about all of these things today, tomorrow and every day.

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Table Meditation

Thanksgiving involves remembering. It involves bringing to mind and reflecting upon God's goodness to us in Christ. And that of course is an important theme of the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper we remember that

Jesus gave himself for our sins. We remember that he was willing to take our place and bear the wrath of God that we deserve to bear. We remember that he gives himself to us as the bread of life. We remember that he gave us the Supper to nourish and strengthen our weak faith. We remember how the Lord's Supper is the new covenant in Jesus' blood so that it seals to us that our relationship with God is covenantal – a formal relationship of oathbound commitment.

And the way we have considered thanksgiving in Colossians reminds us how thanksgiving is our response to God for all of his blessings in Christ. Certainly one of the great purposes of the Lord's Supper is to nurture our gratitude by nurturing our confidence in our participation in the salvation that is represented in the Lord's Supper. One author writing about the Lord Supper has written, "The Church ... makes a glad self-sacrifice of thanksgiving in response to Christ's sacrifice of propitiation. It is supremely in the context of the Lord's Supper that the members of the Church within the one body can present themselves in body and soul as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1)

So let us give thanks – remembering all that God has given us in Christ and delighting in expressing our gratitude to God by word, by song, and by our actions.

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament which is given to strengthen the faith of believers. It is for those who acknowledge that they are sinful and cannot stand before God on their own merits. It is for those who have believed in Jesus and are trusting in him for forgiveness and renewal even if their faith is weak. It is for those who are committed to the life of thankfulness – understanding that while we are in this life, we will always come short – but nevertheless committed to repentance and seeking to grow in the life that is pleasing to God. And as part of that commitment it is for those who are members of a faithful Bible believing church because the Christian life as the Bible presents it is always life in fellowship with Christ's church and under the oversight of elders.

The Lord invites all such to take part in this celebration of the Lord's Supper. Remember the Lord's words, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."