

Forward With Thanksgiving
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We're coming into the Thanksgiving season, so we're beginning a new sermon series today called Forward with Thanksgiving.

Have you noticed how easy it is to be ungrateful? You don't have to work hard to be ungrateful. You have to work to be grateful. It's way easier to complain than to praise.

So, we have to make an effort to be thankful people. Thankfulness is a habit that has to be developed. And thanksgiving is something you can grow in, move forward in.

There's so many "reasons" not to express thanks. So, we have to focus to be thankful for the things God has done. That's the first step in moving forward in thanksgiving.

1- GIVE THANKS TO GOD FOR HIS BLESSINGS

Since it's so easy to be ungrateful, we must do what the old song says: Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done! And when you count your blessings, God will give you more blessings to count! When you give God thanks, He will give you more to be thankful for!

David understood this. That's why he reminded himself in Psalm 103:1-5:

Bless the Lord, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies, Who satisfies your mouth with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Who is David talking to? Himself. What does he tell himself to do? To bless the Lord and forget not all His benefits. In this Psalm, David goes on to remind himself about God's benefits:

- God healed him when he was sick.
- God forgave him when he sinned.
- God brought him out of a pit and satisfied him with good things.

So, when you are down and discouraged, do what David did. Bless the Lord and remind yourself of all the good things God has done for you.

If you need a little help, the Bible tells us many reasons to be thankful. 1 Chronicles 16:34 tells us

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever.

Psalm 118:21 tells us

I will give You thanks, for You answered me; You have become my salvation.

1 Corinthians 15:57 tells us

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Aren't you grateful for that? Listen closely: grateful people do not have less bad things happen to them in life; those things just don't bother them as much.

Grateful people do not have to have great things happen in their lives in order to give thanks. They are simply grateful for what they have. They focus more on what they do have than what they don't have.

The devil will do his best to keep your mind off the blessings of God. He will constantly tell you how bad you have it, of how everything is wrong in your life. The devil knows that an unthankful Christian is a defeated Christian they've lost their joy – and joy is our strength.

You see, it's when you begin to realize how much you have in the Lord, that you will truly begin to be thankful. Thankfulness is a choice. Thankfulness is an attitude. Thankfulness is a way of life.

And by the way, thanksgiving starts in the heart, but it doesn't stop there! Thanksgiving is expressed in words and actions. Thayer's Greek Lexicon says the word used in the original Greek for thanks means "to feel grateful and to give thanks."

A lot of people say, "I'm thankful in my heart so I don't need to express it." WRONG! Yes, God wants us to be grateful in our hearts, but He wants to hear it from our mouths! Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

Jesus wants our thanks to be given. After all, the word is Thanks – Giving!

So begin to thank God for His blessings in your life. Once you develop that, move forward in thanksgiving by doing this:

2 GIVE THANKS TO GOD FOR WHO HE IS

We find the next step in this progression in Psalm 100.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture. Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name. For the Lord is good and His love endures forever; His faithfulness continues through all generations.

This Psalm shows us a deeper form of thanksgiving to God.

It's great to give God thanks for His blessings, but this goes a step beyond that. There's a place for thanking God for His blessings, but this level of thanksgiving is about who God is, not what He gives.

The focus of this Psalm is worshipping God. It shows us the progression of getting to the place of worshipping God. Usually we reduce that progression to verse 3.

Enter His courts with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise.

There is great truth here: thanksgiving and praise precede entering the presence of God. But that verse is sandwiched between 2 verses whose subject is knowing God.

Verse 2: *Know that the Lord is God.*

Verse 5: *For the Lord is good and His love endures forever; His faithfulness continues through all generations.*

We will never worship without praising. We will not praise without thanksgiving. And we will not be thankful until we understand who God is!

The Lord is God; we are not. God made us; we did not make Him. God is always good, unceasingly loving and forever faithful.

If we don't see God like that, we will never be thankful. Instead, we will be ungrateful, angry, frustrated and unhappy. We will not praise and we definitely will not worship.

We must take the time and effort to get to know God. When we do, we will become grateful. Grateful for grace and mercy. Grateful for forgiveness and salvation. Grateful for all His blessings.

If you hear anything I say today, hear this: ungrateful people do not worship. True worship starts with thanksgiving.

Having a thankful heart and expressing that thanks to God gets us into a realm of His presence that we otherwise would not enter. And when we are in that manifest presence, wonderful things happen – changes occur in us. When we touch heaven – changes happen on earth! But that change must start in us.

We must overcome ungratefulness by choosing to be grateful. Thank God for His blessings. Then go deeper and thank God for who He is.

Here's the third step in moving forward with thanksgiving:

3- GIVE THANKS TO GOD IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says:

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

The Bible teaches us that there is something to be thankful for in every situation – even in tough times. The Bible does not exempt you from being thankful in tough times! Look at the example of Christ in Matthew 26:26-29. Jesus was partaking of the last supper with His disciples. He told them that one of them would betray Him and He would be killed.

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is My body."
Then He took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."*

Now this is the Scripture we use when we take communion. For us it is a joyous remembrance of what Jesus did for us on the cross. We can be and should be grateful when we look back at that.

However, on that night – for Jesus it was very different. When He broke the bread and said, “This is my body” – He meant His physical body was about to be literally broken. When He said, “This is my blood poured out for sin” – He meant that His blood was literally going to be spilled. His life would be taken from Him. He was one day away from death. But what did He do when He took the bread and He took the cup? HE GAVE THANKS!

- At that very moment He was being betrayed, but He gave thanks!
- He was about to face a night of absolute torture, but He gave thanks!
- He was facing death by crucifixion, but He gave thanks!
- He knew everyone He loved would desert Him, but He gave thanks!
- He knew He would face separation from His Father for the first and only time in all of eternity, but He gave thanks!

He was an example of how to be thankful in all things! How is this possible to do? Notice at this level God tells us to give thanks "in all circumstances" not "for all circumstances." Philippians 4:4 says,

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice.

It doesn't say, "Be happy about your pain." It says rejoice "in the Lord!" During difficulties, you can rejoice in the truth that God loves you, that He knows what's best for you, that He is in control of the situation, that He has the power to help you through, and that He will reward you.

The ultimate test of spiritual maturity is when you can rejoice in the Lord while experiencing things that don't make sense at the moment. 1 Peter 1:6-7 says:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

So – rejoice in the fire because it’s revealing your heart!
 Rejoice in the fire because it’s building your faith!
 Rejoice in the fire because it’s purifying your motives.
 Rejoice in the fire because it’s producing character in you.
 Greatly rejoice in the fire because you’re coming out like gold!!
 Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice!

The three most famous Thanksgiving proclamations in American history were given by the Pilgrims, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. They were all given during very hard times.

- Most of the Pilgrims had died during the harsh winters and less than half were still alive for the first Thanksgiving.
- Washington’s Thanksgiving proclamation came right after the Revolutionary War when our country was struggling to get established.
- Lincoln’s Thanksgiving Proclamation came in the middle of the Civil War!

I want you to understand that the origins of Thanksgiving came from a people who believed in the goodness of God and who trusted in God even in the hard times. People who believed we should express our gratitude to God through thanksgiving and praise no matter what!

You might think you have it tough, but none of us has it as tough as those believers we call Pilgrims who started this day of Thanksgiving.
 They had no homes.
 They did not have food stamps - they had to grow their own food.
 They had no money – and if they did, there was no place to spend it.
 They had no way to communicate with family back home.
 They had no social security or Medicare or government bailouts.
 They had no hospitals or doctors.

What they had was faith in God and grateful hearts. They had an understanding of the biblical key to thanksgiving found in 1 Chronicles 16:34

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever.

The Bible is telling us that we will never be thankful until we see that God is good and no matter how circumstances may change – God never changes!
 And I’m here to testify this morning that God is good all the time!
 He was good when you were born and He’ll be good the day you die.
 He was good when you got your job and He was good when you lost it.
 He was good when He told you ‘yes’ and He was good when He said ‘no.’
 He was good when He said ‘now’ and He was good when He said ‘wait.’

If any people in the world ought to be thankful to God and grateful for his goodness, it ought to be Christians.

Now I want to talk about a level of thanksgiving that few people get to.

4- GIVE THANKS TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS

Ephesians 5 is the chapter dealing with being filled with the spirit. Verse 18 says:

Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you.

Then the Bible goes on to tell us the results of being filled with the Spirit in verses 19-21.

Then you will sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, making music to the Lord in your hearts. And you will always give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And further, you will submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Paul gives three results of being filled with the Spirit:

Spirit filled Christians sing praise to God in their hearts and among each other. Spirit filled Christians give thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Spirit-filled Christians submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Many people feel that shouting or speaking in tongues are all proofs of being "filled with the Spirit." They are, but Paul also says Spirit-filled believers sing praise, speak thanks for all things and submit to one another. Sounds simple – but try to do it without the Holy Spirit.

It's not easy to submit to others without the Holy Spirit. And it's not easy to give thanks for all things without the Holy Spirit.

Giving thanks in all things is one level of thanksgiving. But giving thanks FOR all things is quite another. Ephesians 5:20 says:

Always give thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The UBS New Testament Handbook says that in this context everything is not a reference to things but to events. The admonition is not to thank God for all the things that He has given but for everything that happens.

God doesn't expect you to be thankful for evil, for sin, for suffering, or for its painful consequences in the world.

Instead, God wants you to thank Him that He will bring good out of evil. The only way to give thanks for all things is to understand Romans 8:28

All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

This is my favorite Bible verse because it encourages me to know that God works everything that I go through for my good. But, what's my good? Well – it's to accomplish God's purpose. And what's God's purpose? The next verse shows us!

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

This is God's purpose for your life - To be like Christ!

And God's plan to fulfill His purpose is to use everything that happens in your life to conform your character to the image of Christ.

The Bible does not say that everything you go through will be good. It says that God will take everything you go through in life – the good, the bad and the ugly – and will use it to make you like Jesus – and that's good! Even what the enemy means for your harm, God will work for your good! Knowing that enables us to give thanks for all things!

What are you thankful for? If any people in the world ought to be thankful, it ought to be Christians. After all:

We've been forgiven by the blood of Jesus.
 We've been saved by the grace of God.
 We've been filled with the Holy Spirit.
 On top of it all, we've got heaven to look forward to.
 We should be the happiest people on earth!

I don't know about you – but God has been so good to me – I am so thankful – and that makes me want to shout with joy, serve with gladness, sing with thanksgiving and dance with delight!
 Can you thank God this morning!!!
 Can you move forward in thanksgiving!
 You do that by giving thanks for all He's done for you!
 Give thanks for answered prayer!

Then move forward by thanking God for who He is!
 He is love and He is gracious and He is good all the time.
 Then move forward by thanking God in all circumstances.
 Rejoice in the Lord at all times!
 Then move forward by giving thank for all things because you know that God is in control and He promised to work everything out for your good!