

“Thanksgiving: Understanding What is Good”

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday and to get us all thinking let’s take a look at what some of you said you’re thankful for...**[VIDEO: “What are you thankful for?”]**

When I think about what I’m thankful for the first thought is that I’m thankful for my wife Janet and my daughter Zoe. As we were eating dinner last week I looked lovingly into my wife’s eyes and said, “Janet, what are you most thankful for about me? My vivacious personality? My stunning good looks? My dynamic preaching?” She thought for a second and said, “No, your vivid imagination!”

On Thursday our nation sits down to eat. **[PICTURE: “Freedom From Want”]** One meal out of a whole year that’s meant to represent all that is good in our lives. One meal that represents our one moment as a nation to say thanks. It’s a meal that we can look at in different ways. In fact, here are two ways that we can view the goodness that this one meal represents...

[VIDEO: “Shenandoah,” “What About Bob”]

Surely one meal out of a year’s worth of meals really can’t begin to sum up a year’s worth of things that have been good in our lives. Good things. But what is the meaning of the word “good”? In some ways I think we’ve diluted it and good is not as good as it used to be because now there’s “great,” “awesome,” “fantastic,” “radical,” “grand,” “breathtaking,” “tremendous,” “amazing,” “super,” “extraordinary” and so on!

When you say that a movie was good, does that mean that it was the best movie you’ve ever seen? When you say that a meal was good was it the absolute best thing you’ve ever put in your mouth? How good does good have to be?

In Genesis when we read the story of creation, and throughout that story and God made one thing and then the next, God says over and over again that it is good. As God creates the light out of darkness, he sees that it is good. As God creates the earth, he sees that it is good. As God populates the earth with living creatures in the water, and in the air, and on the land, he sees that it is good. After he creates man and woman and steps back and sees the whole picture of his creation he sees that it is **very** good.

It’s interesting that good is good enough for God. But sometimes I think we overlook the good in trying to find the “great,” “awesome,” “fantastic,” “radical,” “breathtaking,” “awe-inspiring”. And sometimes good is not good enough for us. And if that happens, we begin over look the good things in life and that leads to thanklessness.

You see, we live in a time, and in place where we are literally surrounded by so many good things that we just don’t see. Blessing from a loving and giving God that we overlook because good sometimes good isn’t good enough. You’d think that having more would make us more thankful, but sometimes it makes us overlook or take those good things for granted.

Think about this, when you were a kid and saw a penny on the ground, you always stopped and picked it up. Always! Even if it was just a penny it was awesome, it was good to find. But what do you do now? In fact, did you see any pennies on the way into church today? We put them everywhere! About 2,000 of them. How many of you saw one? How many of you stopped to pick one up? Or did you just walk past? How many of you didn’t even notice them?

Kind of makes me wonder, how many of God's good things do we just walk by because sometimes good isn't good enough? Sometimes we don't see the good things, big and small, and that affects our ability to give thanks.

What I'm discovering as I move through life is that being a Christian involves certain skills. It takes time and determination to develop skills, no matter what they are, skateboarding, building, fishing, gardening, speaking, number-crunching, whatever. To get good at something, to develop skills, takes time and determination. And thankfulness is a skill too. It's training our eyes, training our hearts to see the goodness that God has provided.

It's important that we have this skill of thankfulness because if thankfulness is absent in us, it creates a vacuum, an empty space in our souls, and that empty space will be filled with something...usually anxiety, stress, bitterness...something will fill that space. One of the most famous researchers on stress, Hans Selye, he wrote this, "Among all the emotions, there is one which more than any other, accounts for the absence or presence of stress in human relations: that is the feeling of gratitude" or thankfulness. In order to have lives that are filled with peace, we need lives that are filled with thankfulness. That's just the way we're wired.

You see, real thankfulness sets a tone for our lives, it opens our eyes, it stabilizes our families, it helps put things in proper perspective. Thankfulness should be a part of our spiritual lives that we spend time cultivating. Without it we run the risk of living dry, empty, anxious lives. Giving thanks is important to our emotional and spiritual well-being.

To train in the skill of thankfulness we begin by training ourselves to **[SLIDE...] see how God has provided.** In Deuteronomy 26 we see a description of a thanksgiving meal that happened several thousand years before the Pilgrims celebrated in 1623. The ancient Hebrews were sitting down to give thanks to God for all that he had done for them. And as they did they were look at how God has provided for them. In fact as they gave thanks they were to say these words to God: **[SLIDE...] "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut 26:5-9, NIV).**

Part of this meal was a time to reflect on how God had provided for them. They were to look around and see God's goodness. How God led the Jews into a land flowing with milk and honey. That meant a land filled with the good things. But it was a long journey and a hard journey to get to the land flowing with milk and honey. They faced hardships, mutiny, battles, illness and everything else you could imagine, but God still provided. Through all that hardship they knew how to be thankful for what God provided for them.

We take a lot for granted and sometimes it's through difficulty that we see how God has provided. Sometimes hardship helps us to not take things for granted. Helen Keller once said, "I have often thought that it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his early adult life. It would make him more appreciative of sight and the joys of sound."

Senator Richard Neuberger, U.S. Senator in the late 50's, once said that the experience of having cancer changed him. Listen to this: "A change came over me which I believe is irreversible.

Questions of prestige, of political success, of financial status, became all at once unimportant. In their [place] has come a new appreciation for things I once took for granted—eating lunch with a friend, scratching Muffet’s ears and listening for his purr, the company of my wife, reading a book or magazine in the quiet cone of my bed lamp at night, raiding the refrigerator for a glass of orange juice or a slice of coffee cake. For the first time I think I am actually savoring life. I shudder when I remember all the occasions that I spoiled myself [when I took things for granted]—even when I was in the best of health...”

What are you taking for granted right now? How has God provided for you? You may have a lot in life...you may barely have enough...but have you spent time looking at how God has provided for you? Guidance when you needed it most? Something unexpected like a raise or a compliment when you needed it? A friend with a listening ear when life has given you swift kick? The laughter of children? A loving parent? A beautiful day? Hope when you least expected it?

You see, God provides...but most of the time we don’t trust that he will, so we worry and freak out. Or we don’t choose to see how he has provided for us...even in the worst circumstances.

It’s interesting, the words “think” and “thank” come from the same root word. This should remind us that thanksgiving comes from thinking about our blessings. Seeing the goodness of how God has provided.

A big part of this element of thankfulness is trust, that even in the midst of very hard stuff, God can do wonderful things. Now, I don’t believe that God makes bad things happen to us—car accidents, cancer, tragedy—but I do believe that God takes the bad stuff, and if we trust him, he makes good come out of it. In fact it’s a Biblical principle. Romans 8:28 says, **[SLIDE...]** “**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose**” (NIV). This doesn’t say that God’s going to make only good things happen in your life. But it does say that no matter what happens he will bring something good out of it.

God provides. Our job is to trust him to provide us with what we need, when we need it. And of course we know the difference between our wants and needs. God won’t always give us what we want, but his promise is to always give us what we need, when we need it. Remembering God’s providence is key to training ourselves in thankfulness.

One of the other good things that we must learn is to **[SLIDE...]** **see how God has set us free**. If you look back at that passage from Deuteronomy 26 you see how they Jews were to see how they had been delivered or set free. As slaves in Egypt they were being brutalized. They cried out to God and God heard their cry and set them free. They were to never forget how God orchestrated that freedom, that deliverance.

For us, this means remembering the times when God has set us free, delivered us from bondage of some sort. For me, I look back and see how God has set me free from fears. Fears I had for decades of my life. Fear of failure, fear of success, fear of giving myself to God, fear of not giving myself to God, fear of challenging people in their faith walks, fear of not doing that, fear of disappointing people and disappointing God. I was paralyzed and life was difficult and getting worse and I wasn’t sure that I wanted to live much longer if that’s the way it was going to be. I cried out in the middle of that slavery to fear and God set me free, he used you and friends and the power of his Holy Spirit and set me free. I am a different person because of that. You may have heard me talk about that before, but it’s important that I talk about that time in my life, because every time I remember that deliverance, it helps me to be thankful that God hears prayers and he takes action to

set us free!

There are people in this room right now that have been set free from **addictions**. People in this room who have been set free from **ways of thinking that were killing them**. People have been set free from **meaninglessness**. From **pain**. From **grief**. From **hatred**. From **envy**. From the **pain of abuse**. There are many who have been set free from **sin**.

In fact, choosing to invite Jesus into your life is the ultimate deliverance. The ultimate freedom. The Bible says in Galatians 5:1, **[SLIDE...]** **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”**

If you're here today and you're a Christian, have you thanked God recently for sending Jesus to save you? If you have been set free, remember these things. Tell the story of the things you've been delivered from to yourself and other people over and over again and you can't help but be thankful. Look and see the goodness of God's deliverance.

Not only do we look around and see how God has provided, and see how God has set us free, but we also **[SLIDE...]** **respond to the good things God has provided**. The fourth element of thankfulness this passage teaches us is that as we see the good things that God has given us, we give back to God. God has blessed us to be a blessing. He has called us to help transform lives and our community and when we see that happen it's an incredible thing! And it's a great joy to give back to God some of what he's given to us so that ministries can happen that change lives!

We give back to God because it's a way to honor him and to thank him. And when we give ourselves, our resources of time and money to God we take part in God's work and we are given a blessing in the process. James 1:17 says this: **[SLIDE...]** **“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17, NIV).**

Everything we have has come from God. And when we give, when we share from what we have, when we prioritize our lives and live within our means so that we can give back to God, there's a great blessing in that.

Because of people giving back to God through this church family there are people who were hungry that are being fed—and not just people in far-off places—people right here in our church family. Because of people willing to give back to God there are people who were lost in life who are now found. If people didn't give back to God we wouldn't have the resources to provide Sunday and Wednesday ministries for kids that will shape them for a lifetime. If people didn't give back to God we wouldn't be able to provide ministries for youth and adults that offer love, nurture, discipleship.

As we mature in our faith and develop the skill of thanksgiving, we see how God has provided for us, we remember how God has delivered us, we respond and give back to God. And then the fourth thing we do when we're training in thankfulness, when we're looking to see the good things, also comes from Deuteronomy. It says that after you've done everything else, gather together and **[SLIDE...]** **“you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household” (Deut 26:11, NIV).** Rejoice! In other words, **[SLIDE...]** **celebrate!** Celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house. God loves to party! Jesus loved to party, to celebrate the goodness of what the Lord has given and we are called, in fact we are commanded, to celebrate! So make sure that you do this week! Celebrate God's goodness! Celebrate the little things! Celebrate the big things! See God's goodness and then be ready to share that goodness with others. In fact, we have a video that might help you discover some ways to pass along the good things of God. Take a look...

[VIDEO: “Suggestions for doing Good”]

And one last thing, remember that for Christians, every day is Thanksgiving Day. Don't wait until the fourth Thursday in November, there's just too much to be thankful for...way too much! And for today that is the Good News! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.