

The King Summons God's People to Give Thanks

1 Chronicles 16:34
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Thanksgiving Day has become almost an orphan holiday. It gets lost between Reformation Day and Christmas. For many people, it has no special meaning. It's just a day off, an opportunity to watch football, gather with family and friends, and overstuff our bellies. Some people say what they're thankful for, but few acknowledge who gave them the things they enjoy. That's because they're not really thankful to anyone, except perhaps themselves, the universe or their "lucky stars," because ingratitude is the heart of all sin. It's the most natural response of unbelief.

But as God's people, we should be, more than anything else, a thankful people. We acknowledge that everything we are and everything we have comes from a God who loves us so much that he sent his only begotten Son to the cross to save us from our sins. Thus, the third part of our catechism isn't about obedience or service, even though it explains the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, but thankfulness. Gratitude is more basic than either obedience or service because it's the motive behind both. Why do we obey the Lord? Why do we serve him? Why do we walk in his grace day after day? It's because we're thankful.

So, this year I want to make much of Thanksgiving. Today we'll examine the reason for it from David's psalm in 1 Chronicles 16. Next week, we'll look at how this reason intersects with our daily lives. The principle here is simple: those whom God forgives much love much. And the Sunday immediately before Thanksgiving Day, we'll talk about the practice of thanksgiving, which involves a lot more than a one-day annual celebration. The Word of God tells us to give thanks in everything. We'll consider what this means.

David and the Ark

Our text for this morning is just one verse, but it's a verse rich in meaning. Its context tells a wonderful story of thanksgiving. After a few missteps, King David eventually brought the ark of God back to Jerusalem and placed it in a tent next to his house. The return of the ark, which symbolized God's presence among his people — the Immanuel principle (God dwelling among his saints), gave everyone such tremendous joy and hope that they expressed their gratitude by offering burnt sacrifices and peace offerings to the Lord. Their burnt sacrifices symbolized the forgiveness of their sins by blood atonement, and their peace offerings celebrated the resulting restoration of their

fellowship with God. Afterward, David blessed the people and showed his own gratitude by giving each person a loaf of bread, a good cut of meat and a bottle of wine.

During this celebration, David also gave a psalm to Asaph to teach to the people. His psalm reflects parts of several other psalms, including Psalms 96, 105, 106 and 107. And our text for today — 1 Chronicles 16:34 — appears almost verbatim in Psalms 106, 107, twice in 118, and 136. Each time it's exactly the same three clauses: a call to worship (*O give thanks unto the LORD*) and two reasons to worship (*for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever*).

David's psalm in 1 Chronicles, and all the other psalms that reflect it, expect God's people to express their thankfulness verbally. We must acknowledge God's superabundant generosity. Just consider a few verses with me. David's psalm begins by calling us to *make known [God's] deeds among people* (v. 8) and to talk of *all his wondrous works* (v. 9). It calls Israel to review God's goodness to his people in verses 13 and following. Then, in verse 23, the psalmist calls *all the earth* to sing his praises. His glory should be declared among the heathen (v. 24). And when all of this is done, God will be worshiped in the totality of his glory and power and holiness. Everyone will know that he rules over all and judges all.

I particularly like the end of verse 29, which calls us to *worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness*. But we might wonder what the beauty of holiness is? Is it a special characteristic of God's holiness that deserves special attention? Not really. Sometimes the word of functions almost like an equal sign. *The sign of circumcision* (Rom. 4:11) is not something other than circumcision or even a characteristic of circumcision; it's circumcision itself. And when Paul talks about *the breastplate of righteousness* (Eph. 6:14), the breastplate that guards us is nothing less than the glorious imputed righteousness of our Savior. In 1 Chronicles, the beauty of holiness is God's holiness. It's the fact that he's distinct from everything else. Everything else is created. It exists only because God willed it to be. But God is the uncreated creator of all things. He makes everything what he wants it to be. The beauty of God is the absolute holiness that makes us stand before him in awe.

Giving Thanks

Now, let's look specifically at verse 34. This verse starts by summoning or commanding God's people to give him thanks.

But if giving thanks to God is the motivation behind all our obedience and service, why does he have to command us to do it? We could say the same thing about the fourth commandment — sanctifying the sabbath. The Lord made us to glorify and enjoy him forever, so why do we need a

special command to observe every seventh day? In fact, we could ask the same question about any or all of God's commandments.

Both Scripture and our experience give us the right answer. We need the frequent commands of Scripture to do what we already know we should do precisely because we don't always do it. How often do we grieve the Holy Spirit even though the Bible tells us not to, even though the third person of the Trinity does such a wonderful work in our lives? How often do we prioritize other things over Lord's Day worship? We would rather spend time with family, go on fun outings, or do just about anything else. How often do we fail to give thanks to God? We might thank him when we're happy, but do we thank him when we're sad? We might thank him when our freezers are full, but do we sing his praises when we have nothing at all? As far as this goes, do we always thank him when we're happy and have plenty? Probably not. He blesses us in more ways than we acknowledge.

Giving thanks to the Lord shouldn't be an oppressive or burdensome thing to do. If we're truly thankful, gratitude should be the natural response of our hearts to his goodness and mercy.

God is Good

After calling us to give thanks to the Lord, David gave us an excellent reason for it. He wrote, *For he is good.* God is good, isn't he? How could we ever think otherwise?

We often say that God is good. We usually say it when he does something we like — when he opens the door for us into an elite college program, or moves our girlfriend to accept our marriage proposal, or heals a loved one who unexpectedly recovers from a serious illness. Yes, God is good in all these things and we should give him the thanks he deserves. But sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that God is good *only* when he does things we think are good. We may not say it, but we forget his goodness when things don't go our way. But isn't God good even in our worst circumstances? Isn't he good all the time, regardless of how much pain and suffering his providence brings into our lives?

Louis Berkhof gave us a helpful insight about all of this in his *Systematic Theology*. He wrote,

The goodness of God should not be confused with His kindness, which is a more restricted concept. We speak of something as good, when it answers in all parts to the ideal. Hence in our ascription of goodness to God the fundamental idea is that He is in every way all that He as God should be, and therefore answers perfectly to the ideal expressed in the word "God."

Berkhof's point is that we don't define God's goodness by what he does for us. It's what he is — always and unchangeably. He's good because he's everything that he needs to be. He's absolute perfection and, therefore, should also be our highest enjoyment. And this means, among other

things, that he knows what's best for us and for everything else he's made, and he always does what's best, whether or not we think it's best. This is what the Bible teaches. Psalm 145:9 says, *The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.*

When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, I can't imagine he thought it was a good thing. He probably wondered why God allowed it to happen. But years later, he came to see that God was working through his miserable circumstances to accomplish things far more amazing than he ever imagined. The Lord used his brothers' sin not only to save his family from famine but also to guarantee that Abraham's seed — the Lord Jesus Christ — would be a blessing to all the families of the earth, just as God had said. Joseph said to his brothers, *But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive* (Gen. 50:20).

Yes, God even works through men's sins. He works in our sins, the shortcomings of our faith and our tragedies. He's good even when nothing else in our lives seems good. He's good when we lose our jobs, when a loved one dies and when our health fails. Why? Because in all these things, he displays his glory and power and wisdom in how he works his grace in our lives. He's constantly showing us what kind of God he is to us.

His Mercy Endures Forever

David gave a second reason to give thanks to God at the end of our text. He said that God's mercy endures forever. There's no end to it. It never runs out. But why do we need to know that God's mercy endures forever? Why do we need a mercy that endures forever?

The answer to these questions is that our sins are greater than we know. Jeremiah wrote, *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?* (Jer. 17:9). We can't know the extent of our own depravity because it always lies to us. Our catechism reminds us that every sin we commit is an offense against the most high majesty of God. It's not just that we misuse and waste God's gifts, which we do, or that we injure one another, which we also do far too often. Rather, our sins are cosmic insurrections against everything that God is. We fight against his authority and kingdom and right to reign over us. We resist what is good and pursue what is evil. Our sins couldn't be worse.

And because our sins are so bad, each one — even those we consider minor — deserves everlasting punishment of body and soul or unending death. But God gives us mercy instead. He's merciful when he doesn't deal with us according to what we deserve, but according to what Jesus did in our place. Paul described God's mercy in Romans 5 when he wrote, *For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die:*

yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (vv. 6–8).

We need a mercy that endures forever so that Jesus' atonement will always be there to cover our sins. We need a lasting mercy because, if it were ever to expire, we'd have no hope.

God's enduring mercy is found only in Jesus Christ. He's our eternal high priest, having made one sacrifice for sins forever. Hebrews says, *By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God (Heb. 10:10–12).* Jesus is our propitiation, appeasing God's wrath toward us and causing his face to shine upon us once again. In him, we have everything we need. The burnt offerings David offered when he returned the ark to Jerusalem were a faint shadow of Jesus' offering of himself. David's peace offerings prefigured the glorious restoration of fellowship with God through his Son, which is now consummated in the marriage supper of the Lamb.

If you want reasons to thank the Lord, you can't do better than today's text. God is good by nature and his mercy extends forever to everyone who comes to him through Jesus.

Thanksgiving isn't a day. It's not an activity that we engage in once in a while. For believers, it's a way of life. It's the reason we live in joyful submission to God and his Word. It's a confession of our faith. Thanksgiving is more than what we do. It's what we are. If the Lord has redeemed us by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, we must be a thankful people — thankful for all the temporal blessings God gives us, thankful for our great salvation in his Son, and thankful that God made himself known to us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We should be thankful that we belong to him now and for all eternity. Amen.