

Offering Thanks in 2016
January 3, 2016
Brian R. Wipf

I'm curious to know how many of you were told this Christmas to say "Thank you" for a present you got; or how many of you had to tell somebody to say "Thank you?" "Tell your grandmother 'Thank you' for your present!" I have another question: I'm wondering how many of you didn't want to say thank you? You really didn't like what you got. Maybe you got a cookbook from your mother-in-law and you're thinking, "What's *this* supposed to mean!? See, I knew she never liked my cooking."

I want to encourage you this morning to step into 2016 with a renewed desire and intention to be thankful. The longer I live the more aware I am of how important gratitude is. But not for the reasons so many of us say thank you or encourage (or even demand) our children say "thank you." Oftentimes, saying thank you is about having good manners; we want to be polite. Of course, having good manners is a good thing to do; and it's also right for us to teach good manners to our children. But it's not the glue that holds society together like the 20th century philosopher Kramer said it was; saying thank you just to have good manners is a pretty low bar. And if we're honest, sometimes we want our children to say "thank you" because we think it makes us look like good parents (now that's a pretty selfish motivation, right? I want my kids to say thank you so other people think I'm doing a great job parenting... yikes!). I really want my kids to say thank you (and I want to be the kind of person who regularly says thank you... and I want you to be a person who gives thanks) because of something much more important and significant than having good manners.

Gratitude is not something you can will; it's not something you can force. You can make your child say thank you to grandma for a gift they are thoroughly unimpressed with, but that doesn't mean they really are thankful. And you can't will this in you. 1 Thess. 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances," but when we're struggling with chronic pain in our back, when we're on our second round of chemotherapy, when our health insurance premiums keep going up, it's pretty hard to be thankful. True gratitude is a spring of joy that spontaneously erupts like Old Faithful that doesn't need to be commanded. Gratitude is the expected result of a heart that's full of joy and without that joy there will be no thanks.

But gratitude is commanded. Give thanks in all circumstances; Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name. Do it! This is a command. So, how does this work? How do we obey a command that we can't grit our teeth and do? It seems like an impossible situation. That's why we're going to talk about it today so our 2016 is one fill with joy that overflows in gratitude. Let's read Ps. 138 (READ).

In the scriptures, we see that giving thanks to God is synonymous with praising God. Vs. 1 let's us know this; it says, "I give thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise." Psalms is filled with parallelism; parallelism is a literary device writers would use to

emphasize their point. A writer would write two different, but similar phrases in parallel to emphasize one point. In vs. 1 giving thanks to the Lord is put in parallel with singing songs of praise. We see this in other places, too. Ps. 69:30 says, "I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving." What a cool thought; I will showcase how great God is (that's what magnify means) with my expressions of gratitude; and that is what it looks like to praise him.

That being the case, I would argue there's always a joy that's accompanied in thanksgiving. There's emotion. Saying "thank you" with a dry, unmoved heart falls short of true gratitude. I give thanks because I'm glad. Now, don't hear "glad" and think "time of my life" kind of happiness. There's a *Yaaa! I'm at the carnival!* kind of happiness, and then there's a gladness, a joy, a happiness that says *I'm so glad God hasn't left me* when your spouse dies. The phrase "joyful contentment" gets at that second kind joy I mentioned. And in addition to this, locating or defining the object of your gladness is important to. So, you're in the hospital and you're getting another round of chemo. Well, certainly you're not glad about the pain, the sickness, the fatigue this poison that's meant to save is doing to you. But you can be glad in God; you can be glad in his provision of medicine; you can be glad and thankful that in the Coming Age there will be no more pain or grief or death because the former things will be no more. You can be glad that the pain is training you to hope in God. Being glad or joyful doesn't mean you're thrilled about everything happening; but what it does mean is that which is good takes the prominent place in your heart and mind instead of what's wrong, which leads to grumbling.

Notice that hard times did not stop David's gratitude and joy. The word "thanks" is mentioned 3 times in this short psalm; clearly it's a major theme. But this gratitude exists during hard times. David highlights his own trouble in vs. 7; "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me." Notice the way he frames his trouble in the first phrase; "Though I walk in the *midst* of trouble." He's in the thick of it, FBC. He's not reminiscing; he's not looking back and seeing God's deliverance and faithfulness years later. Do you know how that works sometimes? After a hard year or two and after receiving some grace we can look back and see the fingerprints of God in our lives in hindsight when we couldn't see it during the fire. But David's is in the midst of the trouble; "I'm walking in trouble right now," he says. I have these enemies that are attacking me. Still, he finds reasons to praise and thank the Lord in that place.

I'm curious: did you walk through a lot of trouble in 2015 and is it still here as you begin the New Year? Are you more discouraged than encouraged about what the future holds? You can have a heart of praise and thanksgiving. I know this might come across as trivial compared to what some of you are dealing with, but I'll share something from my own life. I'm not one who feels overwhelmed often. I take pride in my ability to get things done; I joke, "Ah, these shoulders are broad, so heap it on." But I've felt overwhelmed as I consider my responsibilities in 2016. There's so much to do and I feel I have so little time and energy to get it all done. And I'm tempted. I'm tempted to grumble. I'm tempted towards impatience. I'm tempted to give up or

imagine the grass is greener on the other side. Think about those responses: Complaining. Impatience. Self-pity and fantasizing about a different life. Those don't really fit with gratitude, do they? Maybe you're tempted toward fear and anxiety; maybe you're tempted to escape. We all have our own temptations, don't we, when we are walking in the midst of our trouble? But what I want to have and what I want you to have is gratitude; so where do we get the heart to be grateful?

The answer is in seeing. Seeing the greatness of God, seeing his deliverance, seeing his kindness and seeing his purposes. Throughout this psalm David highlights what he knows or sees about God. And what David sees (even in the midst of trouble) causes him to rejoice in thanksgiving to the Lord.

But the vision to see the greatness, deliverance, kindness and purposes of God is a choice. It's the result of a decision he's making. And this is where the obedience to the command starts for David and for us to give thanks to the Lord. We can't give thanks to the Lord when all we see is trouble; when all we see are our attackers coming against us with great wrath. When all you see and hear and feel is your chronic pain, when the only messages you hear are the ones of defeat and despair from your depression, when all you see are your addictions staring you right in the face you can't thank God... you won't.

But the lie of Satan in those moments is that there's nothing else than your pain, nothing else than your despair and fear and trouble. And you have a choice in that moment: will you believe that lie? Will you say, "That's right! Look how terrible life is! Look how unfair; look how difficult!" like that's all there is or will you, with the eyes of faith, say, "But there's more. God is greater than my trouble; God's deliverance will see me through; God is kind, even now; God has a purpose in this." If you choose to see with the eyes of faith more than your trouble, more than your inconveniences and circumstances than you can rise above the grumbling and complaining and be thankful. But it's a choice, friends. It is a decision of faith; it's you looking into the perfect Word of God, telling you the reasons to be thankful and believing those truths and promises more than the lies of the Evil One and the worldly passions of your flesh.

Have you noticed how I keep referring to God's greatness, deliverance, kindness and purpose? I'm not making that up; I'm getting that from the text. Let me show you

- David sees the greatness of God when he says in vs. 2, "I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word." To be exalted is to be lifted high as great. Also, vs. 5, "and they shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord." See the greatness of God, FBC.
- David highlights the deliverance of God in vs. 3 and 7; vs. 3, "On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased." You came through, God, when I looked for you. Then in vs. 7 we read, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your

right hand delivers me.” In this world, you will have trouble, FBC. But God graciously delivers. Do you believe he will?

- God is also kind to us in our trouble. Vs. 6, “For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar.” Why? Why would he regard the lowly? Why would he give special treatment to us in our miserable condition? Because he’s kind.
- Finally, God has a purpose for your trouble and suffering; there’s a purpose for your struggles. Vs. 8 says, “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me.”

God is greater than your troubles; God delivers you through your troubles; when your circumstance knock you down God kindly lifts up you; and, finally, God has glorious, mysterious, eternal purposes in mind as he ordains the troubles and circumstances you encounter in life. Friends, I want to submit to you that we have much to be thankful for if we only would look and proceed in life with the eyes of faith.

The question for us is this: what do we believe? Will you believe what you see, hear, touch, taste and smell - that which you can observe in the natural world with your five senses? Will you arrogantly and pridefully proclaim that you can see all that needs to be seen and angrily complain that life is unfair? Or are you a follower of Jesus? Are you someone who believe the words of God are more certain than what you can observe yourself? Will you make the decision today and all the days to come in 2016 that you will look at this world and to God with the eyes of faith so that you might sing the praise of God and give thanks to him in all circumstances? This is really what we’re talking about? Who are you, my brothers and sisters?

You know, I wish I could come up with a few success stories from my own life. There’s not a lot that comes to my mind I’m ashamed to say. But I guess that confirms what we all know; that this is a challenge. It’s hard. This doesn’t come naturally without the help of God. But this is what Jesus died to do for us. He died to give us a new heart and a new spirit so that we could see what we’ve never seen before; that God is worthy of endless songs of praise and thanks and when we proceed in faith we’ll be able to gladly give them.

Key Verse: Ps. 138:1 ~ I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise.

Questions for the week

- Does “giving thanks in all circumstances” feel impossible? Why or why not?
- Why is it hard to look past your troubles and see God’s provision of grace?
- What do you see with the eyes of faith that you don’t see otherwise?