

## “Think BIG About Thanksgiving”

Hebrews 12:28

11/22/09

**Give thanks for all things. And no matter what size your table, remember that God has filled it with an abundance of unshakeable things.**

Thursday is Thanksgiving.

No doubt we have heard and will hear a lot of thoughts as to what Thanksgiving is and what it should include. I’m sure you can pull up those images in your head now. Many of them include a big feast, big table, big family, big turkey, and big stomachs. We know those.

**[Thanksgiving 703525 image]**

And so this morning I too want to invite us to think BIG about Thanksgiving, but in a much different way.

The Bible talks a lot about giving thanks. We hear it this morning in Hebrews. We know some of the other scriptures we’ve heard:

1 Thessalonians 5:18: *“Give thanks in all circumstances.”*

Philippians 4:6: *“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”*

Psalm 100:4: *“Give thanks to Him and praise His name.”*

In Luke 17:11-19, we read of Jesus healing ten lepers. Verse 15 says, *“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked Him.”*

Then Jesus asks, Where are the other nine?

Yes, we hear a lot about giving thanks to God. And just like other things, when God talks a lot about it, we better pay attention. Which also always means that we always have room to grow. Just like anything else your teacher or parent or God repeats to you over and over, thanksgiving is one of those things that takes time for us to learn and grow into.

What do I mean? Well, as we are already getting the picture, thanksgiving is much deeper than giving the thumbs up to God: “Thanks dude!”

We tend to go in stages of thanksgiving. I like to say,

**When you give thanks, think BIG.**

Our first stage of thanksgiving is:

**Blissful: centered on the bliss of the moment, not really thinking too much about where God is in all of it.**

This is kind of the entry-level thanksgiving. This blissful stage I relate to when we are young and don’t yet have a real deep understanding of all that is going on around us. And to be sure, this doesn’t happen only with young people—we can get stuck at any of these stages for sure.

When I was young my family got together with all my extended family. It was, for me in my limited understanding, quite Norman Rockwell-ish.

**[Norman Rockwell image]**

For many years we went to my grandparents’ home, but then spent many Thanksgivings at my aunt’s home after my grandfather passed away.

We would walk into their house and immediately smell the delicious aromas—all the components of your classic Thanksgiving meal.

My uncle and cousin were big into football, so there was always a game on. That's where I place the blame of being a Dallas Cowboys fan. Wait, no, the *bliss* of being a Dallas fan!!!

The table was large, full of all the goodness you would expect, and some of which I didn't appreciate back then, like red beet eggs and lima beans.

We gathered around and ate and talked and after the meal my cousins and I would go off and play games as we continued to pick at all the food.

Blissful. I don't want to say there is no depth to this stage of thanksgiving, because I really did love to be there with my family. But it was more centered on the bliss of the moment, not really understanding the deeper things going on with everyone there, nor really thinking too much about where God was in all of it.

That's where many people exist in life. They gather on Thanksgiving and are thankful, but kind of thankful in general—to no one or nothing in particular. As I heard someone say once, that's like being married in general. It doesn't really make sense.

And then, some move into the next stage of thanksgiving, a little deeper and little more awareness, but still pretty much:

**I-centered: Centered on self-gratification.**

This stage of thanksgiving goes something like:

“Thank You God for all I have. And as I look around me, God, at all those people who have very little, thank You that I am not like them.”

**[089 image]**

I-centered—just looking at your own feet.

You could say that the nine lepers Jesus' healed that did not return to give thanks fall into this category. They were happy they were healed, and knew who it was that healed them. They went to Jesus after all. But off they went once they got what they wanted.

I-centered.

Back to my family Thanksgiving image. As I got older, single, living on my own and pretty much for myself, I had a whole different outlook on our gatherings. I liked where I was in life—able to do whatever I wanted, starting to figure out who I really was and wanted to be.

In 1994 I was living out west in Arizona and came back for the holidays. I was thankful for my family and that we could be together. I was thankful for the food I had in front of me, since I hadn't eaten a real meal in many months.

But I still pretty much stayed there. “Thank you God for all this, and thank you God that I have my ‘freedom’ to do whatever I want.” In the back of my mind thinking (yes God, not like some of my family here who are ‘tied down’ with real jobs and responsibilities).

Now, this stage isn't all bad. You begin to at least recognize from whom our blessings flow. It certainly is good to be thankful for what you have. But it kind of stops there. There's not much outward activity going on to others. And, when the stuff we have goes, so goes our gratitude.

**In this stage, our thanksgiving is pretty much based on our circumstances.**

Well, okay. So what's the point of all this? This is Thanksgiving, when we're all supposed to feel good and happy and look forward to Thursday, right?

That's just it. As I pondered the message for this morning, the reality can be that this is sometimes one of the most difficult messages to prepare. Because not all people are looking forward to Thursday. For some, it can be a painful time, remembering loved ones lost, or

dealing with broken relationships, or facing the reality that they don't have enough to put much at all on the table, if there is a table to put it on.

We sit here, I know all of us dealing with the realities of life—illness, loss, stress, you name it.

As I got a little older and, praise the Lord, now have a family of my own, I began to understand that behind the Norman Rockwell image of my early years with my family there was always a “backstage”.

Now I can think back to those days when I was young, sitting around the table with all the great stuff before me, and I know that not all the relationships were perfect—in fact, none were.

I know that my Grandma sat there with us, fresh with the pain of losing her husband. My mom and her sisters fresh the pain of losing their father.

I know now of some of the personal struggles some of my family were dealing with.

I now know and understand that my parents and all the other adults went back to work Monday morning, working hard to make their way in life.

Things were far from perfect. And yet, thanks be to God, I now can look at my Grandma as an example of what Thanksgiving really means. Because, even in the midst of her pain, she remained a pillar of faith, living in true, unshakeable joy, and continued to serve as long as she was able.

It's the stage of thanksgiving God has created us to live within each and every day. Remember, think BIG: Blissful, I-Centered, and finally reaching:

**God-centered: the deep awareness that God has done something amazing here.  
[any cross image you have]**

This is the kind of Thanksgiving God desires we live from. In receiving His unshakeable kingdom—the power and presence of Jesus' Life—we turn back to Him as the one healed leper did, praising Him with all we are.

**God's kingdom--the power and presence of God here and now--cannot be shaken.**

The Kingdom of God. Jesus came to us and declared that the kingdom of God has come. He is here, in all His resurrected glory and transforming power.

Power to heal our wounds. To shine His light into our darkness. To forgive us and set us free from living for just ourselves. To make us His children, as part of God's family, that all know love and are part of something that will never be taken away. Living in His kingdom is living now in peace, in abundance of His grace and the fruit of His Spirit.

**Whatever table you sit at, no matter how big or small, modern or antique, fancy or simple, full or empty, we all sit at God's table in His kingdom.**

*“We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.”*

As verse 27 says, what can be shaken is all created things. All the things of this world—the earthly tables we set for ourselves—can and will be shaken. They will come to an end. They will pass away.

But God's kingdom cannot be shaken. And around His table we sit to give thanks—this day and for all time.

**God-centered thanksgiving is a giving of ourselves to God,**

knowing that all the rest of the stuff of this world is secondary. Not unimportant or somehow wrong. I am thankful for food, for my house, for football and fun things. There's nothing wrong with that.

Just don't get stuck there. Get deep into God. Put your life into He who is unshakeable.

And when we do, it brings our focus off of ourselves and onto the hurting world around us, seeing once and for all that we are all in this together and all the same.

The author Fleming Rutledge writes:

“The life of thankfulness—biblically speaking—is lived in view of the hard things of existence. As the life of thanksgiving deepens, we discover that the more mature prayers of thanksgiving are not those offered for the obvious blessings, but those spoken in gratitude for obstacles overcome, for insights gained, for lessons learned, for increased humility, for help received in time of need, for strength to persevere, for opportunities to serve others.”

*Fleming Rutledge, The Bible and The New York Times (Eerdmans, 1999)*

Because you see, as I got a little deeper into life and away from merely thanking God that I was not like “those others” who didn’t have what I had, God helped me to see that I am just like all of “them”. Yes, I am thankful that I have enough to eat and a house and many comforts. But all of that can be gone tomorrow.

And no matter what I have compared to my neighbor, we are all the same—fragile people who need love, hope, peace, and the knowledge that there is a kingdom that will never be shaken.

So now my thanksgiving still shows signs of self-centeredness. But God has helped me to grow into a gratitude that knows it is only by His grace I am here. And because of that grace given to me, my thanks becomes a giving of all I am to Him.

Together we will sit around the table today. I hope you join us. Amen.