

Toward True Thanksgiving

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Bible Text: Ephesians 2:1-10
Preached on: Tuesday, November 22, 2016

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It's a wonderful time to gather together this evening. This is one of my favorite services of the entire year when we gather together on Thanksgiving week and specifically just to devote ourselves to the Lord's table and to being able to remember Christ and being able to remember his death and his shed blood on our behalf; such a simple time in some respects but so profound in its meaning. You know, one of the things that I really wanted to just be able to communicate with you this evening and to just kind of impress home with the simplicity of the text that we've chosen for tonight, is that as Christians we are celebrating and remembering and giving thanks for far more than material prosperity. That's really secondary in our thinking, far more than food, far more than family, far more than friends, as much as those are graces from God in our lives, no, we are grateful preeminently for the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what matters to us. That is what stirs the deepest strings of our heart. That is what calls forth the deepest reverence, the deepest thanks that we have is to remember Christ and to remember that deep deep love of Jesus which motivated him to go to Calvary in order to give his life for our sins. That's what we want to remember here this evening. In speaking about Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 9:15, he said, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" Paul was full of gratitude as he remembered Christ and recognizing that Christ was a gift from God to us; that there we were in our sin, in our lostness, in our judgment, dead with nothing to recommend ourselves to God, and in love, in grace, in unspeakable kindness, the Lord Jesus Christ came to earth and offered himself up as a sacrifice that salvation might be given to us as a gift.

I hardly need to remind you but it's always good to repeat such basic things, it was not your good deeds that put you right with God. It was nothing that you did. Salvation was not your idea. Being in a love relationship with the King of glory was not something that you wanted. It wasn't your initiative. The mind set on the flesh is at enmity with God, Scripture says. No, the fact that we are here tonight as Christians, those of us that know Christ, the fact that we are here secure in Christ with our sins forgiven, with an objective peace with God, all of our sins washed away never to be brought to bear against us anymore, that we are on the receiving end of the love of Christ and we have a secure salvation that will never be taken away from us, the fact that we have been loosed from the domination of Satan, the fact that we no longer face the judgment of God, the fact that we are no longer afraid of death, all of that is a gift from a gracious God to us. So we remember that tonight with thanksgiving. We remember that with a sense of gratitude and

at the end of the service we will be able to culminate that thanksgiving with the means that the Lord has appointed for us to remember him by. And so tonight we set everything else aside and come with gratitude and with a sense to sharpen our sense of gratitude even more clearly as we remember the salvation that God has given us. In the simplest of terms this Thanksgiving, we thank God for our salvation and everything else fades by comparison.

Well, what is it that will move your heart toward true thanksgiving as we contemplate these things? Well, go back to Ephesians 2 for our text this evening. We're just going to treat this passage in a very simple overview fashion but just to stir you up by way of remembrance, just to awaken the slumbering cords of your gratitude for Christ, to remember afresh what it is that we celebrate when we come to the Lord's table, how can you prepare your heart to be thankful? First of all, look back. Look back. And I speak to Christians tonight. Oh, those of you that aren't in Christ, of course we invite you to listen in but tonight we are speaking as a Christian to Christians and I invite you to remember where you came from, not geographically, not in your ancestral lineage but remember where you came from spiritually; remember where you were at one time in the past and remember that dead and lost condition.

Look at the first three verses of Ephesians 2. I realize they are familiar verses and to be honest with you, that is in part why I chose them. I wanted something familiar so that you would be able to be able to concentrate especially on your heart response as we consider familiar truth together tonight. Paul, as it were, looks back and talks about the former life of the believers to whom he was writing and he says in verse 2, remember and he says,

1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Christian, as you sit here tonight, don't you have a sense of gratitude that you are not who you used to be? Oh, I realize that you're not all that you could be. I realize that you're not all that you will be one day when you are glorified in heaven and you are in the presence of Christ and that will be a glorious day when we are with him free from everything of this life and loosed from the bonds of earth and sin and Satan and free to worship him forever. We'll get to that maybe in a moment but for now I would just invite you to remember the way that you were, what you used to be: dead in sin, a lover of sin and a hater of God, someone who was enslaved to the sinful way of thinking, maybe sinful philosophies, maybe sinful conduct, but you were in a bondage that you could not get yourself out of. It was dark and you were profane and you were arrogant and you were boastful and somehow, some way God brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to you and awakened your mind to the fact that you were in a lost condition under his judgment, and moved your heart in a way that you gladly responded to Christ, gladly received a Savior in order to be cleansed from sin, in order to be made new. Look back and remember what

you used to be back in your former enslavement to Satan, doomed to suffer the wrath of God and why would you be grateful tonight? Why would you be thankful? Why do we contemplate Thursday on the American calendar a day of thanksgiving and why would you give thanks? And why would you give thanks to God in particular? Because God didn't abandon you to that former way of life. God didn't allow you to sink into the quicksand and be smothered and swallowed up in your sins. While you were still living, while there was still time, God reached down and had mercy on you and delivered you from that dark condition and showed favor to you. Why are we thankful? We remember what our Lord Jesus said about his own Incarnation. He said in Luke 19:10 in the story of Zacchaeus, he said, "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

So there you were, Christian, lost in the deadness of sin with your fingers, as it were, in your ears refusing to hear and yet God overlooked all of your sin, in a sense. God looked past that. God gave you grace where judgment was rightfully due and he didn't abandon you to your sin and to the judgment that was rightfully yours. Isn't that grounds for thanks? Don't you look back and remember what you were and remember that God saved you in the midst of that and doesn't that bring forth a sense of gratitude? Let's be clear with each other, let's be mindful of the reality of salvation, let's say what we've already said this evening: this was not your idea. Your salvation was not your idea. It was not your plan. It was not something that you were looking for. Romans 3 says that no one seeks after God, no one understands. It was all of grace. It was all of a good God having favor upon you. Beloved, God had compassion on you. God had mercy on you. God, as it were, saw you in your need and blessed you in a way that you did not deserve, and in the greatness of his mercy, his kindness and his love extended an eternal gift to you that you never could have earned if you lived an eternity of lifetimes. God has shown favor to you far beyond anything that you could have imagined.

Look at chapter 2, verses 4 through 7.

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

There you were dead in sin, having no capacity to respond to spiritual stimulus, and in the words of the hymn that we just sang, "And can it be?" God's eye diffused a quickening ray. You woke and you rose and you followed after Christ. Why? Because God first loved you. Because God took the initiative. Because God caused you to be born again. He awakened your heart and he brought you out of your death of slumber, in your slumber of death, and awakened you so that you could come to Christ and be saved. And why did he do that? Well, contrary to the former wicked way that you used to think about God as a harsh taskmaster, as someone austere or maybe in a different way a kind of a grandfatherly figure and benign and all of that, no, now you see that a holy God had mercy and compassion upon you; that he showed kindness to you in your sin; and that out

of a love in his heart, not in response to a love in your heart but out of a love in his heart, he showed this love and mercy in order to bring you into his salvation. 1 John 4:19 says not that we loved God but that he loved us, "We love, because He first loved us."

So would you give thanks tonight? Would you give true thanks? Would you respond to God rightly? Remember his mercy upon you. Remember the greatness of the depth of his kindness, his mercy, his compassion and let that stir your heart to praise because, you see beloved, when you look at the totality of this passage, it's not just that God forgave all of your sins, although that's wonderful and marvelous as well, but Scripture describes you as being under the domination of the devil; being in the domain of Satan; being under the autocracy of the father of lies who was inflicting harm upon you and desired the doom of your soul; a supernatural enemy having power over you, having blinded your eyes heretofore to the truth of the Gospel. You are defenseless. You are defenseless under that reign of Satan.

Look at verse 2 of Ephesians 2 with me just to remind you, "in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." You were blind and powerless under the domination of the devil and what did God do? He came and he broke those chains, metaphorically speaking. He came and he freed you from that domination of a wicked taskmaster that you could not free yourself from and God intervened and graciously saved you, not just from sin but saved you from the domination of Satan. And not just freed you and then wound you up and let you go, as he freed you from Satan, he brought you into union with the Lord Jesus Christ. He brought you into a perfect union and raised you up and shared the fruit of the resurrection with your soul so that now you have a principle of eternal life at work in you that can never be extinguished, a flame burning inside your heart that can never be put out because it is a flame instilled by the Holy Spirit himself. God rescued you from coming hell, has you now, keeps you now, and has the intention which will most certainly be fulfilled to perfect that work and to bring you into glory and share that with you for the unfolding ages of ages into all of eternity never to end. Blessing upon blessing. Never to be tortured by Satan, never to be tortured by sin, never to be tortured by an accusing conscience evermore, never to be under the domination of a false religion that laid rules upon you that you could never fulfill and never meet. All of this from the gracious hand of God. Beloved, would you give true thanks tonight? Remember that God saved you and that this was a gift, it was not on anything that you did.

Look at verses 8 and 9 with me.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

The emphasis in this verse, there is both a strong negative and a strong positive in it. Not of yourselves, not of works but of God comes the gift. From God comes the gift. By grace, not through yourself, not through works so that you wouldn't boast. You know,

one of the things about being a Christian is that you're glad not to call attention to your salvation in the sense that you're glad not to take credit for it. You're glad to disown any sense of merit, glad to disown any sense of works that contributed to your salvation and instead to give all of the glory to God because you realize that you are saved because of a great act of love, a great purpose of grace, that was established before the foundation of the world, has worked itself out in time, and will culminate in glory. I say we should be thankful, don't you?

And we remember, especially at the table here tonight, we remember that this wasn't simply a gift that God established by erasing sin on our ledger and then writing something in on the positive of our ledger as though it were an accounting entry. No, no, this is a gift that came at the price of blood. This was a gift that came at great self-sacrifice from our Lord Jesus Christ. This was a gift that he paid for at the cost of his own life. We are justified in the sight of God by which we mean God has declared us righteous. God has forgiven our sins and imputed to us a perfect righteousness which is always availing to enter boldly into his presence. We have been justified as a gift of grace.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 3:24 and 25. He says you were "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith." God publicly slew his Son. Christ was publicly slain on the cross and his blood was publicly shed as the price of our redemption, as the sacrifice that turned away the wrath of God. The physical agony of Christ was real. He was a real man suffering real pain, shedding real little human blood on a real literal human cross. He was no phantom. He was no ghost. This was a real man. God in human flesh suffering for you. Fully identified with your humanity with the exception of the sin. And yet this one on the cross was God himself, God Incarnate, giving his life and infinite value which was able to cover the payment of sin for everyone who would ever believe in him and to cover the vast infinite depth of your own guilt. Christ drank the full bitter cup, drank every last drop of judgment that was coming upon you, interceded on your behalf, interceded for sinners just like you, drank it all up. Why? Because of his love, his grace, his kindness. Because Christ preferred to pay it himself than to see you pay it, a debt that you could never pay. He preferred the pain of eternal judgment in his own soul, the full weight of infinite eternal judgment being poured onto his infinite being, he preferred that to losing any one of his sheep like you. You see, we look to the cross, we look to Christ and we bow low, don't we? We humble ourselves before him. Not simply because he's greater than us but because he has given us a gift that we could never deserve. He has given us a gift of grace and he paid dearly for it with his own blood and life.

So we're thankful. In a sense we have so many complementary emotions. There is joy, "Oh, my sins are forgiven! Praise God!" There is humility, "Oh, Christ, I didn't deserve this." There is wonder, "How can it be that thou, my God, would die for me?" But tonight in a special way in our hearts, there is gratitude, sheer gratitude for a gift that we never could have earned, that we certainly didn't deserve. God has not dealt with you, Christian, according to your sins. He is not looking on you in your sin now. He's looking on you

through the lens of the Lord Jesus Christ and says, "I accept that one in the Beloved." With no further works to do to complete it, nothing on your part to boast in, simply to take thanks, to take refuge, to glory in the perfect grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which brought to us a perfect salvation which can never be taken away. That's why we are thankful tonight. That's why we love him. So if you would give true thanksgiving tonight, this week, look back at what you used to be. Look back to Calvary and thank God for his indescribable gift.

There is one more thing that we can say about this from the text just very very briefly. You look back, you look ahead. You look ahead. We've talked about looking ahead in the sense of the eternal glory to come, I'm going to focus on something a little different here going along with the text. Look ahead in this sense: that God saved you not only for eternal glory, he did and that's the ultimate consummation of our salvation, but even here, even tonight, even in your flesh, even in these brief window of years that the Lord has given to you to live out, God has not only saved you in the past, he has planned your life now.

Look at verse 10 of Ephesians 2.

10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

"Walk" being the course of life. God, Christian, do you remember this? It's so easy to forget, especially when life is not going the way that you would want it to go, it's so easy to forget this but to remember that God in his wisdom, in his love as part of his gift of salvation to you, has ordered the steps for you to walk in in your Christian life. The life that you have now for all of its blessing, all of its joys, its sorrows, its tears, and everything in between, God has given you the life that you have now with the intention that you would live through this life, that you would live that life and bring glory to the one who saved you.

Your life is not, Christian, your life is not a series of random events that you have to guess at. You don't have to look back at your past with regret and say, "Oh, only if I had made another decision. Oh, only if I hadn't said that word and life would have gone differently for me." No, the salvation that God has given to you with all of the grand glories of Christ, included in the midst of that is the fact that God has given you the life that you have now with the intention to bless you in it, to guide your steps in it, and for you to glorify Christ in everything that comes your way. Your life is not a series of random events over which you have no control. You're not subject to forces of blind fate. You're not at the mercy of people who oppose you. No, you're in the hands of a God who has prepared your life beforehand so that you could walk in it. That changes your whole perspective on why you live and what you're looking for. It takes away all fear of the future. It takes away all regret over the past. To just simply step back and realize that what Christ purchased with his blood was a comprehensive salvation for you that delivered you from sin and included in that was a life that he had appointed for you to live; that the sorrows of life would draw you closer to him in dependence and trust and

obedience; that the joys of life, the successes of life, the good things of life, would be that which you would turn and give thanks to him. He prepared it all in advance, ordered it all so that your steps would be with him.

That's a great place to be. To be in Christ, to be secure, to be forgiven, to be on the road to heaven and on top of that to have all of your steps ordered by him, never outside of the realm of his providence, always being under the careful watchful loving eye of the one who numbers every hair on your head, who knows when the sparrow falls to the ground, then supremely watches you even more, that's a great place of blessing, beloved. So look ahead. Look ahead even in your earthly life and say, "My life is in the hands of the same gracious God who saved me. He will most certainly continue to be gracious to me." Listen, beloved, the biblical role, the biblical way, the biblical argument of thinking about these things is this: if God has done the greater thing for you in saving you eternally from your sin, then will he not surely with that give you all other things as well? Give you all that is necessary for life in godliness? Will he not order your steps in order to bring blessing to you in the end? You see, you can give thanks tonight because you are eternally saved and because God has ordered life in a way that is guaranteed to bring blessing to you; that is guaranteed to be a manifestation of his goodness and kindness and mercy as an overflow of the same mercy and kindness that saved you in the beginning.

I'll say it one different way, recognizing that we have people on every end of every conceivable spectrum of life here: some at the beginning, some closer to the end, some in sorrow, some enjoy, some with great talents, some with other talents, some blessed with prosperity, some struggling to make ends meet. Everywhere along the line, beloved, what I want you to see is this and let this be an encouragement to your heart, let it be that which renews your sense of trust, of confidence, and motivates you to continue to live: God has uniquely prepared your earthly life for you. He has given you a life, he has given you a platform on which no one else can glorify him but you. And God, remember the things that we've looked at in our systematic theology study, God did this according to his wisdom, his perfect wisdom, in his perfect love, in his perfect kindness, his perfect holiness. There was no mistake. There was no errant factor entered into your life that was contrary to God's ultimate purpose for you. Beloved, God has appointed your relationships, the good ones and the bad ones, your activities, your joys and sorrows in a way that is uniquely designed for you to fulfill.

Look at the text with me again. You just take in all of the details and circumstances of life and in chapter 2, verse 10, we see "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." But can you not see how all your desires have been granted in what he has ordained for you? Beloved, look back and give thanks for your great salvation. Look ahead in your steps in life and realize that God has ordered them to keep you, to bless you, and that even your deepest sorrows, even the worst of tragedies and unexpected occurrences in your life ultimately, beloved, are given to you from the hand of God to extend further blessing to you in the end. Every one of them without exception. God never deals with his people but to bless them because his goodness would not allow him to be any other way.

And we wrap this up as we prepare for the Lord's table. The love that went to the cross, the love that ordained your steps in life, will not fail, could never fail, will always accomplish its purposes in the end. Let's look at Romans 8 as we close this meditation. Romans 8, again gladly, willingly choosing familiar passages to facilitate our response of gratitude tonight. Romans 8, beginning in verse 35, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Even if all of creation was arrayed against you, beloved, it could not sever this great love for which we give thanks tonight.

Let's bow together in prayer as we prepare our hearts for communion. If you're a Christian tonight, we invite you to come to the Lord's table with this sense of true thanksgiving. Even if you're just visiting with us, you're welcome to share in the table. It's the Lord's table, not ours.

Father, as we come to the table, we remember the words of Scripture that says that in Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace which he lavished on us. Father, as it were in our hearts, lead us to Calvary now. Lead us with grateful trusting hearts, glad to remember our Lord, his broken body, his shed blood, glad, Father, for the privilege of being able to come to this table together in fellowship not only with Christ but with one another. We thank you for the love of our Savior. We thank you for the love of the saints. Father, we look up, we look down, we look to our left, we look to our right, we look ahead, we look back, and all around we see blessing and grace and kindness beyond compare, kindness that came from your grace, prompted by your love, your goodness, your Holiness, not our goodness toward you, not our love toward you, certainly not our holiness. Father, we come as those responding to grace tonight with grateful and thankful hearts so help us now as we do that. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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