

“The Giver” (Psalm 103:1)

Thanksgiving November 25, 2009

Before beginning their Thanksgiving dinner, some families go around the table and have each person say a prayer. Here’s one that was given by a little boy named Jimmy: "Dear God, thank You for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and all of the holidays. Thank You for the turkey and dressing and Mom and Dad...and for my little sister, even though sometimes she can be a pain. Thank You for books and TV and game boy. Thank You for loving us. And oh, yeah! Take care of Yourself, God, because without You, we’d be sunk!"

“Out of the mouths of babes!” – right? Without God, we would be sunk – and this is a good time to remember that! We all know Thanksgiving is a time to remember our blessings. We all know Thanksgiving is a time to remember those less fortunate than ourselves. We’ve heard plenty of sermons on both. But should Thanksgiving *just* be focused on our blessings...or other people’s lack of blessings? That’s kind of materialistic when you think about it! What about the Giver behind the gifts? What do we have that He did not give us? Every one of our blessings comes from God’s own hand! So shouldn’t the focus be on Him?

And this is true even if it seems we have fewer blessings to count this year. In fact, it’s all the more reason to focus on the Giver – to remind ourselves it’s a blessing just to have God in our lives! I mean, what if we were stuck in this life all on our own? What if we had no one we could turn to? What if this universe really was a cosmic accident, and life was meaningless, and hope was an illusion? We’d be sunk, wouldn’t we? Just like little Jimmy said. So what is it worth to have Someone we can turn to, Someone who cares about us, Someone who is utterly faithful and will let nothing in all creation separate us from His love? What is it worth? At least a “thank you!” *Thank you, God, that you’re there to thank! Thank you that you’re in my life! Thank you that I can turn to you and that you care about me more than I’ll ever know!* Yes, I’d say that’s worth at least a “thank you!” Beyond the gifts, beyond the giving, we want to focus our thanks on the greatest blessing of all – God Himself, the Giver!

Now, put this way, it probably sounds pretty obvious. Of course we should focus on God the Giver! But it isn’t always obvious. Not even for pastors. At least, not this one. I have to tell you, though, it did really hit home earlier this year when I was at a continuing education event. The man leading the event belonged to a denomination that – well, let’s just say they believe in one God at the very most. So, in order not to offend anyone, he didn’t start with prayer; he just told us to take a moment for “thankful thoughts.” Okay. Fine. Whatever. Thankful thoughts. And that might have been the end of it. But later that day at lunch, this guy at our table brought up the subject again. *What was the point of having “thankful thoughts” anyway? Why bother?* Listening in, a woman who belonged to the same denomination as the leader took it upon herself to set him straight: “We need to remember how blessed we are, so that we don’t take things for granted. That’s why we take time for ‘thankful thoughts’” “Okay,” the guy said,

“but thankful *to whom?*” “Oh,” she said, “just thankful to life. Thankful for all we’ve been given.” “But given *by whom?*” the guy persisted. “By *life,*” she said. “So ‘life’ gives you blessings?” he asked. “Well,” she said, “I wouldn’t put it quite that way, but my life is full of good things, and I’m just thankful that...” “That *what?*” the guy interrupted. “That you are lucky?” “I suppose.” “Or that you’re luckier than people who are not as well off?” “Now, wait just a minute!” she said. “Sorry,” the guy replied, “I’m just trying to understand this ‘thankful thoughts’ thing. To me, it sounds a lot like self-congratulations: ‘Look at how lucky I am!’ In fact, it sounds a lot like the Pharisee praying, ‘I thank you God that I am not like other people are’ – except you don’t even acknowledge God!”

Needless to say, that put a damper on the conversation! But the guy had a point, didn’t he? And not just a theoretical point about theology or prayer. This point goes much deeper – down to who we are, and Whose we are, what life is all about, and how bleak life would be without God – even the best life. For no matter how “lucky” we might be, what meaning would life have without God? No matter how “lucky” we might be, where would we find hope without God? And luck can change, can’t it? Luck can run out. In fact, sooner or later it will — at the grave! So what would we do then? Where would we turn then? Without God, we would be sunk!

But with God? That’s a whole different story! With God, we are blessed regardless of what we may lack. For *with* God, life *does* have meaning – ultimate meaning! With God, we *do* have hope – eternal hope! And with God, there *is* Someone we can turn to – Someone infinitely more dependable than “luck” could ever be! With God, it’s a *whole* different story! Some may have to learn this the hard way. “Luck” may have to run out for them to see how little it’s worth. But the truth is: even if we had nothing but God we’d still be richer than one who has everything but God. Just having God in our lives is the greatest blessing of all. Beyond the gifts, beyond the giving – having God Himself, the Giver.

King David sure knew this! It shows in the way he wrote the psalm I’ve chosen as our text, Psalm 103. Someone else might have launched right in listing all his blessings, but not David. Before saying *what* he was thankful *for*, He focused on *whom* he was thankful *to*. He focused on the Giver Himself: “**Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.**” That’s not to say David wasn’t grateful for his other blessings as well. Just read the rest of the psalm! But he wanted to put first things first! Before listing the gifts, He wanted to acknowledge the Giver. *Thank You, God, that You are there for me. Thank you, God, that You are in my life. Thank you, God, that You are You.*

So why did he focus first on the Giver? Because life had taught David well that he needed more to count on than just “luck.” His life was full of ups and downs, full of twists and turns, over and over again, but come what may, there was one constant in David’s life that he could count on, and that was God. Wherever David found himself, he knew God was right there *with* him. Whatever problems

David faced, he knew God faced them *with* him. And having that assurance was worth far more than all his other blessings combined! Yes, at times he wondered what God was up to. At times, he questioned why God did this or didn't do that. But bottom line: he knew God was *in* his life – that was the important thing. He knew God would get him through – some way, somehow. He knew this from personal experience. Time and again, God had proved Himself utterly faithful. And what greater blessing could he ask than that? So David did appreciate *particular* blessings. The psalm makes that clear. But beyond the gifts, beyond the giving, David was thankful for the Giver Himself. That's why he began the psalm putting first things first: **“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.”**

David's example gives us a lot to think about as we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving,. Not just that we should count our blessings. We all know that. Rather, he shows us where to begin. If we focus first on *what* we're thankful *for*, that can become rather self-absorbed. *I've got this and this and this. Aren't I lucky?! Or I haven't got this and this and this. Isn't my life sad?* Either way, our thoughts revolve around me and mine – which isn't very productive and kind of misses the point of the day, doesn't it?

So instead of starting with *what* we're thankful *for*, we want to focus first on *who* we're thankful *to*. Focus first on the Giver. *Thank You, God, that You are there for me. Thank you, God, that You are in my life. Thank you, God, that You are You.* True thanksgiving recognizes that everything we have comes from God's hand. And even more, it recognizes that nothing we have matters more than having God. Without Him, we would be sunk! So that's our cue! Sometime tomorrow, when we take time out from food and football to sit down and count our blessings, let's focus first on *who* we're thankful *to*. Let's focus first on the greatest blessing of all. Let's focus first on the Giver – as David did: **“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.”** Amen.