

THANKS FOR WHAT!

In our last broadcast we referred to that first Thanksgiving when the Pilgrims, despite the fact that their numbers had been halved by death, gave thanks. We suggested that they had a different view of life and death to what we have today. Take this matter of giving thanks, for example, some years back an ingenious gatherer of statistics found that in a particular Christmas season thousands of letters from children addressed to Santa Claus reached the dead letter office before December 25 but in the whole month after Christmas only one letter came addressed to Santa Claus with a message of thanks.

Similarly the story is told that two angels were sent out from Heaven each with a basket to bring back the prayers and thanksgiving of those on earth. The angel of thanksgiving started with a large hamper, the collector of petitions, with a small basket. But when they returned each was in trouble. The petitions overflowed the basket and filled the sack as well while the angel of thanksgiving only had three in his hamper.

My friends, we dare not despise the nine lepers who were cleansed, who did not return to thank Jesus because it has always been much easier to cry 'give me' than it has been to give thanks. One of our greatest needs and a need which, if fulfilled, will multiply our joy is the need to think and to thank. The trouble is, of course, this poor human nature of mine and yours. Our human nature is as crooked as a cork screw. To say thank you is just as difficult as it is to practice giving rather than getting. Let me illustrate, two boys went out to gather grapes, one was happy because he found grapes, the other was unhappy because the grapes had seeds in them. Two men being convalescent were asked how they were. One said, I am better today, the other said I was worse some yesterday. When it rains, one man says, this will make mud; another says, this will lay the dust. Two girls examined a bush, one observed that it had thorns, the other, that it had a rose. Two children looking through colored glasses,

one said the world is blue, the other said, it is bright! One person says our good is mixed with evil but another says, our evil is mixed with good. Two men looked out through prison bars, one saw mud and the other saw stars.

Does it not occur to you, dear listener, that misery is simply a synonym for ingratitude. There is always something to be thankful for. Even on the worst of days we can be thankful for what hasn't happened and I often think of that little boy in class—when the pupils are asked to list all the things they could be grateful about, in his list he had included the fact that he had glasses. “Why, Johnny,” said the teacher, why are you thankful that you have glasses?” His answer was, “I am glad I have glasses because the boys won't hit me and the girls won't kiss me. There is always something to be thankful for, my friends. The trouble with most of us is that we are too prosperous. We have it too easy in this day and age. That is what distinguishes us from the Pilgrims on that first Thanksgiving.

Many years ago quite a number of beehives were carried to the island of Barbados in the West Indies. At first the bees went diligently to work gathering honey for the coming winters but when the bees found that they were in a land of perpetual summer, they ceased to gather honey and instead spent most of their time flying around stinging the natives. And this is the way it has become with us in the western world. We have a spiritual degeneracy. God has surrounded us with so many blessings that instead of working for his glory and for the good of our fellows like those seven men among the Pilgrims who were still healthy enough to tend the sick, instead of that we spend most of our time in living for ourselves. We thrust the sting when we should be gathering the sweetness. We should be gathering the sweetness of life to give out again to starving men. We should thank God not just for prosperity but even for the threats to that prosperity which cast us upon Him in faith. We should praise

him for the trials and temptations that keep us from sinking into an attitude of self-content that can destroy the soul.

Did you know that one whole book of the Bible has a theme of thanksgiving right in the middle. On one side of it God is speaking to man and on the other side God is speaking to man but in the middle book of the Bible man speaks back mainly regarding thanksgiving. The name of that book is Psalms which is equivalent of the Hebrew title of 'praises.' If you look at the last five Psalms and particularly the last Psalm, you will find that the theme of thanksgiving is summed up in a great crescendo. Notice Psalm 150, "Praise the Lord, praise God in his sanctuary, praise Him in his mighty firmament, praise Him for his mighty deeds, praise Him according to his exceeding greatness, praise Him with trumpet sound, praise Him with lute and harp, praise him with timbrel and dance, praise Him with strings and pipe, praise him with sounding cymbals, praise Him with loud crashing cymbals, let everything that breathes praise the Lord, praise the Lord." Just look my friends, at those Psalms, particularly the last five that summarize the book and notice how they again praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul!

Someone might say, well, I don't have much to praise God for. May I introduce you an alphabet of thanksgiving that one person devised? Let me read it to you, the alphabet of gratitude: (A) That stands for America, or for some like me, for Australia, (B) for beauty, books, brotherhood, birds, brooks, barn fires, Bible, (C) for children, camps, churches, crops, cranberries, (D) for democracy, dawns, duties, doughnuts, (E) for eyes, education, (F) for faith, friends, fun, flowers, freedom, (G) for God, (H) for hope, happiness, home, (I) for ideals, institutions, independence, immortality, (J) for Jesus, (K) for knowledge, keepsakes, (L) for love, loyalties, longings, laughter, (M) for mother, music, (N) for nights, nature, (O) for oceans, opportunities, (P) for prayer, pictures, peace, pumpkin pie, (Q) for quests and for quoits, (R) for right, reasons, rest, (S) for strength, strangers, ships, sunsets, (T) for truth,

tomorrow, and at thanksgiving time, turkey, (U) for universe, universities, unity, (V) for victories, (W) for worship and for work, (X) for, Christmas, X-Mas, (Y) for youth, years, yesterdays, and (Z) for zoos, zest and zippers. Do you like that my friends? There is always some reason for gratitude is there not? There is a sermon in each word there. We, indeed, need to think and thank. Of course, there can be a danger in thanksgiving. You remember the story of Mr. Macover (?) (in David Copperfield), he was leaving London but he owed Mr. Traddles (?) 41 pounds, 10 shillings and 11-1/2 halfpenny and so said Mr. Macover, "To leave this metropolis and my friend, Mr. Thomas Traddles without acquitting myself of the pecuniary part of this obligation would weigh upon my mind to an unsupportable extent. I have, therefore, prepared for my friend, Mr. Thomas Traddles and I am now holding in my hand a document which accomplishes the desired object, I beg to hand to my friend, Mr. Thomas Traddles my I.O.U for 41, 10, 11-1/2 and I am happy to recover my moral dignity and to know that I can once more walk erect before my fellowman. My friends, we need not make our thanks like Mr. Macover's I.O.U. and think we have discharged our debts to God. Too many are good with words and poor in deeds, too many are really borrowing from God but never repaying because the life is no different, because we are strangers too often to service for our maker and our fellows.

Think in contrast to Paul the Apostle, he was no stranger to thanksgiving. He could write, "Thanks be unto God that always causes us to triumph in Christ for we are enriched in everything to all bountifulness that causes to us thanksgiving to God and thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift." That same Paul could say, "The love of Christ constraineth me." Because we thus judge that if one died for all, then all died. A grateful heart must love, my friends, and loving leads to serving. Paul was no stranger to service, as you know. You notice that he referred to Christ as the unspeakable gift,

“Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.” In Christ we have the unspeakable cause for thanksgiving.

Have you ever asked this question, what if Christ were not? What if today we could blot out the name of Christ from every book, from every tape, from every newspaper, from every tongue? What sort of a world would there be then? With him would go the Bible and also the 10 Commandments and with those, my friends would disappear the foundations of democracy and liberty and a measure of security that we enjoy because of law... what then? The nights would be filled with screams and the days with tears. Every sane person should be filled with gratitude for the life and death of Jesus Christ; we should be singing his praises, living his praises.

A little fellow in a certain hospital had a malignant piece of bone removed from his arm, he got well but before he left the place he sent for the doctor. “You wish to see me, Willie?” said the doctor. The little fellow reached up his hand and laid it on the doctor’s shoulder and he said, “My mother will never hear the last about you.” My friends, if we fully realize what Christ has done for us we would say to him, “My friends will never hear the last about you.”

We alluded a little while ago to the story of the 10 lepers. Let me read it to you from Scripture, Luke 17:11 onward: “On the way to Jerusalem Christ was passing along between Samaria and Galilee and as he entered the village he was met by 10 lepers who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said, ‘Jesus, master, have mercy on us.’ When he saw them he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priest,’ and as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them when he saw that he was healed turned back praising God with a loud voice. Now, he was a Samaritan. Then said Jesus, ‘Were not 10

cleansed? Where are the 9? Was no one found to return and give thanks to God except this foreigner?' and he said to him, 'rise and go your way, your faith has made you well.'" My friends, never be disturbed because people don't say thank you to you, if one in 10 thanks you, you are being treated as well as Jesus. Look at the story. I want you to notice that there was some faith in all of the 10 lepers. They set off without a word though, as yet, they were not cleansed. They set off for Jerusalem to see the priests as they were told to do so they had a measure of faith and a measure of obedience. If their faith had worked by love, all 10 would have been given a greater blessing than just the cleansing from physical leprosy. The one trouble with the 9 was that they did not love... or, should I say, they loved the wrong object, self. Want and hunger can create a faith that gratification kills unless love and gratitude are cherished. We need to remember that. All blessings received, my friends, are a test of character. True gratitude always involves two things: one, humility. You noticed the healed leper fell at the feet of Jesus. We remember the pit from whence we had dugged when we entertain true gratitude. The second thing is the exaltation of God. We read that the Samaritan glorified God. If you and I were truly grateful for the goodness of God we, too, would want to be good and thus glorify Him. Now will you note about the 9 who lacked these things, they went on their way with their bodies healed but with a more loathsome disease upon them—the leprosy of ingratitude. Have you ever thought of that? If you and I do not give thanks to God we are no more than cows, pigs and dogs. We are worse. We have a spiritual leprosy. How gentle the Savior was with the lack of gratitude of the 9. He could have said, all right, may their leprosy return to them forever but he didn't. My friends, our God loves even the ungrateful, the thoughtless, the careless. He loves all that he has made.

No doubt, there are more than 9 sources of ingratitude but I remember, I think it was Spurgeon who suggested there were at least 9 and that each of these 9 unthankful lepers may represent one of these

causes. Number one is callousness. Let's take leper number one, he did not feel his misery as much as some nor is he much stirred by his return to health. He is sullen, torpid, stony. Such men are thankless. Number two, he is thoughtless. He is more like the shifting sand on hard stone. He never reflects, never introspects, never recollects; the unreflecting are ungrateful that is why we need to think and thank. Number three leper is proud. He has not had more than his merit in being healed, he thinks. Why should he be thankful for what his respectability, his station in life deserves? It is only the humble hearted who are truly grateful. Leper number four is envious; though healed, he has not all that some others have. They are younger or stronger or have more friends to welcome them. He is envious. Envy turns sour the milk of thankfulness. Leper number five, suppose he is cowardly, after all the one who healed a person who is scorned, persecuted and hated and the expression of gratitude may bring some of such hatred on himself. The craven person is always a mean ingrate. Number six is calculating. If he acknowledged the benefit received, it might involve some claim. He would have to be a disciple perhaps or give a gift. Number seven is worldly. Already he has purposes of business in Jerusalem or plan of pleasures there which fascinate him from returning to give thanks. Number eight is gregarious. He would have expressed gratitude if the other eight would but he has no independence, no individuality. Number nine? Let's call him procrastinating. By and by, Christ asks where are the nine? Are we among them? How is it with us?

The moment a man gets what he wants is a very testing moment. It carries a trial and probation with it for if for the instant his feeling is excited, the after time is a trial. Too often there is a sudden reversion, a reaction in the posture of the mind when from needing something we shift into getting it, immediately the mind can receive thoughts that it couldn't entertain before when the pressure of urgent want kept them out altogether. Firstly, the benefactor is no longer necessary so that makes a great

difference. Who can believe the quickness with which the memory of sickness and all its prayerful longings can be wiped out of our hearts when once the tide of returning strength has swept us up again into health. It is the natural state of affairs that tricks us, cheats us, betrays us. Health is our natural condition and there is a strange sway exercised over our imagination and our mind by all that is natural. The evenness and sequence of health smother all need of inquiry. It is when things change and we are bewildered in sickness, when we are wrenched out of our known and habitual environment, then we felt a need, then we were open to God, when we are thrown into uncertainty, when we could not tell what the next minute might bring, when we had lost our standard, our measure and cue we had no custom on which to rely, then in our distress and our impotence we learned how all depended on the most High but in health the normal solidity returns, the fabric of life. We can be sure now about tomorrow, we can count and calculate and so God seems to fade away. Perhaps, my friends, that is why sometimes trouble must come again for our own good.

A pious clergyman for more than 20 years kept an account of the sick persons he visited during that period. Many of the parishioners during the time of his residency, died. However, a considerable number of sick ones recovered and among these were 2000 people who in immediate prospect of death appeared to give evidence of change of heart. Out of these only 2 by their future lives proved that their repentance was sincere and their conversion genuine. Doesn't that tell us something about our human nature? Every miracle has its lesson in Scripture and in that lesson lies the reason why it has been recorded. There were many lepers cleansed but whose record no record is given but the story of these 10 is told because one of them came back. It was the despised Samaritan who returned in contrast to the ingratitude of the Jews. Christ's own people, the privileged Jews, held on their legal and selfish way. They had a good excuse, a legal excuse. Christ had ordered that they go, the law demanded that

they go to the priest and show themselves but, my friends, sometimes the letter of the law kills and it is the spirit that gives life. Love needs to overrule acts of congress. Nine held by the law but the one who got the grace, Christ could say to him, “Thy faith has saved thee.” Spiritually now as well as physically he got the nobler blessing.

May I remind you again my friends that in this story we do not find Christ made sour, bitter, there is no recoil in him to the opposite extreme of indifference and hate. I am glad he is not like me. I am glad that he is always loving and to all people. Oh, for the love of Christ to be understood. Even fruitless human lives he spared, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” The nine like so many of us took greedily the temporal benefits. We take sunshine and health and food for granted along with a thousand other things, our sight, our hearing. These nine despised the more precious gift the Lord was waiting to bestow, do we? They snatched the lesser and missed the greater, do we? My friends, think on these 10 men. They all needed cleansing, so do we all. There was the lesson from the nine, the sin of ingratitude and there is the lesson from the one, the duty of gratitude. Now, my friends, the punch line—there is only one reason why anyone will miss out on heaven, not murder, not adultery, not theft, not lying, here it is, ingratitude. That’s the only reason people miss out on heaven because the issue now is the Christ question, the Son question, not the sin question. The only reason people will be lost from the kingdom of heaven and eternal life is because they have not appreciated Calvary.

Let me read you from John, chapter 3:17, note it very carefully, “God sent his son into the world not to condemn the world but the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned but he who does not believe is condemned already.” Do you notice. People are not lost because of their sins but because they rejected Christ, because they have not been grateful for Christ.

John 3:36 says, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God abides on him. Think on that my friends. Those who lack the spirit of gratitude for Calvary will lose eternal life, he has something better to give us than even the thousand gifts for which we rejoice from day to day. We need to see him there on the cross for us. That will bring gratitude.

A famous French bishop told a story not long ago to his congregation. Here it is: “Three university students of Paris were walking along the road one Good Friday afternoon. They noticed crowds of people going to churches to make their confession. The students began to discuss this custom of the unenlightened. They talked in rather cynical terms about the survival of religion which they described as superstition. Suddenly, two of the students turned to the third who was the leader among them and said to him, ‘Will you go into this church and tell the priest what we have been saying to each other?’ ‘Sure I will,’ he said and went in. He stood in the pew of those who were going to confession and when his turn came he looked at the priest and said, ‘Father, I’ve come here merely to tell you that Christianity is a dying institution and that religion is a superstition.’ The priest looked at the young man keenly and said, ‘Why did you come here, my son, to tell me this?’ The student told him of his conversation with his friends. The priest listened carefully and then said, ‘All right, I want you to do one thing for me before you go, you accepted the challenge of your friends and came here, now accept my challenge. Walk up to the chancel and you will find there a large wooden cross and on it the figure of Jesus crucified. I want you to stand before that cross and say these words, ‘Jesus died for me and I don’t care a damn.’ The student looked diffident but to save face he agreed. He went up and stood before that cross and said it, Jesus died for me and I don’t care a damn. He came back to the priest and said, ‘I’ve done it.’ ‘Do it once more’ said the priest, after all, it means nothing to you.’ The student

went back and looked at the cross for some time and the figure on it and then stammered it out, Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn. He returned to the priest and told him, 'I've done it, I am going now.' The priest stopped him, once more, he said, just once more and you can go. The young man walked up to the chancel and looked at that cross again and at the crucified. He stood there for a long time and then he came back to the priest and said, 'Father, can I make my confession now?'

The bishop who told the story concluded it by saying, "My dear people, that young man was myself."