

I. Introduction

A. For the last few weeks, Starbucks has been using their Christmas cups. You know what that means, Thanksgiving is not far away. Indeed, it's this Thursday. And that is a good thing. In many ways, Thanksgiving is not just my favorite holiday. It's also a pretty profoundly Christian one.

B. I want to unpack why I would say that – and explore what that means for us – by looking at a few passages, principally Psalm 100.

II. Two summers ago, we did a series on the Psalms. I hope you remember:

A. That the Psalms are found in the middle of the Bible.

B. That along with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and Song of Solomon, the Psalms makes up what we call the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. The Old Testament has three sections: the Law, the Prophets and Wisdom Literature

C. I trust you also remember that: 1) the Book of Psalms is mostly a collection of prayers – God gives us the words to pray back to him; and 2) that these prayers come in a handful of types: praise, thanksgiving, lament, imprecatory, messianic and confession.

D. And finally, I hope you also remember that some of the Psalms are not prayers, but meditations. They are words not words for us to say to God; they are words for us to say to ourselves. In fact, the Book of Psalms opens with a meditation on a call to meditate. It opens:

1. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law, he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

E. This Psalm is not a prayer – it's talking points to speak to ourselves. It's truth to reflect and to meditate on

III. Today we are not looking at Psalm one, but at Psalm 100:

A. Is a short Psalm (only five verses);

B. It is a popular Psalm – some say second only to Psalm 23.

C. It is an old Psalm – it goes back about 3,500 years to Moses.

D. And it is another meditation: it's more talking points we are to direct back at ourselves. More to the point, it's a set of commands telling us to thank and praise God.

E. Just to be clear, we are not told to feel thanks. We are told to express thanks. And not just to adopt the actions, but to embrace the mental model that shapes our. It reminds me of teaching young children to say “thank you.” Alongside teaching them to say “please” with the line, “What’s the magic word?” After they have been given something, we look at them and ask, “What do you say?” And they need to learn to say, “Thank you.”

IV. **Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness;**

A. Three things jump out here. First, we are being told to shout. To say thank you very loudly.

1. The King James famously translates this passage, “make a joyful noise to the Lord.” Suggesting some kind of loud and happy sound. The word "noise"

suggests that we are full of an emotion that we cannot contain. That there is lots of energy behind what we are saying – which may not be words – think of the roars you hear at sporting events.<sup>1</sup>

2. Not, by the way, because God needs the affirmation. He does not. He delights in our attention. Just like parents delight in the love and gifts given to them by their small children. The gifts of a three-year-old do not have any market value. If someone else gave us the kind of gift our two-year-old did, we'd be like, "what's up with that?" But we delight in the gift because it is from them. In the same way, God delights in our praise. He doesn't need it. He is perfect and complete and lacks nothing. We are not instructed to thank God because God needs to be thanked. We are instructed to thank God because we need to be shaped by thankfulness. In part because that helps us bring our thinking in line with reality – which always works best. We need to praise and say thank you.

B. Two: We are told our worship should be joyful.

1. Joy is a big idea in Christian worship. In fact, when compared to their ancient near Eastern neighbors, Hebrew worship was so characterized by joy<sup>2</sup> that the Jews have more words for joy than any other language.<sup>3</sup>

C. Finally, we are to shout for joy to the Lord.

1. Built into Psalm 100 is the idea that God is worthy of worship. He is. The God who is revealed in this book is great beyond all comprehension. But the big point here is, we are to worship God. We are never simply told to worship. Worship happens whether we intend it to or not. Our lives get ordered around what we value. In various ways, we advertise what matters to us. We pay attention. We get excited and celebrate. There will be a lot of worship at Soldier Field today. (Hopefully). The point being made here is that our actions need to make it clear that God is the greatest good.

2. And so we are invited – encouraged - to focus on him; to ponder his goodness and glory and allow it to elicit a response.

V. Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. **Worship the Lord with gladness;**

A. Remember, in English poetry we rhyme words; in Hebrew poetry they rhyme ideas. This second stanza is a repeat of the first.

VI. **Come before him with joyful songs.**

A. You might have wondered why we sing. I have. Well, the main reason is because we are told to. Nearly 600 times the Bible tells us to "sing." It is one of the most frequently repeated commands in the Bible. A second reason we sing is because it moves us in unique ways, and in doing so it can facilitate worship.

B. Of course, singing is not synonymous with worship. But music often facilitates worship. It helps carry our hearts to a new space.

VII. **V3: Know that the Lord is God.**

A. It's time to note that the term being used here for Lord is Yahweh not Adonai.

B. As you may know, the first is a name, the second is a title. In Exodus 3 God reveals his name to Moses. He said, "I Am."

1. This is the only four-letter word in Hebrew.

2. It's a form of the verb to be.

3. Lots and lots of speculation and study here. Lots of doctoral dissertations on this.

4. Yahweh is a form of the verb “to be.” He is stating something like, “I am who I am. I will be who I will be – not who you try to make me to be. I am God. You are not.”

C. The point being, God is not just whoever and whatever you want to think. He is who He is.

VIII. **It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.**

A. Here we are being reminded that He owns us. We do not own ourselves.

B. And we are also being assured that He owns us. We are his. He claims us.

C. As an aside, I’ll remind you that being called a sheep is not exactly a compliment. Sheep are not as dumb as we once thought – not as dumb as Orwell suggests in *Animal Farm*. But they are not bright, and more to the point, they are uniquely defenseless and dependent. God doesn’t describe us as a raptor or a cougar. We’re not a panther or a leopard. We are way down the food chain. None of the animals used as the mascot for a college football team are used to describe us.

D. Perhaps there is a Christian school somewhere whose mascot is a sheep. But, if there is they probably get their imagery there from Revelation – where Jesus is the fighting lamb – the victorious one. But for the most part, sports teams want to be the Bears or the Eagles or Rams, Panthers, Jaguars.

IX. **V4: Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.**

A. The imagery here shouldn’t be missed. The temple was surrounded by a gate. We are not being told that the secret password to open the gates – like “Open sesame” – is praise. We are being told to draw close to him with praise.

B. Now, there is a technical difference between thanks and praise. We give thanks for what God has done. We offer praise for who He is. But that distinction is perhaps not as important as noting that we are being coached to focus on God and to realize how amazing He is and how wonderfully He has blessed us.<sup>4</sup>

X. **V5: For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.**

XI. If you have been here for a while, you know that the sermons are generally part of a series.

A. Most of the time we are working our way through a book:

1. We spent five years in Luke, two in Acts, two in Philippians, two in Hebrews and have had extended sessions in Genesis, Ecclesiastes, Psalms and the Minor prophets

2. We take breaks from these – for instance every fall we do something a bit more topical; we also set aside time for Advent or Lent; Occasionally we do something like last week – some cultural issue that needs some attention. And we have this series on the basics that are organized systematically.

3. All of that to say, occasionally, there is a message that is all on its own. I take a topic – today it’s thanksgiving, because this Thursday is Thanksgiving.

And I go looking for a passage. (Now, you are not supposed to do that. All of the seminary students are scandalized. I am at great risk of *isogesis* over *exegetis*).

4. I share that to say, about a month ago when I started looking for a passage on being thankful, I was unprepared for how many I found.
- B. As you might know, the Psalms are saturated with commands to be thankful to God. There is a whole category of them. But the Psalms are not the only place.
1. In Leviticus there are more than a few chapters of instructions to the Levitical Priests about how to make thank offerings to God.
  2. In Deuteronomy 28, we find instructions to be thankful and warnings about what will happen if we are not.
  3. In I Chronicles 16:41, David appoints two men – Heman and Jedothum – to stand before the Ark of the Covenant to offer thanks to God. It was their full-time job.
  4. And when we jump to the New Testament we find more of the same, such as Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonians to **give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus**; or his comments about contentment from a Roman prison cell - in Philippians 4 he notes that he has learned **how to be content and thankful in every situation**.
- C. Once you start looking for it, you will find a lot of coaching about being thankful.
- D. So, where does that leave us? Well, if we study these together, there are some unique insights about life and thankfulness. I want to highlight three. But let me clear up a few things first.

XII. For starters, we need a definition. Because I think gratitude is pretty consistently misunderstood. What is gratitude? What are we called to when we are commanded to be thankful?

- A. There are lots of people who talk about it: 1) G.K. Chesterton describes thankfulness as the highest form of thought and gratitude as happiness doubled by wonder; 2) John Ortberg suggests that gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift. He goes on to note that it liberates us from the prison of self-preoccupation; 3) A Benedictine monk I occasionally look at, argues that happiness does not lead to gratitude, but that gratitude leads to happiness.
- B. I could go on a long time with these. I actually resonated more with something I found in a *Wall Street Journal* article. In that piece, the writer, Melinda Beck, argues that gratitude is a choice. She describes it as a decision. I would go one step further and describe it as a discipline. It’s a bit less mysterious than silence and fasting and some of the other spiritual disciplines, but it may be more powerful.
- C. This might strike you as confusing, because you think of gratitude as a feeling – a rather involuntary one at that. When something good happens, we are thankful.
- D. Yes, right, except. That is a feeling, it’s fleeting, hard to control and only a small part of what we are talking about. What we are being called to is a gratitude that is not dependent on circumstances we cannot control.
- E. There are two surprises here: 1) we are called to gratitude even when that is not going to be our default response; and 2) gratitude is more than a feeling, it’s a discipline.
- F. What is a discipline? Well, spiritual disciplines are things we can control that lead to wins in other areas of our life – that position us so that God does what only He can do.<sup>5</sup>

G. Gratitude is a feeling, but Psalm 100 – and lots of other passages – make it clear that it’s also a discipline. It is something that takes effort. It’s something we need to train in.

XIII. A second thing I want to clear up is what we are expected to be thankful about.

A. In I Thessalonians 5:18, Paul instructs us to be thankful in everything. Some think the command is to be thankful for everything. No. That may sound hyper-spiritual to you, but the truth is, some things are horrible. They are evil and wrong. Yes, God can use them. Amazingly, he can redeem the worst things. But we do not have to be thankful for bad things.

B. While I am here, let me also note that the call to be thankful does not suggest we should ignore or suppress the bad. To just focus on the positive. The Psalms give us multiple examples of people lamenting bad things.

C. It’s not a call to give thanks for all circumstance or by ignoring circumstances, it is a call to find cause for thanksgiving.

XIV. Ok, with those two matters clarified, I have a few other observations to make. And I suspect they are going to surprise you.

A. A typical talk on gratitude says things like, we should be thankful, after all, we have a lot to be thankful for. Those of us born in America have a lot more than anyone else. If you were to reduce the world's population to a city of 1,000 inhabitants, 46 of those people would be Americans and they would have half of the income, a life expectancy nearly twice as long as many others, 15 times as much stuff and all the food we want. You’ve heard this before. The dogs and cats of the American people today have a better diet than most people around the world. We have a great deal to be thankful for.

B. You might also expect me to say, being thankful is not introductory level Christianity. Many of us learn to pray by giving thanks – saying grace at a table, or as little kids in footy pajamas praying with our parents. But we are always to give thanks no matter how mature our faith grows. It was the example of Jesus standing before the crowds at the feeding of the 5000.

C. Or that gratitude is a win-win escalator. When we are: 1) we win: there are all kinds of studies that establish that gratitude helps us: reduce depression, gain promotions at work; increase our energy; develop a stronger immune system; decrease blood pressure; eat healthier; reach goals faster; be a better friend; reduce and cope with negative stress, etc. etc. etc. But that is not all, when you are thankful – and express it, 2) other people win and they in turn are likely to express thanks to others. We can help lots of people take a step up.

D. I get those argument. There is truth there. But I think there are other things to see in Psalm 100 and the many other passages we find about thankfulness in the Bible. Let me note three:

XV. Three Things to Know About Gratitude

A. One: Gratitude is counter-intuitive. The Bible – and especially Jesus – suggest that the happiness, joy, thankfulness that we are after are not found where we typically look.

1. We talk about finding happiness, which comes from having money, or finding our soul mate, or having great health. We think there are things and stuff

and situations that will allow us to be happy. And the suggestion is that the path to joy and thankfulness is about giving not getting. No.

2. Look, one of the challenges we have to face is that what satisfies today doesn't satisfy tomorrow. Therapists call this adaption; philosophers call it the "Hedonic Treadmill." The point is, we strive for something, thinking it will make us happy. And it might, for a few days. But then, we adapt and think we deserve it. Tragically, what brings thrills to us today, we take for granted tomorrow. And – what's worse – if we lose it (when our conditions for happiness go away) we are crushed. Our reason for living is destroyed.

3. The other challenge is that Jesus suggests we have been wired for something very different. That the way to joy is to give not to get; that the way to really get ahead is to serve, not to be served; that the way up is down; and that the way to be first is to be last. Jesus is really clear that He didn't come to be served but to serve.<sup>6</sup>

4. Gratitude is counter-intuitive, because there is a sense in which you can never get enough to be grateful. You have to think more about giving enough to be grateful.

B. Second: To be thankful, we are going to need to learn to control our thoughts. They are key.

1. What you think about – and how you think about what you think about – matters. 1) Proverbs 23:7 makes this point: As a man thinks, so He is. 2) So does 2 Corinthians 10:5, where we are told to hold every thought captive to Christ; 3) and of course, the importance of our thoughts is assumed in Psalm 1's meditation on meditation and in what we are told in Psalm 100.

2. I've made much of this in the past. Remember the: Sew a thought, reap an action. Sew an action, reap a habit. Sew a habit, reap a lifestyle. Sew a lifestyle, reap a character. Sew a character, reap a destiny.

3. Well the point here is: we need to train ourselves to see how much we have to be thankful for.

C. Which leads me to my final point. There is so much more on this topic.

1. I could talk about the obstacles to gratitude: one being our propensity to focus on the bad. Another being our pace of life. We do not reflect.

2. We could look at ways to cultivate gratitude – things like fasting (you come to appreciate things more if you temporarily give them up); or keeping a gratitude journal.<sup>7</sup>

3. I did not talk about how our thanks should be pure. In Luke 17, ten lepers come to Jesus. He heals them but only one comes back to say thank you. The attention the others gave to Jesus was not exactly pure. It was transactional. We are often that way. We may hope that by praising God we are going to get something back.

D. There is more that could be said. Let me end by noting that the game changer when it comes to thanksgiving is the Gospel. We need to focus on the Gospel. We need to remind ourselves of what God has done for us. Of his love. Of the fact that He did not withhold any good thing from us – he sent His Son. We need to drive that eternity-changing truth deep into our soul so that our attitude is framed by thankfulness.

XVI. Let me end as we began, by reading Psalm 100.

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<sup>1</sup> FYI. Enthused comes from a Greek word that means to be possessed by God. If that's the case, there are very few people in Churches today possessed by God because they show such little enthusiasm.

<sup>2</sup> Pure joy is joy in God as both its source and object. The psalmist says, "You reveal the path of life to me; in Your presence is abundant joy; in Your right hand are eternal pleasures" (Ps 16:11).

<sup>3</sup> There are 13 different Hebrew roots, that combine in various ways to make up 27 different words, to suggest joy or joyful participation in religious worship.

<sup>4</sup> And, again, we are not just being generically grateful. We are to be grateful to God. Phil Yancey says that being thankful with no one to thank is actually a bad feeling. He argues that not being able to thank God takes some of the fun away. You are left thanking the steak for being delicious or thanking a suit for fitting well.

<sup>5</sup> Spiritual disciplines are also things that broaden our perspective.

<sup>6</sup> *Tim Keller, in Walking with God through Pain and Suffering (2013)*

<sup>7</sup> I have done these things and am always surprised by how well they work. I called a few therapists this week and asked for their take on the whole school of positive psychology. I have thought it was often looked down on. They all said, "there is value there." Writing out your blessings doesn't help you if you are struggling with schizophrenia or a psychosis. And it's not enough alone. But, yes, even secular psychology sees the value in things like, learning to be thankful.