

“Thanks for Nothing!”

Theme: Thanksgiving

Ephesians 1:15-23



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It's Thanksgiving weekend, and it's time to count our blessings. Let's think for a moment about the many blessings we have. If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep—you are richer than 75% of the people in this world of ours. If you have money in the bank, cash in your wallet and spare change in a dish someplace—you are among the top 8% of the earth's wealthiest people. If you woke up this morning with more health than illness—you are more fortunate than the million who will not survive this week. If you have never experienced the danger of war in your hometown, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation—you are ahead of 500 million people in this world. If you can attend this worship service, or any other religious meeting, without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death—you are fortunate. Millions of people in the world cannot.

It's not hard for us to count our blessings, is it? Most of us could quickly and easily jot down a rather lengthy list, including thanks for family, for friends, for church, for food, for clothing, for cars, for a home, for a job, for health, for opportunity and so on. But think about this. What if we lack some of these things or most of these things? Does that mean we cannot give thanks? Can we count our blessings only if we have stuff to count? Is our thanksgiving always dependent on having what we think we should have?

In his letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul takes a different view. He encourages us to give thanks for nothing. In fact, he offers us the example of his own thanksgiving for nothing at all—not one physical, material, tangible thing. Instead, Paul gives constant thanks for things which are not things: faith in the Lord Jesus, love toward one another, a spirit of wisdom and revelation, the hope of God's calling, the riches of God's inheritance and the greatness of God's power. Look at this list. None of these blessings can be seen, touched, purchased or possessed—like food, clothing, cars, boats or homes. And yet, they are the very greatest gifts we could ever receive. To give thanks for the non-tangibles, even in the vortex of violence, despair, and suffering, is what the Bible calls praise. Praise is the recognition that it is all about God and not about me.

In the classic book (Antoine de Saint-Exupery's) *The Little Prince*, the fox character in the story is saying goodbye to the little prince and as he leaves he says, “And now here's my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” “What is essential is invisible to the eye,” the little prince repeats, so that he will sure to remember. This fox's insight is right in line with what the apostle Paul wrote to the

Corinthians: “We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen in temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). It is the unseen that is eternal. What is essential is invisible to the eye.

This approach to Thanksgiving runs counter to conventional wisdom, and it refuses to fall into step with the swarm of shoppers who are surging into shopping malls this weekend to begin the Christmas buying binge. “Black Friday,” as this past Friday is called—is the biggest shopping day of the year. It's not black because it's bad, according to merchants, but because they count on it to turn the red in their books to black. They should call it “Green Friday,” the color of money.

But ponder the perspective of the apostle Paul. He doesn't give thanks for gold jewelry, Game Cubes, leather jackets, personal care products, computer games and DVDs. He refuses to focus his gaze on the things that can be seen, because he knows that these things are temporary. Instead, he looks only at the essential and eternal things that are invisible to the eye. When he counts his blessings, he lists absolutely nothing you can buy, and nothing you can own—only faith, love, a spirit of wisdom and revelation, hope, God's inheritance, and God's power.

I want to digress for just a moment. I do not want any of you to think that I am saying that the basics in life do not matter...that it doesn't matter if we have adequate food to eat, a safe and warm place to sleep, and clothes on our backs. Those things do matter and all of us who have more than these bare essentials need to concern ourselves with those who do not have these basics. But for those of us who do have our basic needs met our focus needs to be shifted from the world of material things and onto the invisible. So

let's look at some of these invisible things that Paul asks us to remember.

Paul first gives thanks for faith and love. "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints," he reports, "and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you." (1:15). Paul knows that the sign of true success is not a Lexus, or a house with a view, or a job with a six-figure salary. Instead, success is being a person who trusts Christ completely, and who loves neighbors consistently. This living out of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life - a vertical relationship with Jesus, combined with a horizontal relationship with neighbor—is the key to a perfectly balanced and fulfilling life. And it is also the picture of the essence of the Christian life, a double love—love for Christ and love for others.

Secondly, Paul also gives thanks for a spirit of wisdom and revelation, (vs. 17) which he prays will come out of our ever-expanding relationship with God through Christ. The word Paul uses for wisdom here is "sophia," which means wisdom of the deep things of God. This spirit of wisdom opens our eyes to what God is planning for us, and it helps us to see that there is nothing richer or more valuable than a life in communion with God, both today and in the life to come.

Now to appropriate this spirit of wisdom and revelation we must be willing to commit ourselves to a lifetime of Christian learning. We need to become students of the Bible, and we must learn how to pray. We must commit ourselves to loving God with our minds, as well as with our hearts. Most professionals know that they can never stop learning in their profession. Most doctors do not think that they have finished learning when they leave the classroom of their universities. They know that week by week, and almost day

by day, new techniques and treatments are being discovered; and if they wish to continue to be of service to those in illness and in pain, they must keep up on all the new advances and discoveries. It is the same thing with the Christian life. The Christian life could be described as getting to know God better every day. A friendship which does not grow closer with the years can easily vanish over time. And so it is with us and God.

Third, Paul next gives thanks for a new realization of the Christian hope. It's a characteristic of the age in which we live that it is an age of despair. H. G. Wells once wrote grimly: "Man, who began in a cave behind a windbreak, will end in the disease-soaked ruins of a slum." On every side, the voice of pessimism sounds. And so today it has never been more necessary to sound the trumpet call of Christian hope. Hope that God has broken us free from our bondage to sin, and has adopted us into the family of faith. Hope in God's call in our lives—that we haven't just been put on this earth to take up space, but because God has called us and given us a special purpose on this earth.

The final invisible items that Paul wants us to appreciate are the riches of God's glorious inheritance and the greatness of God's power. God's inheritance is far more valuable than stocks or bonds or a savings account or real estate. It is the promise that God not only accepts us as we are, but God treats us with extravagant attention and lavish affection.

Part of this wealthy inheritance is the immeasurable greatness of God's power working on our behalf, a power that has raised Jesus Christ from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places. This power has put Jesus in a place of ultimate authority, far above every earthly ruler, so that everything on

earth is now under the soles of his sandals. What a comfort it is to know that the rulers and powers of this world do not have ultimate control over the destiny of this universe. There is a power in Christ that makes their power look weak and puny in comparison. In short, Jesus rules.

But the best part is this: God's amazing power is at work in those of us who believe, and this power is experienced as we take part in the life of the body of Christ, that body of believers known as the Christian church (vv. 19-23). It doesn't matter how much wealth or power or prestige or personnel or inventory or square footage we control in this world, because our greatest influence comes through our work as disciples of Christ.

- It is as followers of Jesus that we experience the divine life and power of God that fills all things.
- It is as followers of Jesus that we are able to endure incredible hardship and overcome enormous personal obstacles.
- It is as followers of Jesus that we are able to step out in mission and share the good news in both our words and our deeds.

None of these is a "thing," in a material sense. But whether we are rich or poor, homeowners or renting, working or unemployed, we have access to an amazing set of essential, eternal, unseen treasures. As Christians, we can honestly say to God: Thanks for everything!