

What is Thanksgiving All About?

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I love the holiday season because of the change of routine, the gathered times with family, the special foods I get only this time of year, and the decorations that everyone puts up around homes and neighborhoods. Thanksgiving is one of those holidays that is hard to secularize, though there is great effort to do this with the distraction of the intense shopping the day after, on “Black Friday.” Although we treat Thanksgiving as a holiday for feasting, it is much more than that. It draws our attention away from ourselves and allows us to ponder the Creator, Savior, and Counselor. The very idea of giving thanks assumes that 1) there is someone to whom we give thanks and 2) there is something for which we give thanks. The refrain of the old hymn by Johnson Oatman says it well:

Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.

Thanksgiving Begins with Worship

Giving thanks assumes that we have received something from someone. The Pilgrims recognized that the only reason they survived the new world was by the providential care of God. George Washington called the new nation to thank God for their new freedoms. In the midst of civil war, Abraham Lincoln gave

the nation his *Proclamation Establishing Thanksgiving Day*, October 3, 1863:

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.

To give thanks to God assumes some very basic beliefs: 1) that God does indeed exist, 2) that God is actively involved in the affairs of our lives, and 3) that God loves and blesses us. We cannot give thanks unless we worship. Worship, praise, and thanksgiving go together. Psalm 106:1 says, “Praise the Lord! Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” Unless our hearts are open to the Almighty God, there is no one else worthy of our thanks. The Doxology song proclaims, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” James wrote, “Every good and perfect gift comes from above” (James 1:7). To whom is your thanksgiving addressed?

Thanksgiving Affects Attitude

Giving thanks to God affects how we view the world around us. We can see life as full of problems or full of possibilities, the glass half empty or half full. When we give thanks, we acknowledge that God cares for us and that he provides hope for us in our struggles and pain. Praise refocuses our

priorities. An Irish proverb says, “Get on your knees and thank God you’re on your feet.”

A lack of giving thanks can have a negative affect. Our focus becomes inward. We fail to worship God. We doubt God’s love and begin to fear the future. Any person, family, or nation that fails to give God thanks will become self-centered and eventually self-destructive.

Thanksgiving is Lived out in Action

Giving thanks is something that we must do every day, not just once a year. Every day can be a moment of thanks for us. Prayers over meals remind us of the source of life. Blessing God through short “breath” prayers throughout the day help our problems to become possibilities. Thanksgiving must become a life habit. Don’t be like two men who were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. Instantly they darted toward the nearest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they wouldn’t make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, “Put up a prayer, John. We’re in for it!” John answered, “I can’t. I’ve never made a public prayer in my life.” “But you must!” implored his companion. “The bull is catching up to us.” “All right,” panted John, “I’ll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: ‘O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.’”

Thanksgiving as a lifestyle has several affects on us: 1) it keeps us humble and dependent upon God, 2) it refocuses the direction of our lives, and 3) as we conform to God’s will, we will begin to model God’s character of giving to others—we become God’s instruments of grace.

As many of us gather together this coming week in celebration, let's also make it a time of refocusing. There is no better time to return to faith in God and trust in the salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ than when our hearts are full of praise and adoration. Look around and see what God is already doing in your life. He is there; he is speaking to you; he is blessing you.