

It is good for us to be grateful, to show gratitude when someone else does something for us. And we certainly want to feel appreciated when we do something nice for someone else. It's a nice thing to get things like thank you cards. It's a nice thing to hear someone say "thank you." Sometimes it's even nice to receive a gift in return. Whatever it may be, it's nice to be appreciated. But our gratitude, Christians, is often just that, isn't it? It's often just a matter of words. We say "thank you." We write the card. Whatever it may be. But we usually don't do much more than that. We just kind of leave it at that, which can lead us to think that gratitude is only really about a feeling. As long as I have the right feeling, as long as I have that feeling of being thankful, then I've done everything that I'm supposed to do. But Christians, when we think of gratitude in that way, unfortunately that can affect how we view being grateful to God as well. Because the question we have to wrestle with today is: are we grateful not only in what we say towards the Lord, but also in what we do?

Because Moses in our Old Testament reading for today is speaking to Israel right outside the promised land. They're all getting ready to finally go into the land after forty years of wandering. And Moses is telling them everything that has happened up to this point, reminding them of what God has done for them time and time again, and why they should be thankful towards him. Because they're not about to go into the promised land because they were such great people, because they were so righteous, or because they were so good. If anything, they had shown time and time again that they were not. Because Moses reminds them of the incident with the golden calf, which as you remember from the book of Exodus, as Moses went up onto the mountain to receive the commandments of God, the people of Israel made the golden calf and worshiped it as if it was God. God was understandably very angry with that. He had every right to be. They had been completely ungrateful and had broken the covenant right as he was giving it to them. And so God threatened to destroy them at that time. And they deserved it! But the only reason why they were saved, Christians, was because Moses prayed for them. He interceded on their behalf, calling on God to remember the promises that he had made. The promise to Abraham, the promise to Isaac, the promise to Jacob, to make their descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and to bless all the nations of the earth in them. And because of that promise that God had made, he forgave Israel, even though they didn't deserve it. They deserved to be destroyed, but he forgave them because of his rich mercy and because of the promise that he had made to their fathers. What a wondrous love that is, Christians! That God showed such rich mercy towards his people even when they had been completely ungrateful towards him. God forgave them. So how could you not be thankful to God in a situation like that?

But Christians, do not see yourselves here too? Do we not see ourselves in the same position as Israel? Because before we came to faith, before we became Christians, there was nothing about us that deserved to be forgiven. There was nothing about us that was righteous. Nothing about us that was good. Nothing in us that would've deserved God's mercy! And yet God has shown us mercy, as we hear in Romans 5: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." What a wonderful, glorious thing that is, Christians! That God was so faithful towards us and so merciful towards us even when we hated him that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, so that we might belong to him forever. How could we not be thankful for something like that? How could we not pour out our gratitude towards God for such a rich mercy in his Son?

But Christians, is that gratitude which we feel towards God just words? Is it a matter of just a feeling? Do we say thank you to God, but then turn away from him in other things? Do we say thank you to God, but then not listen to what he commands us, not listen to what he has to say? Maybe it's because we think of the commandments as being too hard, as something that's too inconvenient, too much work, something that we just have other things to do. When it comes to something like church, for example, do we come to church as often as God wants us to do? Or do we sometimes say, "Well, it takes too much time. I've got other things to, do other things that I need to take care of." When it comes to something like forgiveness, and that person over there who has wronged us, who has hurt us in some way, do we forgive them? Or do we say, "No, I can never forgive them, because they hurt me too badly," forgetting that God first forgave us? Or when it comes to something like the poor, those who are in need around us, do we pay attention to their needs? Do we take care of them? Or do we say, "It doesn't matter, because they're just going to use it on alcohol or drugs or something, and they should just find a job anyway." But what does that say about the condition of our hearts, Christians, when we think in this way? When we turn away from the Lord, because, well, we have other things to do? Like a child on Christmas who very begrudgingly says thank you for the presents that they have received, so are we when we don't listen to what God has to say.

So Christians, on this day "Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn." Repent, the Lord says! Turn towards him. Put away these things which keep us from him. Put away these things which lead us towards ingratitude. And come back to the Lord, because he is merciful and gracious. And he has chosen you, Christians, to be his own. And he is also a righteous and a holy God, as Moses says in verse 17: "The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." God is holy, Christians, and God calls us to be holy with him. Because he has forgiven us in his Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, let us walk after him. Let us listen to what he has to say. Let us fear him, love him with all that we are, and serve him, and keep his commandments. All out of a sense of gratitude for the things that he has first done for us.

Because that's what good works are, Christians. Good works are our way of saying "thank you" to the Lord. Because good works are not going to make God love us. Good works are not going to make us righteous in his sight. Moses does not say these words so that he then goes on to say, "Do all of these things, and then you can go into the promised land," as if you earned it by them. Not at all. God is saying, "You're going into the promised land because of what I have done for you." And Christians, we enter into the kingdom of God, because of what Christ has done for us. And the things that we do, then, the good works which we perform in his name, are our way of saying "thank you" for the things that he has done. Because when we know that Jesus has been given to us, it's only natural for us to say thanks. It's only natural for us to want to make God happy and to do what he says to us.

So Christians, fear him. Serve him. Hold fast to him, and swear by his name. "He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things your eyes have seen." Give thanks to him today, Christians, not only by what you say, but also by what you do, because Jesus is your righteousness.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to make us righteous in your sight. We give you thanks for all of your rich mercies which you have given to us, and we pray that you would lead us always to follow after you, to do what is pleasing in your sight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.