

Thanksgiving is a time of many things and many good things. Thanksgiving is a time for a meal with turkey, with stuffing, with potatoes, or whatever our favorite food may be. Thanksgiving is time spent with family, especially family that we haven't seen for a while. And it's good that we have gathered here this morning to worship the Lord on this Thanksgiving Day. But why do we celebrate Thanksgiving? Well, we'd probably say to give thanks, of course. It's right there in the name "Thanksgiving." But what exactly does that mean, to give thanks? What does it look like? And how do we give thanks as Christians and not in the way of the world?

Our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy chapter 26 shows us what it means to give thanks. Because in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is giving his farewell speech to Israel. Israel is standing right outside the Promised Land, getting ready to go in. And so Moses is reminding them of all the things that have happened in the past and also what they should do once they actually get into the land. And our reading from Deuteronomy 26 is Moses commanding them to have their own Thanksgiving Day, showing them how to give thanks for the things that the Lord had given to them. So verse 2, for example, says this: "You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you." So at the beginning of the harvest, then, they were supposed to take some of the first fruits. And first fruits doesn't mean just what is literally first, like the first thing to come up out of the ground. First fruits means the best, the very best of the harvest, the very best of what they received from the Lord. That is what they were supposed to give, not just what they had left over or had no use for. To take that to the Lord in thanksgiving for what he had given. Verse 2 goes on to say: "And you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there." In other words, they were supposed to take it to the tabernacle, to take it where God had promised to be. In our terms, we might say they brought it to church, and they offered it up as a thanksgiving to the Lord for all the things that they have received. Giving back to God what he had given them, literally in this case. And then the priest would take that basket and set it in front of the altar as a sacrifice to the Lord. This is what they were commanded to do once the harvest had come.

So giving thanks, Christians, means first of all giving back to God. And for Israel that was very literal: to give part of what they had received to the Lord, to give some of the harvest itself. And honestly that's not a bad thing. We might even imitate that today, even if it's just giving part of our income. It is an excellent way to give thanks to the Lord for what we have received. But thanksgiving is also more than this. It is also a spiritual sacrifice, giving prayer and praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Because thanksgiving is not just a feeling, Christians. It's not just feeling really gracious for everything that the Lord has done for us. Thanksgiving is giving back to the Lord. It is offering up to him our thanks, setting our thanks before his throne which is in heaven. And so when we gather today, we should pray and give thanks for all that we have received, whether we do that on our own or whether we do it together as a family as we sit down to eat. To give thanks to God for all that we have received, to give him that spiritual sacrifice as a way of expressing our gratitude. And we could even pray in this way: to say "Thank you, Lord, for everything that you have done, and thank you for all of your mercies that you have shown to us." And then it would be good for us to be specific about what it is that God has given to us, giving thanks for family, giving thanks for the harvest, giving thanks for our health or whatever it may be. And then asking him to help us to always look to him for everything that we have and

need, and to ask all these things in the name of Jesus. Amen. That would be a wonderful way to give thanks as we gather on this Thanksgiving Day.

But Christians, this Old Testament Thanksgiving is more than just bringing the first fruits. It's not just about giving part of what we have to God. It is also about remembering everything that God has done. Because being specific about what God has done for us doesn't just mean the past year, but everything that he has done for us in the past. And for Israel, this meant looking all the way back in their history. Verse 5, for example, says: "And you shall make response before the Lord your God, 'A wandering Aramaean was my father.'" In other words, looking all the way back to Abraham. And remember, Christians, when Israel was standing outside the Promised Land, Abraham had lived 400 years before. So they're looking back not just in their lifetime, but looking back over four centuries towards everything that God had done for them. Because what he did for Abraham, he had also done for them. And so, thinking about how God had called Abraham to be his own, not because Abraham deserved it, as if God somehow owed it to him. But God called Abraham purely by his grace to make him his own and to call him to follow him. And now Israel, 400 years later, were God's people by that same grace. And that was something worth giving thanks for.

But it goes on to say: "And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation great, mighty, and populous." So we're also looking at Jacob going down into Egypt. And when he went with his family into Egypt, there were only seventy of them, but by the time they left Egypt 400 some years later, they were a multitude. Two million or more, leaving Egypt. And God had increased them in this way, not because they deserved it, as if they had done something that made them worthy of his care, but rather because God is faithful to his promises. The promise that he made to Abraham to give him offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven. And that was also something worth giving thanks for.

But of course, Israel didn't have an easy time in Egypt. The Egyptians oppressed them, made them slaves, made them have very difficult labor. But God did not leave them there. God brought them out because he heard their cries. He brought them by his grace to the Promised Land, which they were now about to enter. And so all through the past 400 years, time and time again we see instances of how God was showing grace to Israel, showing his love towards them. And now in the years to come, he would continue to show that grace by giving them a harvest. Not because they deserved it or because God had to give them a harvest at all. Rather, because he loved them, and he had shown that love to them so many times, giving his gifts to his people. That was something worth celebrating, something worth rejoicing over. As we hear in verse 11: "And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you and the Levite and the sojourner who is among you." All of these things were worthy of their thanksgiving.

So Christians, giving thanks for us is also about recognizing what the Lord has done. Not just in the past year, although that's important, but also in years gone by. And not just within our lifetime either, but everything that God has done for us. Because Israel was looking back over 400 years to think about all that God had done. Stuff that they had never personally experienced, stuff that happened to their great-great-great-great-grandfathers, but they gave thanks for it, because God had done it for them as well as their fathers. And so for us, Christians, we too

should remember what God has done for us, beginning first and foremost with his Son, Jesus Christ. Because without Jesus, we wouldn't be here. Without Jesus, we would have nothing. We would still be lost, apart from God and justly so. But because of what Jesus has done for us out of his pure love, we are now Christians, called to be God's people. That is certainly something worth giving thanks for.

We should also remember our Christian ancestors, those who came before us and everything that they did and everything that God did for them. Because if God hadn't shown mercy to them, we would not be here today. And we can also remember everything that God has done for us in past years, all throughout our lives, especially in difficult years, seeing how he brought us through them all. We also remember what God has done in the past year, whether it was good or bad. Because in this way, Christians, when we remember all of these things, we will see that there is so much to give thanks for, even things that maybe we don't think about all that often or things that we haven't thought about at all. But all of them come from the gracious hand of God.

Maybe that seems easy, like how could we possibly forget what God has done for us? And yet it's amazing how quickly we forget. Because when we have a good year, yeah, it's easy to give thanks to God. It's easy to say thank you when things are going well. But in the hard years, we very quickly forget and may even want to say, "What has God done for us? What is there to give thanks for?" But when we think of everything that God has done, Christians, then we can give thanks even in the hardest year of our lives, because all that we have, especially our salvation in Christ, is a gift from the hand of God. That is certainly worth giving thanks for.

But giving thanks also includes one more thing, Christians, and that is our good works. Because as we heard in the last verse, it talks about the good which is given "to you and your house, you and the Levite and the sojourner who is among you." So Israel had been given all of these things, in other words, not just for themselves, but also to care for those around them, to care for the poor among them. Because the Levite had no land. He had nowhere to call his own. And the sojourner had no home. He had nowhere to lay his head. And in the next verse, in verse 12, we also hear about widows and the fatherless, those who had no one to provide for them. And God gave his gifts to them so that they could then use them in the service of these people, to use them in the service of those in need. Because God does not give his gifts for our sake alone. He gives them to be used in caring for one another.

And Christians, this is especially true for us in caring for those here in the congregation. Because we should ask ourselves: are there any among us who are hungry? We should give to them so that they have something to eat. Are there any among us who are poor? We should give to them so that they would have no lack. Are there any among us who are struggling financially? We should give to them so that they are cared for, providing for all of their needs because we are members of one another. And I don't mean just in the major things, like taking care of somebody when they have a major medical expense. But that's a good thing too. We should do that as well. But even in the simple things, like giving a turkey to somebody who doesn't have one, especially on a day like today. That is also what we are called to do. Because when we do this, Christians, we truly give thanks to the Lord for all that he has given. Because what better way is there to give thanks than to act like God towards one another? To take what we have been freely given

from the Lord and freely give it to one another? By showing love to one another, especially in this congregation, we truly give things to the Lord.

So let us give thanks, then, on this Thanksgiving Day. Let us give thanks by giving to the Lord what he has first given us, whether physically or spiritually. Let us give thanks by remembering all that God has done for us, even in years long gone. And let us give thanks by serving one another with what we have been given. And in that way, Christians, this Thanksgiving Day will be a true thanksgiving to the Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we give you thanks for all of your mercies, which are new every morning. We give you thanks for all that you have done for us, especially for giving us your Son. Help us always to remember your mercies so that our lives may be filled with thanksgiving towards you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.