

What does it mean to be thankful? I think we tend to think of being thankful as giving thanks for what we have. I'm thankful for my family. I'm thankful that we have enough to eat. I'm thankful for a good harvest. I'm thankful for my good health, and so forth. I am thankful for what I have. Of course, it is good to be thankful for what we do have. Such things come from God's hand, after all, and we should be grateful for all the things that we do have. But the question I want to ask you, Christians, is: could you give thanks for what you don't have? And I don't mean not having just some things, the way we might say I'm thankful that I'm not sick or I'm thankful that I'm not struggling. Because in reality that's just the same thing as before, just worded a little bit differently. But rather to be genuinely thankful for things which we do not have, for things which the world might even consider to be bad. I'm thankful that I am poor. I am thankful for the hard times in my life, and so forth. Now, I know that sounds odd. Who could possibly be thankful for something like that? But it gets at the very heart of what it means to truly be thankful. Because being thankful is not just about what we have, Christians. It is about looking to God in the midst of everything, and being content in everything that he gives to us or that he does not give to us in his wisdom.

I think to really understand this we need to look at our readings for today, where we see a couple of very good examples. Our Gospel reading, for example, gives us an example of what it means to not look towards God in everything. Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who had a very good harvest. So good, in fact, that he didn't have enough space to keep it all. His barns were simply too small. Surely we would think that would be a good problem to have, right? It seems to be a very great blessing to have so much, to have such an abundant harvest. And yes, Christians, it is a blessing. And if God sees fit to give such a blessing to us, we should certainly give thanks for it, because it came from his hand. But I ask you, what if he didn't give it? What if he gave you a poor harvest instead? Would you still be able to give thanks?

Because the trouble with this rich man is that he's focused only on what he does have, and he's lost sight of everything else. And the even bigger problem here is that it simply isn't enough for him. Because if some is good, he thinks, then more must be better, right? And if I can give thanks for this amount, I could give so much more thanks if I had so much more. And so he tears down his barns, not just to make room for this harvest. He wants to build barns big enough to hold this harvest and probably years to come. He wants to hold on to it. He wants to hold it back, probably to hold on to it until prices get better, when the market isn't so saturated, and then he could make even more money off of it. I know that that's something that we do a lot today, but his situation is actually quite different. Because in those days, Christians, people relied on the harvest. If you didn't have a harvest, you would starve in the coming year. People needed that food just to survive from day to day. So for him to hold it back like this meant that he was holding it back from those who actually needed it. He was more interested in making money than actually using it for what it was for. It'd be kind of like people today who jack up prices whenever there's a disaster or some kind of shortage, just to make a quick buck. It's a very dishonest thing to do. And so for this rich man, then, nothing else matters. All he was focused on was what he had and what he could gain from it.

Now, he does give a kind of thanks for it, after all. He says in verse 19: "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But notice who he's talking to. He's talking to himself. He's not talking to God. And that is the ultimate danger when we think of giving thanks only about what we have. Pretty soon we become focused only

on that. Life becomes about possessions. Life becomes about abundance, even if those things aren't actually physical. And when they're taken away from us or if they never come to us at all, pretty soon we lose heart. If we treasure things up only for ourselves, Christians, it's going to end in disaster, because someday it will all be gone, either because it's going to be finally taken away from us or because we ourselves will be gone. And when that day comes, whose will it be? So being thankful is not just being thankful for what we do have. It is about being rich towards God and content in everything because of him.

This is why Paul is so helpful in our Epistle reading for today. He gives us an example of what this looks like. Because when Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was actually in jail, probably in a Roman prison waiting for his trial to happen. Paul was sitting in chains, wondering if he was going to be put to death because of his preaching of the Gospel. That's a very difficult situation for anyone to be in, the kind of thing that we might wonder how could anybody possibly give thanks in a time like that? It seems like everything has gone wrong. It seems like everything has gone the way that it shouldn't go.

And yet Paul could still say in our reading for today, Philippians 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Paul in prison could still say, "Do not be anxious." Paul sitting in chains could still say, "Let your requests be made known to God with thanksgiving." Paul, wondering if he was going to be put to death for preaching the Gospel, could still talk about the peace which can only be found in God. Paul could give thanks in the midst of that situation. How very different he was from that rich man!

But Paul is not just giving thanks in that situation. Paul is not just indifferent to whatever's happening to him. He's not just putting up with it, grinning and bearing it, whatever you might want to call it. Paul could even give thanks for that situation. He could give thanks for the situation that he was now in. In fact, he says earlier in Philippians: "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel." Being in prison had become a way for him to bear witness to Jesus. The guards, those connected to him, everyone around him had come to hear the name of Christ because of his chains. And others, he says, were even emboldened to speak about Jesus. They saw Paul in prison. They saw how he was dealing with it, his peace that he had, and they became even more vigorous in proclaiming the Gospel around them. His imprisonment had become a source of good, and so Paul could give thanks for it. It was as if he was saying, "Thank you, Lord, that I am in prison for you!"

The secret, he says, the secret to giving thanks like this is to look towards God and to be content in him in everything. Paul again says in Philippians: "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." When we keep our eyes on God, Christians, then we can be content in whatever situation we are in. And when we are content in God, we can give thanks for the abundance that comes from his hand. When we are content in God, we can give thanks when he takes it all away the next day. When we are content in God, we can give thanks that we have so much to eat. When we are content in God, we can give thanks when we have to go without. Because being content in God is not about

being indifferent, to just deal with whatever is happening. Being content in God means trusting in him, because he is our loving Father. And our Father knows what is best for us, whether that means that we have a lot, whether that means we have little, or even nothing at all. Because life does not consist in what we have, Christians. Life is in God, and everything comes from him.

That's what we need to remember on this Thanksgiving Day: that thankfulness is not about what we have, but about looking to God. And then we can give thanks even for what we don't have. We will be able to say, "Thank you, Lord, for what you have given to me. Thank you, Lord, for what you have taken away, because you know best. You know the way that I should go. Thank you for leading me in the ways of life, and thank you, Lord, for strengthening me and preparing me for glory through Jesus Christ, your Son."

Let us pray. O God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who knows best what we need and who guides us in the way we should go, we give you thanks for all that you have given and for all that you have taken away. May your holy name be blessed above all things, both now and in eternity; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.