

11/25/2021

Thanksgiving

Pastor Priewe

Text: Colossians 3:15-17

Theme: Thankful from the Inside Out

Have you felt the cold? I'm not talking about the blustery cold November days. I'm talking about those cold moments when you feel yourself turning towards God with your hands stretched out in the air? When the only sensation you've got left in the daily numbness of it all is a knee-jerk reaction that says, "What's your problem, God?" "What more do you want from me?" "Haven't you had enough?" "Haven't you taken enough?" That's a cold and dark place to be.

It's when we reflect on cold moments like those that we start to realize how dangerous they really are, how badly mistaken our perceptions are, and how prone we are to float on a boat named "Woe Is Me" atop a sea of God's new every morning mercies. It's moments like those where we catch ourselves in our sin and we finally come to realize that the warming "message and peace of Christ" is not so much dwelling richly and reigning, but dimly flickering in our hearts. How quickly our hearts become a cold frozen battleground where ingratitude wins the day and plants its flag deep in the frost.

For this reason, Thanksgiving Day has come to serve a very important purpose. No, not one day a year to do nothing but binge on turkey, yams, and football, but at the very least, one yearly reminder to defrost the bottom of the freezer in our hearts. You know that big old chunk of ice that grows through the year and envelops the whole bottom shelf in ice. It's the last thing at the bottom of the to-do list, but you've been putting it off long enough. The ice just keeps growing. It's time to get down to the bottom and get rid of it. And when you do, you're forced to take everything out of the fridge and freezer one by one and see just how much you actually have in there. It's a useful process to see what's been forgotten about, what we've left spoil, and what is just sitting there waiting to be used.

Thanksgiving gives us a chance to do just that—to take stock of everything one by one and see all that God has blessed us with. And when we've once again seen and appreciated all those blessings, we can finally get at melting the thankless ice block of a year gone by and return our hearts to proper working condition. So today as we meditate on our text from Colossians 3, we'll do so under the theme "Thankful from the Inside Out".

The first thing to realize is that "thankfulness" and "gratitude" are not stand-alone qualities. The Apostle Paul's command to "be thankful" is sandwiched between two very important reminders about the peace of Christ and the message of Christ. We don't just have a natural spring of thankfulness inside us that bubbles up. Thankfulness and gratitude are *responses*. They are reactions based on not only what we've received but our understanding of what we've received. We are thankful in response to what we realize that we've been given, and the amount of our gratitude corresponds in some way to our understanding of how much we've received. The more we realize what we've received, the more we are thankful.

So here is where we encounter a problem. I'm going to take a wild guess and say that most of you intellectually know how many blessings you've received from God—the home you live in, the bed you sleep in, the food you eat, the people around you who care for you, along with all the fun gadgets you have to boot. All of that stuff that might get mentioned as you go around the Thanksgiving table doesn't even mention the greatest love anybody could ever show from the God who laid down his very life.

We all *know* the many things that God blesses us with continually and yet we realize how hard it is to *feel* continually thankful in everything we do. The proper response just doesn't come. There's something broken about us that always wants more, that receives from God and yet doesn't produce the appropriate response to his gifts. We don't feel like singing, we don't feel like reading or meditating, we don't feel like listening to anyone else sing, and we definitely

don't feel like giving thanks. Like a frozen chunk of ice at the bottom of the freezer, something has frozen up our peace on the inside and so it freezes any warm and thankful response to God.

So what is the real enemy behind the cold we want to focus on today? Of course the general answer is well, sin! Duh, but what is it that robs us of the peace of Christ and our thankfulness with it? Much of the time our peace is robbed by bad expectations, mistaken expectations that are formed from the outside in! When the message of Christ doesn't form and inform the basis for our expectations from the inside out, we set ourselves for disappointment and our God up to fail. Bad expectations are the recipe for broken responses and cold heartache.

For one, we expect to be able to carry on our lives with everything we need without any help from God, except that he had better be there when we need him the most. And secondly, we act like we are the ones who get to declare our expectations to God rather than the other way around. Here's a newsflash. God is never going to fulfill our bad, mistaken expectations, so if that is what we are holding our breath for, we're going to suffocate and never be thankful again. We are the ones who had better get our expectations adjusted.

There was a moment this year where I had my expectations drastically and abruptly adjusted. It was by far the hardest moment of my life. About a week after our daughter Josie was born, the doctors brought Carissa and me into a room to share with us the results of her brain MRI. Based on what they saw with the damage her brain sustained, they said there were a lot of things they never expected her to do—walk or talk or possibly even be aware. Their expectations were low based on her brain's condition and what they had seen from other children in similar situations. They were giving us the worst-case scenario.

As I think back on it now and how terrible those moments were to endure, I'm thankful for the hard thing that the doctors did. Like resetting a broken bone, they reset our expectations. We expected that she would naturally have a life filled with running and jumping and singing and sports and all the things that we treasured so much in our own lives. And if those continued to be our expectations, it would always seem like she was missing out or more accurately like *we* were missing out.

But with our expectations properly adjusted, every single solitary step of progress that our dear little daughter makes is cause for joy, true thanksgiving. When she lifts her head off the floor, when she takes one single swallow of milk out of the five bottles a day she gets through her tube, when she hears her mother's voice and turns her head to the left (she doesn't like to go to the left), it brings tears of joy. With realistic expectations, we treasure each blessing she receives for the gift that it is.

It's the same in our spiritual lives. When you measure God's gifts only by your mistaken expectations of what he should give, what you demand is appropriate, what you reckon you deserve, you will always find him underperforming, withholding what you're due. You will always find yourself unsatisfied.

But when you measure what God gives by a true understanding of the worst-case scenario, that is, what you actually deserve—wrath, anger, punishment, death, hell—you will see every drop of grace he generously rains down on you. You will find true joy in every breath of life you receive from God. When you stop to realize that he does not treat you as your sins deserve or according to what you should rightly expect from him, then even the smallest things in life are cause for joy: every sunset, every time a leaf turns from green to red and you get to see its beauty, or even the first snowfall that covers the trees with sparkling white snow. But those aren't the things that will keep you thankful forever.

When we understand the ultimate blessing we receive from God, the gift of his own Son

and the peace that only comes from Christ, it is cause for daily tears of joy and heartfelt thanksgiving. That's what the peace of Christ is: the true knowledge of what we deserve from God overcome by faith in the unbelievable reality of what we actually receive from God instead—forgiveness, life, salvation.

So the message of Christ produces the peace of Christ and from the peace of Christ bubbles up thanksgiving, true and lasting gratitude. I'm not talking about happy feelings or our mood from time to time throughout the day. I'm talking about true Christian joy and gratitude that lives down deep in our heart. Thanksgiving is our response to the peace of Christ, and the peace of Christ is something that can only be produced by the message of Christ.

We began this sermon talking about a cold dark place, a frozen battleground. How quickly our hearts can turn into that place, like ice growing on the bottom of a freezer. I want you to leave this sermon imagining a much different place. Imagine it. It's a cozy room filled with people you love all being blessed by each other's words and songs. They're all gathered around a fireplace in the center of the room. Not those electric gimmick fireplaces, this is a real fireplace, with real logs, there's a beautiful glowing fire filling the room with not just a warmth, but peace and joy as well. The fire burns brightly and all who gather around are changed by its warmth.

Where is this room so we can go there? Doesn't it sound so nice? It's the heart where Christ dwells. That beautiful glowing fire is the message of Christ, its warmth is the peace of Christ, and that room is *your heart*. Imagine it as you hear again the words of our text, **“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:15-17**

Where the message of Christ burns brightly in our hearts, it fills us with the warmth of his peace, and our lives are forever changed. The message of Christ gives us peace that peace makes us *thankful from the inside out*. Amen.