

Thanks & Giving: Thankful Worship
By Jason Huff
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Luke 17:11-19; Revelation 5:11-14; Colossians 3:12-17

Our final Scripture lesson this evening comes from Colossians 3:12-17. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the insert from your bulletin to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 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 word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 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."

On any given weekend, 17% of the United States goes to a worship service. What happens is different in every church...even Catholic and Orthodox services where the rituals are the same from place to place, there are still different songs, different homilies, different participants. But what is worship? Do we even understand it? If we do, do we actually do it?

As we've gone through the Ten Commandments together, I've thought a lot about worship. That's because the commandments have pointed us not to rigid rule-keeping but to deeper relationship with God. Last week, we learned that the tenth commandment, "do not covet what belongs to your neighbor," is only fulfilled when we desire God more than anything else. The reason we exist is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Enjoying, desiring, and glorifying God are central to relationship with Him. Those are at the heart of worship.

In Hebrew and Greek, the core word for worship means to bow down. In the New Testament, it's not always clear if someone is bowing before Jesus or if they're worshipping Him. Worship is to bow before God – to acknowledge that He holds our lives in His hands, and we owe Him allegiance and devotion. We are His to command. We belong to Him. Ancient kings had their subjects kneel to show subservience. We kneel only before God. We recognize His value, that He is worthy. When we worship, we come together to acknowledge God's worthiness to receive our praise, thanksgiving, prayers, attention, and time.

Worship and thanksgiving are full of paradoxes. Think about thanksgiving. The good paradox of thanksgiving is that those who have the least are usually the most thankful for what they have. The bad paradox is Black Friday – people who are supposedly thankful for all they have run each other over the next day to get all the stuff they don't have. Which side are we on?

Less than half of the settlers on board the Mayflower survived the first year of Plymouth Plantation. Children were orphaned and almost every family lost members. Conditions were incredibly harsh. Yet they celebrated God's goodness. It seems like a paradox. Yet those who live for God can rejoice in all things, knowing He is ultimately in control.

At the center of both worship and thanksgiving is the paradox of Christ – He is fully God, but He became in very nature a servant, dying on a cross to take our punishment. We can give thanks because of Jesus’ sacrifice. Colossians 3:12 was written about us, God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved. We rejoice not because we chose Him but because He chose us, not because we are holy but because He makes us holy, not dearly loved because we deserve it but because He chose to love us. We are thankful worshippers because God didn’t save us out of duty but out of a love beyond our wildest dreams.

When we reach the point of believing in Jesus and becoming His follower, wanting to desire Him more and more and enjoy Him, how can we worship in a way that pleases Him? We embrace the paradoxes of worship and avoid the pitfalls. That’s what we’ll spend the rest of our time on today, seeing how we find ourselves falling more in love with God through worship.

Paradox #1: Worship is a command, but thankful worshippers do it willingly, eagerly, and gladly. Worship is not a duty but an honor. Do you know everyone who lives will one day worship God? Even those who reject God will worship Him. Romans 14:11 says, “Every knee will bow...and every tongue shall give praise to God.” We who are chosen by God and are rescued from sin and death have the honor to praise God willingly and gladly in this life, now.

Duty has nothing to do with it. Imagine that Catha got home from a long day of work and I gave her a kiss, and she said, “What was that for?” And I said, “It’s my duty.” That’s no good! If I take her on a date or buy her a Valentine’s gift out of obligation, what would she say? I’d be in the doghouse? It would be ludicrous! I love to do those things, not because I have to, even though I said in my wedding vows I would, but because love goes way past obligation!

Thankful worship that God accepts as faithful is the same way. God wants us to worship Him because we love Him and enjoy Him and want to glorify Him. In John 4:24, Jesus says that God seeks worshippers who worship Him in spirit and truth. We’ll talk about those two parts in a minute. But God wants faithful followers to worship Him out of love, not out of compulsion.

God’s serious about this. He has no interest in duty-bound worship that comes from a dead heart. In Amos 5, God speaks to those who worship Him out of duty but reject His ways: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies...I will not accept the offerings you make...away with the noise of your songs! ... But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” God doesn’t need our worship. He wants us to love Him and to obey His ways and for worship to flow out of that love and obedience. I encourage us to check our hearts and see how we see worship – as a wonderful privilege or an obligation.

Here’s paradox #2: Worship is meant to be deeply emotional AND richly thought-provoking. God wants worshippers in spirit and truth, right? In Matthew 22:37, Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” We worship in spirit when we let the worship of Jesus invade every part of our feelings and emotions and heart. We worship in truth when we use our minds and seek to understand the deep things of God. Worship isn’t any one part of the service; it’s the whole thing – music, liturgy, the readings, the sermon. We have all those parts because they affect us differently – they are meant to move every part of us because God lays claim to everything we are.

Jonathan Edwards is the greatest American preacher who ever lived. His sermons are still read in secular classrooms to understand the importance of Christianity on American life. He hit both sides of the equation. Edwards' sermons were theologically deep and emotionally powerful. His sermons led people to weep uncontrollably, to shout aloud for deliverance, to rejoice. He wasn't a noteworthy speaker; he read his sermons! But the material struck his listeners dead center in head and heart. Naysayers criticized him because of the reactions his sermons received. But God used Edwards as the lynchpin to the First Great Awakening that revived a passion for God throughout the mid-1700s in North America.

Edwards was from our branch of the church, which surprises some. Many Presbyterians are stiff and emotion is downplayed. But it hasn't always been this way. Sadly, in most parts of the universal church, you worship emotionally or intellectually, but not both. That's a problem. Passion and feeling without intellectual truth leads to believing whatever you feel mostly deeply, which can lead us away from Christ. Worship that stimulates the mind but not the heart is just as deadly because we think we're saved through our knowledge of God rather than a relationship with Him that consumes every part of us. In our passage today, it says to "teach and admonish" while "letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly" and "singing with gratitude." Paul encourages us to experience the full meal deal of head and heart, not just one or the other.

When we are thankful worshippers in the way God desires, we open our hearts and minds up to whatever God would do in us. We can't always control what's in the service; you can't control if the music stirs up emotions in you or if the sermon strikes you or convinces you or stimulates you. But we are ready for God to move in every part of us. We are laid bare in worship, nothing hidden from God and no part of us unable to be touched. If we desire God above all else, we should want this and expect it in worship. Every part of us comes into the sanctuary to be cleansed and healed and challenged by the living God – head and heart.

Paradox #3 – Worship is meant to be deeply reverent and surprisingly undignified. God deserves our best. We come in awe of Him. The Bible describes this awe as fear, and it's appropriate. When I was in Oscoda a couple weeks ago, I had lunch just off the lake, and I was intimidated by it. You look off and there's nothing – no homes, no land, no boats, just water as far as the eye can see. The vastness is daunting. That's a small body of water compared to an ocean, and an ocean is a drop in the vast reaches of the universe God has created. We should be awestruck and afraid...not because God is out to get us, but because He is so powerful, so good, so holy, so just, so loving, and we are not. Our reverence comes from deep respect of Him. When we worship, we come in wonder and awe to approach the throne of grace.

But at the same time, because we revere God utterly, we can be personally undignified when God calls us to be. We need to be able to let go of our own ego in the presence of God. Our ego means nothing to Him, and sometimes we have to give up our own pride to worship Him unabashedly. In 2 Samuel 6, when the Ark of the Covenant was returned to Jerusalem after years in enemy hands, King David danced before the LORD with all his might in front of the entire assembly of Israel in just a loincloth. His wife Michal was so angry that it was so undignified that she despised David in her heart; they never spoke again. But God was honored.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were about appearances and ritual and dignity. They despised Jesus partially because of all the undignified behavior around him. Prostitutes washed Jesus' feet with their tears and hair. Tax collectors climbed trees to see Him! Men cut through the roof of a house so their friend could be healed. Talk about undignified! But Jesus loved them all. He loved them *because* they were willing to be undignified. They weren't going to let what anybody thought of them stop them from getting right with God.

I'm going to ask you to stand up and do a couple things with me. Now put your hands up as if you were stretching. Now put them out to the side. Now clap. All of those things are OK in here. In fact, they are completely appropriate. When we sing a song that says we lift our hands in worship, and nobody's lifting their hands, I think, "Is anybody paying attention?" I can't lift my hands; I'm playing guitar. But it's OK! This is the one place in the whole world where you can let go – cry, say "Amen," laugh, clap – and if it's for the glory of God, it's OK.

One of my favorite movies is **About A Boy**. Hugh Grant plays a 30-something guy who never has to work, he's self-centered, he's all about what's cool. He becomes friends with a very sweet, very uncool middle school kid. The kid wants to play a song at the school talent show for his mom. Hugh Grant's character knows it will be a disaster because the boy is so into it, so loves his mom, so wants it to be great, he sings with his eyes closed. It's the epitome of uncool.

As thankful worshippers, it's OK to be so into God, so into the moment, so undignified, that we sing with our eyes closed, with our hands stretched out to God, appealing to Him in the moment. We shouldn't force it – forcing it is just one more kind of obligation. But if God's moving in our hearts and minds, don't let what others think stop you.

Those are some paradoxes we find in joyous God-centered worship. When we embrace them, we enjoy God more and fulfill what we were made to do – to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But with those paradoxes come pitfalls that can stop us from pleasing God in our worship and enjoying Him. The sooner we identify them, the sooner we can watch out for them.

Pitfall #1 – Going to worship for what we get out of it. There is no quicker way to destroy worship than for worship to be about you. We are not the object of worship. God is. If we judge worship based on what we get out of it, we have missed the point. We've been taught subconsciously that church is entertainment, like going to the movies but about God and better for you. If you don't get something out of it, it was a waste of your time.

But worship isn't a means to an end. Worship, the glorification of God, the enjoyment of God – those are ends in and of themselves. We don't feel amazed standing in front of the Grand Canyon or fearful standing in front of a bear or loved when an old friend gives us a hug for the first time in years and think, "What's the purpose in feeling this way?" We just feel. We just experience those emotions. If we go to church thinking, "It will make my mood better," and it doesn't, we feel put out and let down. But if we go to worship thinking, "I am going to glorify God," then any benefit we receive from it is wonderful – but secondary and unnecessary. The enjoyment of God comes in the worshipping, not in the receiving.

Pitfall #2 – Fretting about the form of worship. This is directly related to pitfall #1. It happens when we determine that we like a particular form of worship and we get cranky when we don't get what we want. We see this when folks get mad that there aren't more hymns played with an organ or contemporary songs played with electric guitars. We see it when folks think there's too many readings to say together – or too few. It's judging the pastor for wearing a robe or not, or preaching a certain way, using or not using lots of illustrations. It's not worshipping because something about the form doesn't appeal to us. It keeps us from engaging when there's something new and different that we don't know yet, like new music.

This is dangerous because we often don't see it as being about us or “getting” something out of the service. We think there's something genuinely better about what is actually just our preference and what we already know. Now if a church has something genuinely wrong – if the music or sermons have bad theology or if the pastor and elders are not walking with Christ – run away. There's nothing wrong with embracing a church where we are welcomed and the sermons are good and the music is appealing and we feel at home. But if we find ourselves frustrated with worship, especially in a church where God has planted us and rooted us, we need to do a heart check to see what's going on.

This can be tough because sometimes it means we have to learn new things. The last couple of weeks, I've been in churches where I didn't know but one song. One was traditional, one was contemporary, and I stumbled through both, even with a hymnal! But worship was more important than knowing every note. One song, I learned and we'll use in a couple of months. Here at CrossWay, almost all the songs we sing can easily be purchased online or even at local Christian bookstores. We can learn the forms so we can better worship.

Last pitfall today is ***Pitfall #3 – Thinking we don't need weekly worship or that we can go it alone.*** Even when we're gone for a weekend, I'm searching for a church. It's not because it's a duty. Though it's fun to pick up something I got from another church and use it here, that's not it either. Worship to me is less like a choice and more like oxygen.

None of us were made to be spiritual deep-sea divers that can go under for long periods of time without breathing. We were made to enjoy the clean fresh wind of the Holy Spirit often. As little as a generation ago, two worship services a week were the norm – Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. That's all but gone. And that's sad, because we need worship.

When it comes to worship, we are spiritual sharks. Sharks swim to breathe. A shark is swimming or it's dying. We either glorify God and get the life-reviving breath of the Holy Spirit or we slowly but surely die spiritually. I encourage you to make every effort to be here every week. It's not because I get paid based on how many people show up. It's not because it's more fun to preach to a full crowd – even though it is! It's because we need it. It's hard sometimes to say “no” to folks who are scheduling things during worship. But the next time somebody asks you about your plans for Saturday night, don't ask yourself, “Do I need to worship this week?” Ask yourself, “Do I need to breathe this week or not?”

In the same way, we can't do it alone. People who tell you that they can worship just as well at home alone or in the forest communing with nature don't understand true worship of the living God is or they've never experienced it. Unless you're with fellow believers, singing songs of faith, hearing the Word of God and experiencing it preached, you aren't worshipping in the way Paul taught us in Ephesians.

Scripture talks about people praying alone, reading Scripture alone, fasting alone, giving God His due alone...but that's all preparation for coming together for corporate worship. God makes us into His holy nation. We are not all individuals walking separately with Jesus. We are brothers and sisters. We need each other to worship properly. If we have to go it alone, we should constantly be praying that God would restore people to our fellowship soon.

We've just gotten a taste of being thankful worshippers. But isn't it exciting to think about? The more I think about God fulfilling my deepest needs, the more I think about worshiping Him as the reason I was made, that I was made to display His glory to the world and to enjoy Him, the more I want it. If you've never given your heart to Christ, or if you don't feel that desire to glorify Him, to enjoy Him, I invite you to pray to Him and ask for the ability to trust in Him and the desire to desire Him. I pray that you would join us on this journey of thankfulness expressed through worship. Because the more we give thanks, the more joy we find in God, the giver of all good gifts.