

"THE CASE FOR THANKSGIVING"

Text: Philippians 4:10-20

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by

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"I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me; you were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me.

"Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only; for even in Thessalonica you sent me help once and again. Not that I seek the gift; but I seek the fruit which increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more; I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

This paragraph is one of the last things that the Apostle Paul ever wrote. In expressing gratitude to his Philippian friends, Paul mentions three things for which he is thankful.

(1) He is thankful for the things that have been given to him by his friends; (2) he is even more thankful for the relationships that underly the gifts and make them meaningful, and (3) he is thankful for the chances that still remain open to him to live a constructive life. "I can do all things....." Even though he is in prison and is apparently closed off from the privileges of movement, nevertheless he is caught up with a Christian understanding of history; he knows that the story of man is not closed in and sealed with impossible barriers. Therefore, he is thankful for the open options that God's grace has given to man in history.

There are two ways to look at the whole question of Thanksgiving. The one is to summarize the many things, chances, and relationships for which we are and should be thankful and the second way to consider the meaning of Thanksgiving is to try to understand the dynamics involved in

the very act of giving thanks itself. It is this second way, the dynamics of gratitude that we should particularly probe. Let me put the dynamics of gratitude this way:

For a man to be fully man in the Christian understanding of human-ness, he must express gratitude to others and to God but he should not expect nor demand gratitude from others. Gratitude is only meaningful in giving it; to want it, to crave it, to long for it, to wait for it is self-defeating and destructive.

Take the negative point first: The person who says "all I want is a little appreciation" is basically unresolved and his statement proves it. He has done things not from fullness but from emptiness. To desire gratitude from people will always have a negative effect upon your own outlook. This is a principle that is equally true for men and for nations.

One result that almost always develops in such people is a tendency to play to the crowd in every act. Instead of doing something because it deserves to be done, such an individual always calculates the "gratitude quotient" of a particular act and so the excitement and joy of the event itself is corroded, spoiled by an ulterior motive. This is one very sound argument in favor of confidential contributions to worthy causes. A few years ago my own denomination, the United Presbyterian Church, USA, launched a vast capital funds drive to raise some sixty million dollars for overseas and national needs (Silliman University has received a building from that drive). The campaign has been a complete success and succeeded in capturing the imagination of Presbyterians because the objects of the drive were strategic and carefully thought out. In reading some of the early campaign reports I was impressed by an item under the donations summary. It read: "Three individual gifts of one million dollars each (anonymous)." I said to myself then that this is a very good omen for the whole campaign. Here are three people who want to give because something needs to be done and they want to have a part in doing it; and not only that, but they resisted the desire for public appreciation.

This past summer I was confronted on one occasion by a fellow American who in a few well chosen sentences expressed his dismay and sense of injury at the "lack of appreciation" that so many of the underdeveloped countries had expressed toward the USA for "all of our vast foreign aid." It is hard to answer such a statement until the frame of reference is changed from that of the symbols of gratitude to the tremendous task that must be done and a task in which all of us in the human family have an inescapable share. If our eyes are on the common challenge, then the whole dynamics of international aid are far more healthy for us, both the giver and the receiver. But if our eyes are glued to the applause meter, the results are inconclusive and confusing.

Secondly, those who exact and expect gratitude will inevitably develop a persecution complex because there will always be a very large company of ungrateful people, especially relatives. These real examples of unthankfulness from those who have thoughtlessly forgotten to acknowledge our kindnesses all produce in us a "gratitude obsession." I know of and have counselled people who bear wounds far out of proportion to their

real injury because they have cultivated in their own hearts each experience of ungrateful children or friends or husbands or wives. I will promise you this: if you keep careful records on the appreciation you receive from other people, you will close each day a prisoner to "I told you so's," hurt feelings and self-indulgent indigestion.

The third result is ironic but, nevertheless, almost always true. Those who extract thanks from others are always themselves the least thankful toward others. I think the reason is obvious; in demanding appreciation for the things we give out, we tend to seal off the deeper possibilities of relationship and of chances, so that they fail to discover their own debts to people around them.

It may be surprising to all of us that Jesus Christ in his whole ministry never asks for our gratitude nor does he expect it from man as if he needed it to complete his own character. According to the New Testament record Jesus taught only one prayer: the "Our Father." Have you thought of the fact that the "Lord's Prayer" contains no sentence of gratitude to God? It is important to keep this matter in focus; we in the church are the ones who have rightly said that man must give thanks to God. Our Lord at his Last Supper with his disciples said of that Holy Sacrament, "Do this in remembrance of me." It is the church which has called the Holy Communion the Eucharist, the "thanksgiving."

What then is the positive side of the dynamics of gratitude? A man should not expect gratitude but he must give it. Gratitude to be meaningful is a one-way street. To give thanks to God and to man is sheer exhilaration and is man at his very best. Giving thanks has a wonderful effect upon our lives.

To show gratitude keeps us human. We are admitting to the fact that we need someone else and such an admission is not only accurate but good for the soul. The false front of imperial self-sufficiency is impossible to maintain in the face of honest thankfulness.

But in an even profounder sense the importance of gratitude is that it puts a man in the open position toward his neighbor and God and this enables him to really know the neighbor, to really know God. At one point in the ministry of Jesus he healed ten people who were afflicted with leprosy. Of the ten only one returned to the Lord to express his thanks. In the long view the only difference between the nine and the one will be just this single fact: The man who gave thanks not only received a gift from the Master but he was privileged to know the Master.

The dynamics of gratitude have not changed since then.