

GO FORWARD!



in Thanksgiving

Sermon

TITLE:

Go Forward! In Thanksgiving

TEXT:

2 Corinthians 9:11-15

THEME:

Thanksgiving is a time to be generous. Generosity reflects God's gift of grace to us. Giving includes sharing the good news of the Gospel. It is a test of our responsiveness to God's sowing and scattering of grace among us.

INTRODUCTION:

A long time ago in the 19th century there was a wealthy woman from Paris named Babette, who fell on hard times. She was the head chef at the renowned Cafe Anglais but a violent insurgency abruptly closed her establishment leaving her penniless with no place to go. An acquaintance from the Paris opera took pity on this former woman of society and sent her to his hometown of Jutland, Denmark, a small, coastal village that was ruled by a severe Protestant sect of Pietists. Babette appeared on the doorstep of two pietist sisters named Martine and Philippa, who agreed to take her in as a servant.

For 14 years Babette worked hard for the two sisters just to earn her keep. They really didn't know what to make of her. Though she was a spinster like them, Babette still wore her beautiful Parisian dresses which contrasted sharply to the

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coarse black woolen frocks of the pietist Martine and Philippa. Truth be told, they weren't very nice to Babette. They thought she was worldly, and they would often snicker behind her back when she would style her hair before going out to milk the cows.

One day Babette was informed that she had come into possession of 10,000 francs, a virtual fortune in those days. Keeping this to herself, she announced her intention to make a meal for the entire pietist congregation, which consisted of only a dozen or so people. This meal would be different from the plain, bland food that the sisters and their congregation were used to. This would be a proper, multi-course, French meal.

Babette had to order in the supplies needed to make the meal, and as the villagers saw the exotic food being delivered, there was a ripple of amazement and excitement that started to spread throughout the town. The sisters didn't know what to think as their kitchen pantry filled up with the luxurious French food. They were even worried that perhaps they were sinning by eating such food. The whole congregation was thrown into an uproar, as Babette prepared her feast.

On the day of the feast, the invited guests came to the home of Martine and Philippa. That same opera singer who sent Babette to Jutland was also there. As the dinner was served, the pietists ate in silence, fearing that to show pleasure in the meal was to sin against God. The opera singer however, marveled aloud at the meal saying how it reminded him of the luxurious food he used to enjoy in Paris at the height of his career. As the courses were served, the silence of the congregation gave way to cheerfulness and mirth. It was announced that Babette had come into a fortune of 10,000 francs. Martine and Philippa asked her if she was going to return to Paris now that she was wealthy again. "No," she



replied. She went on to explain that she had spent her entire fortune, all 10,000 francs in preparing this one meal for the members of the congregation. After the initial shock, Babette's Feast, also the name of a film that this story was based on, was enjoyed even more by the sisters and the congregation as they recognized the sheer graciousness of the dinner. Every last cent of the fortune was spent in preparing this lavish meal. What better way to express thanksgiving for the gift than to show appreciation and grace to Babette, who was then fully accepted into the community.

TRANSITION:

During this season of Thanksgiving, though your meal budget will hopefully not exceed 10,000 francs, it will nonetheless be a time of gracious giving, and thankful receiving. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he promotes the importance of generosity and giving with a cheerful heart as an act of grace. In 2 Corinthians 9:11-15, he links together three great truths: 1) Grace from God comes as a gift. 2) God's grace prompts grace in and among people, and that 3) grace returns to God in the form of thanks.¹ As we reflect on our overall theme for the coming year which is the Whole World Mobilizing, we will learn how God's grace and his command for us to give generously and graciously to one another, is one of the ultimate tools of evangelism. A thankful person and a gracious person can be a powerful magnet that draws people into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

¹ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume XI, p. 132.



1. THE GIFT: GRACE FROM GOD COMES AS A GIFT.

First however, in the context of today's scripture, Paul is writing to the Corinthians with the hope that they will supply him with a financial gift that he will give to the fledgling church in Jerusalem. He says earlier in chapter nine that he was boasting to the Macedonian believers about just how good the Corinthians were in their giving. He hopes that when he sends those responsible to collect the gift from the Corinthians that his claims won't ring hollow. Paul is making the claim that believers of Jesus Christ should be generous. The reason they should be generous is because God was generous in pouring out his grace to them. Grace is the undeserved favor of God, that God gives to his followers through Christ Jesus. Salvation, or being saved from the penalty of sin, is only possible because of Jesus Christ making atonement on the cross of Calvary. Our eighth doctrine states that we believe "...we are justified by grace, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and that he that believeth hath the witness in himself." That sacrificial act on behalf of God was an act of grace. Paul wants to make clear to the Corinthians that grace only comes from God and that God only gives grace as a gift. It is not something we can ever pay for. It is not something we can achieve through our own merits. It is the only true gift.

There's a tendency because of our familiarity of the word, to pass over grace, to assume that we know everything there is to know about it. But grace isn't something just to be learned; grace is something to be experienced. When you're so aware of your own sinfulness before God, when you experience those rare moments in your soul where you know that you're unclean before the Holy Spirit and still you feel love, acceptance, and forgiveness from God - that's grace. John Newton in his famous hymn called it, *amazing grace*. Acclaimed author, Philip Yancey in his book, "What's so Amazing about Grace" explains grace this way: "Grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me

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more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God's family."

Bowled over by the grace of God in his own life, Paul exclaims in verse 15, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" What is grace? It's amazing. It's indescribable. It invites you to sit at the table when you don't even deserve to knock on the door. It's Babette preparing a 10,000-franc meal for people who whisper behind her back. It's Jesus Christ saying on the cross of Calvary, "Forgive them Father. For they know now what they do." And in today's scripture verse, it's Paul encouraging the Corinthians, who were probably not very wealthy, to give what little they had to support the brothers and the sisters of Jerusalem who were in a desperate situation. This free gift of God, is grace.



2. THE GOAL: GOD'S GRACE PROMPTS GRACE IN AND AMONG PEOPLE.

The next teaching that Paul offers the Corinthians is that God's grace, prompts grace in and among God's people. Beginning in verse 11, Paul writes, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion...Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you."

Paul starts off by saying, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion." Paul is not simply talking about monetary wealth, but about the riches that we experience in Christ Jesus. This includes material provision, yes, but it also includes abilities, talents, employment, health, friendships, family, all the things we say we are thankful for on Thanksgiving. When you think of all the blessings that God has given you over the years, can we not all say that we are a wealthy and blessed people? We may not have a bank account like Bill Gates, and sometimes our own cupboards may be empty, but God has given us abundantly more than we could ever ask for, amen?

That's such a fascinating concept: God pouring his blessings on us so that we in turn can be a blessing to other people. So often we desire to hold on to the things God has blessed us with for our own use, instead of giving them away to bless others as the Lord had intended. Perhaps it is like holding on to a handful of sand: the tighter we close our fist, the more sand escapes. Likewise, the tighter we hold on to the things God has blessed us with, the more they leak out and these amazing gifts end up going to waste. Do we want to squander the generous gifts God has given us? As Paul would answer, "By no means!"

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In verse 13, Paul gives another reason as to why we should share God's gifts. "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else." By being generous you are being a powerful witness to others that the Gospel is real and that the Gospel has the power to change lives.

Think of the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22 and the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector. The rich young ruler was told that for him to have eternal life, he needed to give away his wealth because it was a stumbling block. What happened? He walked away sadly. He could not give away his gift to others. Zacchaeus on the other hand, accepted the Gospel so readily and so joyfully, Jesus didn't even need to tell him what to do to make things right. Unprompted, Zacchaeus said, "I'm giving away half of my wealth to the poor, and if I cheated anybody, I'll pay them back four times!" Jesus, in response to Zacchaeus declaration, said, "Today, Salvation has come to your house."² What a witness to the power of the Gospel a generous spirit truly is.

You see, generosity, giving, sharing - are all acts of grace. Another reason Paul gives to the Corinthians as to why they should give, is a very useful one. Verse 14: "And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you." Acts of grace stir people up to pray. Prayers said for you and about you are a blessing - to you. We all need each other's prayers, amen? The beauty of prayers offered on behalf of one another to God is what prompted songwriters Robert Sterling and Claire Cloninger to write one of the best loved songs we know today:

² Luke 19:1-10

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*Somebody went to the throne of heaven,
Somebody lifted my name.
Bringing me into His holy presence,
Saying what I could not say.
Somebody showed me the face of His mercy,
When darkness was all I could see.
Somebody pleaded the Blood of Jesus,
Somebody prayed for me.*



3. THE GRATITUDE: GRACE RETURNS TO GOD IN THE FORM OF THANKS.

The final exhortation that Paul urges his Corinthian readers to reflect on is that grace returns to God in the form of thanks. Grace, and thanksgiving are closely tied together in all of Paul's writings. In fact, biblical scholars agree that throughout Paul's letters, "the proper and fundamental response to God is quintessentially expressed as resulting in 'thanksgiving to God'.³

We live in an age that celebrates being the fastest, the strongest, and the best. Watch only a few minutes of television or internet ads and the message you'll see over and over again is "Go ahead. Indulge. Buy. Accumulate. Possess. You deserve it. Others don't, but you do. Treat yourself." But grace teaches us that we don't deserve it. We don't deserve the costliest gift that was ever purchased for us - the gift of God's salvation, and yet, we can have it. It can be ours, hallelujah? In response to such grace, we can only express our thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, you'll be pleased to know, is not the consolation prize that God will begrudgingly accept because it's all we can offer. No, thanksgiving is the only response God wants. Do we stand before him today, a thankful people?

As we pray, plan, and prepare for our Army to be mobilized in mission, to go forward in evangelism, may we seek first and foremost to go forward in thanksgiving! How do other people honestly see the followers of Jesus Christ? Would seeing God's people with closed hands, ungenerous spirits, and ungrateful attitudes, point them towards Christ, or point them away from Christ? Whereas a person who always offers thanksgiving to God, grace towards others, and reflects a simple contentment with his or her life, no matter what it looks like, can serve as a very powerful magnet that draws people into the kingdom of God. Oh I pray that we would be such an attractive people today.

³ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume XI, p. 130.

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In the Gowans and Larsson musical, *Hosea*, one song begins by children saying their prayers to God, which are more akin to requests and wish lists than anything else, followed by a quick amen. From their perspective, the prayer is finished. Then the narrator asks if they have forgotten to add something, to which the children reply in song: “I nearly forgot to say thank you.” Likewise, it is easy for us to think of God as a granter of wishes. Our prayers begin to sound like a list of demands instead of a give and take conversation that we might enjoy with a loved one. We can easily become thankless in our prayers. Conversely, a heart that is truly thankful expresses thanksgiving even in the darkest of circumstances. Swedish Salvationist August Ludvig Storm suffered a back ailment at the age of 37 that left him crippled for life. Nevertheless, he wrote a hymn expressing his thanks to God which reads as follows:

*Thank you, Lord, for wayside roses,
Even for the thorns beside;
Thank you for the prayers you granted
And for those that you denied;
Thank you, Lord, for precious comfort
In my hours of grief and pain;
Thank you for your precious promise
Life eternal I shall gain.⁴*

Like the songwriter, let us cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving by acknowledging that every good gift in your life comes from God - the maker of Heaven and Earth. “God graces. God sows. We do not deserve God’s favor, but we receive

⁴ SASB 395

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it."⁵ Secondly, show that grace to others by being generous. Whether you have much or whether you have little, be generous with what you have. That act of grace may be a good deed, it may be a financial gift, it may be an invitation to share a meal, it may even be a prayer, raised up to God on another person's behalf. Be generous to others and others may be generous to you. And finally, the grace that is passed for one person to another, will rise to the Father as a hymn of thanksgiving. When our Heavenly Father sees his children, being good to each other, practicing grace, practicing generosity, this in turn gives him joy. To serve God joyfully gives us joy in return. This is the essence of Thanksgiving. Let us pray.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we want to express our thanks to you. For your salvation, we say, thank you. For your grace, we say thank you. For the opportunity to practice grace to others, we say, thank you. Through our generosity, may we be a witness to others. Through our love, may we draw people to your side. Help us, O Lord, to be a mobilizing Army. Help us, O lord, to go forward in thanksgiving. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

⁵ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume XI, p. 132.

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APPEAL:

During the playing of appropriate music, invite the congregation in one or two sentences to complete the following sentence:

Thank you God for_____.

After some time, encourage congregation members to prayerfully complete the following sentence, demonstrating one concrete action they are willing to put into practice, either aloud or in their thoughts:

I will go forward in thanksgiving by _____.

Ex. I will go forward in thanksgiving by saying thank you to the cashier at the grocery store.

I will go forward in thanksgiving by cultivating an attitude of gratitude.

I will go forward in thanksgiving by keeping the conversation positive, when it starts to go negative.