

# The Spirit of Thanksgiving

BY  
REV. FRANK  
K.  
BAKER

As we approach the annual Thanksgiving season, what more beautiful or appropriate sentiment could be suggested for the hearty consideration and quiet meditation of every person than that contained in St. Paul's exhortation to the church at Ephesus: "giving thanks always for all things unto God."

It is the duty of all to be thankful to God, who is the active source of all blessings in creation, in providence and in grace. All are the recipients of God's favors which demand return of thanksgiving. It is not only God's right, but man's happiness, and not to render it is to wrong both God and oneself. It is right and "comely" and "pleasant" both to God and man. Thanksgiving and praise is the employment of earth as well as of heaven. All certainly owe thanksgiving to God as a tribute for past mercies.

O, holy Father! just and true  
Are all thy works and words and ways,  
And unto thee alone are due  
Thanksgiving and eternal praise!  
As children of thy gracious care,  
We veil the eye, we bend the knee,  
With broken words of praise and prayer,  
Father and God, we come to thee.

It is soiling indeed to think of at least one little season in the whole year when, in the midst of all the rigor and vigor of life, all persons shall possess to some degree the thanksgiving spirit. Like the Israelites of old, all should come to God with a peace offering of thanksgiving which would be delightful to God and double the offerer's blessing; for it is "More blessed to give than to receive." As the Israelites came to the altar with festive gladness in their hearts, because peace was established between God and themselves, and reconciliation was realized, so likewise should we all unite in a sacrificial banquet of joy and thanksgiving over peace and plenty, through our Heavenly Father's good pleasure. The offerings of the Israelites were an expression of their gratitude to God, an acknowledgment of his infinite power and glory, an expression of their reverent sense of God's goodness to them, and of a desire to render some service to him in return. This ancient people of God did not always approach him with requests; they often came with offerings intended distinctly for thanksgiving.

We, as true worshippers of God, should not only seek God when we have requests to present, or when some danger threatens, or some great need presses; but there are seasons when we should come to him with songs of praise and thanksgiving. There are times when the language of all should be, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?" "Bless the Lord, O my soul," "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift." Is not our annual Thanksgiving season such an occasion? Is not this a time when all should yield themselves in devotion to him who has been their gracious benefactor? Is not this a time when the happy recipients of his grace, like the stem full of sap throwing out many branches, will give vent to their full heart of praise in many different forms? This is a time when language is lame, and we say with Hannah More:

Fountain of mercy, whose pervading eye  
Can look within, and read what passes there,  
Accept my thoughts for thanks: I have no words.

My soul, grieved with gratitude, rejects  
The aid of language: Lord! behold my heart.

We call, with Milton, upon all nature to aid us in rendering praise unto God:

His praise, ye winds, that from  
Four quarters blow,  
Breathe soft o'er land; and  
Wave your tops, ye pines,  
With every plant, in sign  
Of worship wave.

In any normal human being, unless morally degenerate, gratitude naturally rises in the heart toward human benefactors. How much more should it toward God, in whom we live and move and have our being. And yet we find the prophets frequently rebuking Israel for thanklessness and reminding them that the dumb creation put them to shame. There were many lepers cleansed by Christ of whose healing no record is given. The reason the healing of the ten lepers is mentioned is no doubt because one of them came back, "giving him thanks." The incident was mentioned to teach us the lesson of thanksgiving. So much to the credit of the leper. The nine had not the excuse "nothing to be thankful for," which is so often heard. They were thankless and graceless, for these two qualities of character are concomitant. They were hard-hearted. "Neither were they thankful" is mentioned as one of the marks of man's apostasy from God. Gratitude is to man what the ballast is to the ship. A ship should have sufficient ballast for the sail it carries. Only in this way can it have the useful steadiness. A man with great gifts and honors but who is without the ballast of gratitude and praise to God is very likely to make shipwreck on the rock of pride. A man who realizes his right relations to God will have the right apprehension and consideration of the benefits conferred upon him and he will know how to esteem and value them. While each new gift increases his sense of responsibility it also gives him a growing sense of his unworthiness and of his dependence upon God. I say dependence upon God, for what is the idea of thanksgiving, if it is not true, sincere and spiritual worship of God in a spirit of thanks for blessings received? It is impossible for an atheist to be thankful in the true sense. His words of praise and thanksgiving would not be worship, for while his language used implies the existence of a personal God, infinite in power and goodness, his heart denies his existence. Like Cain's sacrifice, it would not be acceptable to God because it was not offered in faith. Thanksgiving without faith and heart in it is mockery. The Psalmist says: "I will praise thee, O Lord, my God, with all my heart; for great has been thy mercy toward me."

We find then that the thankful heart is the most worshipful, for the spirit of thanksgiving is the predominating element in praise, which is the essence of true worship. Worship is only acceptable to God when it is the joyous expression of a thankful and reverent heart. It is then that man is brought under the spiritually transforming power of God, whom he worships. "Praise," said one, "is the rent we owe to God, and the larger the farm the larger the rent." It is to be feared that there are many farms from which he receives little or no rent. "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you."

While we have appointed and convenient thanksgiving seasons when special attention is directed to this obligation, yet the thanksgiving spirit is to become a disposition, "giving thanks always." According to Faber there was a beautiful quote from Philo. It is to this effect: "When God had created the world he worked his hands. One of them replied that it was so vast and perfect that only one thing was wanting to it, namely that there should be a voice from which he receives little or no rent. "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you."



and the firmament showeth his handiwork.  
"Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge."  
"There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard."  
What is needed is the thankful disposition that takes thanksgiving up as a life work and joy, like David, who said: "As long as I live I will praise thee." Thanksgiving with us is not to be "transient—a fit of music and the instrument hung by the wall till another gaudy day of some remarkable providence make thee take it down," but our incessant employment, yea our life. Our Lord is to abide in us and we in him. Like Caleb of old, we should acknowledge God's gracious keeping in all the experiences of our lives. He attributed to God's mercy all that he has; he traced the stream of life, health and strength to this source. "The Lord hath kept me alive," as he said. Think of the multitudes who live without any thoughts of thanksgiving whatever.

It was the law in some old monasteries that the chanting of praise should never be interrupted and that a choir of monks should relieve another in the holy service. How beautiful the thought. May it be more than mere sentiment to us. May gratitude become the common spirit of our lives instead of the exceptional impulse. "Giving thanks always." Many are thankful for some things, for great favors, agreeable and pleasant occurrences of providence and temporal blessings. But when it comes to the little favors of God and man, to the adverse experiences of life and to spiritual and eternal blessings, they show no signs of gratitude. Thankful for all things! I beg you have me excused; I cannot go that far with you, they say. He who is only thankful for some things is brother to him who is thankful for nothing. This is the point at which the spirit of

thanksgiving with many stops. Here they become very pessimistic. How can a man be thankful for the dark chapters in his life, the deep sorrow that has wrinkled his brow, bent his back and whitened his hair? How can he be thankful for the cares and misfortunes that have blighted his happiness and robbed him of his peace of mind? He can be thankful for these afflictive experiences of life only when he realizes their purpose. We don't require the physician and surgeon for their distasteful medicines and painful cuttings with thanks and praise because we like these things in themselves, but because they are the means to restore us to health. If we would look at the afflictive experiences of our lives in the same light, believing that he who holds our lives in his hands, through them deigns to rid us of our sins, restore us to spiritual health, and prepare us to be heirs of his everlasting kingdom, then we would be thankful for trouble and sorrow as well as for ease and pleasure.

What an illustrious example of this faith we have in the life and death of President William McKinley. He lived in the faith that "God's way" is the safe way and that he plans best who plans with God. The spirit of resignation and brave submission manifested in his suffering and death was a part of his life. He felt from his young manhood that a higher power was working through him and beyond him, and sometimes, no doubt, seemingly against him, and yet making chapters of a kind of history that was to last. It was easy for such a noble man of God to say in his last hour: "It is God's way. His will be done." This Thanksgiving day finds this country of ours and the whole world under new obligations to be thankful for the life of our martyred President.

How cultivate the thanksgiving spirit? That it may be cultivated is obvious. That all have it in germ and that all should cultivate it is not realized by many as it should be. How to cultivate the thanksgiving spirit, even among the most selfish of persons, is not difficult of solution. Annie M. Tooley says: "It has no narrow creeds or tenets—no special forms of devotion for the exercise of its influence. It is simply an annual, heaven-born incentive to do good and to make others happy and grateful to our Maker. One way to acquire this spirit is by human charity and pity. The real thanksgiving spirit sends its prayers in a basket of devotion for the exercise of its pity with the palm of the hand. Only when the solemnities of a Thanksgiving day leave such an impression on the people as that they are more careful and cheerful in doing their duty afterward are they indeed acceptable to God or profitable to man. Some people are like a bog which

catches the surface water of the surrounding country, but which has no outlet, they have an unlimited capacity for receiving and absorbing, but they never give out to others. They seem blessed by the constant stream of God's mercies and their life is full to overflowing, yet they give not to others that which would make them happy. Blessed with plenty of money, health and congenial associations, they withhold that from others which might make them happy forever. Selfishness and ingratitude are conjoined. The selfish life is a narrow and untrue life; it is a stagnant life. But how sublime is the life of the thankful soul, forgetful of itself, is devoted to God and duty, and whose brother's good is his good. There is nothing more divine or Christlike than a man whose whole life is possessed with a desire to help others. However lonely the trail of human life, however deep and dark the forest through which it runs, however many and strong the spiritual enemies that infest his way, his heart is kept in perfect peace, because he feels he is a coworker with God in his great work of bringing men into his kingdom. This is the spirit of brotherhood that will make the dream of Olive Schreiner, who says: "I dreamed I saw a land, among the hills walked brave women and brave men, hand in hand; and they looked into each other's eyes and were not afraid."

"And I said to him beside me: 'What place is this?'  
"And he said: 'This is heaven.'  
"I said: 'Where is it?' He said: 'On earth.' And I said: 'When shall all these things be?' And he answered: 'In the future.'"

We have reasons to rejoice that the angels' carol is being translated into Christian experience on earth. This is the true thanksgiving spirit cemented beyond the fear of dissolution the fraternal kinship of Christianized humanity. The selfish man and the unbelieving man who ignores the sacred obligations of the Christian church and the human God is standing in the way of the real brotherhood of man. It is only as the spirit of him who gave himself for us leaves the heart of men and permeates society, that the proper adjustments can be made between capital and labor, the employer and the employe in the economic world. Marianne Farningham, in the Christian World, expresses this great truth in the following lines:

God's world is very large,  
Ours is so small;  
Our love is for our own,  
His love for all.  
The Father's light and love  
No change can dim;  
Why have his children grown  
So unlike him?  
Faces careworn and hard,  
Hearts of unres,  
Hands swift to snatch and hold  
For self the best,  
Insatiate greed of gold,  
Luxury, ease—  
What do the sons of God,  
Craving for these?  
Oh, for the love of God,  
Keep love to man;  
Study the Father's will,  
Further his plan,  
Self-love is never joy,  
Never knows peace,  
Ave, in the God-like soul  
Self-love must cease.  
Children of love divine,  
Learn larger ways;  
Charish the nobler life,  
Filled with God's praise,  
Sorrow will lose its power,  
Morning will break,  
If the heart loss itself  
For love's dear sake.

Another way of cultivating this Thanksgiving spirit is by counting our mercies. We all have more blessings than we are mindful of, but we get so used to them they become common to us and we fail to appreciate them.

We look upon the dew of the evening, or the crops in the harvest, as something regular and customary, and, deprived of these, we feel justified in uttering our complaint as if their bestowal was not calculated to call forth thankfulness.

We daily receive supplies of water and the rays of the sun, and we gaze upon the stars of heaven which God kindles nightly as though they were very common things.

The very frequency of our blessings and the regularity of their coming make them common to us and lead us to forget the Giver. We accept many of our blessings God gives us as if they were not sent.

Many are prone to dwell upon their sorrows and rehearse them who never count God's mercies to them. None are so skilled in numeration as to be able to count all God's exhibitions of goodness, which are as numberless as the sands by the seashore.

Oliver Wendell Holmes gives us a beautiful and suggestive illustration of the thankful heart, finding abundant mercies. Said he: "If any one should give us a dish of sand and there were particles of iron in it, I might look with my eyes for them and search them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to find them; but let me take a magnet and sweep it, and let it draw to itself the most invisible particles by the mere power of attraction. The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies, but let the thankful heart sweep through the day, and, as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find in every hour some heavenly blessings; only the iron in God's sand is gold."

Then count your many blessings, name them one by one, and you will find much to be thankful for. Jesus taught that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesseth. It is not the abundance a man has that makes him thankful; it's being faithful in that which is least. Thankfulness, like justice and truth, is the companion of the soul.

A sunny spirit is always a thankful spirit, and to look on the bright side of things is a fair way to cultivate the grateful heart. If we were just as quick to hunt for the bright places in life as we are for the dark ones we would find less use for sighing.

We might mention one more way in which to cultivate the Thanksgiving spirit, and that is by considering the relative importance and value of the things seen and unseen. The constant appreciation of the brevity of life and the hope of immortality will rob life of its drudgery and make it worth living. We are told that over the triple doorway of the white marble cathedral of Milan there are three inscriptions spanning the splendid arches. Over one is carved a beautiful wreath of roses and underneath is the legend: "All that which pleases is only for a moment." Over the other is a sculptured cross, and these are the words, "All that which troubles is but for a moment." Over the great central entrance, in the middle aisle, is the inscription, "That only which is eternal." To live in the light of these great facts will develop a thankful heart. The hope of the life which is to come makes this life worth living. The belief "that life here and now has its roots in immortality, that here and now we have close kinship with heaven, and that the purposes and hopes that animate us today, instead of being destroyed by death, shall find their completion and fruition in the calm beyond death" will crown life here with joy and gladness and yonder with glory.

Cultivating this upward look toward life and immortality beyond the grave is to bring into our lives a sweeter and richer consciousness of the heavenly world; rob our lives of much of their bitterness and lighten the shadows which bereavements have cast over our pathway. It is an inspiration to live in anticipation of reaching the city which hath foundations, where we shall be reunited with "those whose bark sped out into the night and over the sea, while we stood weeping upon the shore."

May Thanksgiving day find us entering into "peace with God" by bringing to him the "sacrifice of peace offerings," which is "a broken spirit" and "a broken and a contrite heart."  
And while we call home our dear ones and hold our family reunions around all our hearthstones, while we render to God services of praise and thanksgiving for the bounteousness of the harvests and of our general prosperity, may we also give ourselves to deeds of brotherly kindness and loving charity, endeavoring to "give back the upward looking and the light" to the sorrowing and to "rebuild in them the music and the dream."  
How appropriate are Addison's lines:  
When all thy mercies, O my God,  
My rising soul surveys,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise,  
How