

Thanksgiving'

By: Doug Warren

How do you give thanks when life is hard?

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite times of year. There is so much about this season and our family traditions that make it a delight. Yet, I have many friends for whom this is a painful time of year. Lost loved ones, memories of past hurts, or current crises can make it very difficult to feel thankful. So what do you do when life is hard and folks around you are happily giving thanks?

This really gets at the heart of what gratitude is all about. Often I find that we approach giving thanks along the lines of the children's song that sings, "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands." While that is good for as far as it goes, it doesn't go very far. What I find that God tells us instead is to "give thanks in all things." How can we be expected to be grateful in the midst of difficulty or, even worse, real horror? And even if we are willing to be thankful in such situations, how do we go about doing it?

First of all, real thanksgiving is person-specific rather than stuff-based. We see this with children all the time. We try to teach our kids to be grateful, not just polite. When they get a really cool toy, we help them express thanks to the one who gave it to them, rather than just offer a token "thanks" while they are engrossed with their new thing. Gratitude is more than just being happy about the gift; it is an appreciation for the giver. We often confuse excitement about something for thankfulness.

Often this confusion is a matter of maturity. A child is not usually as expressive in giving thanks for the gift of a coat as she is for a toy. But a parent, knowing the reality of the coming cold is able to far more appreciate the greater care and sacrifice behind the giving of the coat. Real gratitude takes into account the person giving the gift. That is also what can account for deep gratitude for gifts of less interest or value when it is connected to knowledge of the love and sacrifice of the giver.

God says that everything that we have comes from Him. Giving thanks necessarily has to acknowledge Him. Enjoying His gifts is not gratitude. Thanking other people for what He has given us is not gratitude. Giving Him personal thanks is. No matter how excited about the stuff we may or may not be, unless we consider His good care behind it, we are not being grateful. Imagine if your wife gave you something wonderful and every time you crowed about it to your friends you gave credit to the store clerk who sold it. We know intuitively that it matters *whom* we thank, but often our thanks completely ignore the one who has given us everything.

Sure it's fine to be as thankful for the coat as for the toy, but how can you be thankful for pain and difficulty? If we focus on the giver instead of the gift it frees us up from self-centeredness so that we can be grateful. Since our gratitude is person-specific, we are able to give thanks for difficult things because of whom they come from. This is the

essence of what Job realized when he said, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not adversity?”

Giving thanks springs from recognizing the goodness of the giver. If we know that He is good and that all that He gives us is for a purpose, we can be grateful. But how do we know that He is good? Isn't that really the source of our struggle? We encounter difficulty, suffering, or heart-ache and we cry out, “What's going on?!” We feel like there isn't anything to be grateful about. We doubt God's goodness, fairness, or entire existence for that matter.

But God's goodness doesn't rise and fall according to our portfolio, relational security, or any of a thousand other variables in our lives. His goodness is trustworthy regardless of our current appreciation of it. How do we know that a good God is the source of our blessings and trials? The only way I know to make any sense out of it is by looking at what Jesus did on the cross. There is no denying that horrific things happen to us in this life and God at very least allows them. God's goodness is seen not in the absence of horror, but in His taking it upon Himself.

Looking at Christ's suffering sacrifice we find not a God who is removed from our pain, but a God who has entered into it and conquered it. Jesus is personally acquainted with suffering. He does not call us to anything that He has not been willing to endure Himself. We can trust Him because He has been there and He has triumphed. He has not only gone to the cross, He has risen from the dead and is coming back for us. Anything that He brings to us is ultimately for our good and so we can give Him thanks and rest in His goodness.

We are to thank God for everything that we have. We are to tell Him how much we appreciate Him and we are to tell others. But it doesn't stop there. We are to live out our gratitude for what Christ has done for us. It is a life full of not only gratitude for what He has done, but also full of hope for what He is yet to do.