

Thanksgiving 2024: Descriptions of Thanksgiving

We'll be celebrating Thanksgiving Day this Thursday. I hope that everyone will have a lovely time with family and friends.

Thankfulness/gratitude is one of the main expectations that God has for his people. Christians should be thankful people. We should express our thanks to God and to others as a normal, regular part of our lives.

Today I want to look at some of the NT texts that mention thanksgiving, and in particular I want to focus on those passages that describe *how* to give thanks or how certain people gave thanks. I'm not focusing on what the people in these examples were thankful for but the manner in which the text describes thanksgiving.

Some of these passages command us to be thankful and tell us how to do that, while others describe how people were thankful to God. I want to focus on the manner of thanksgiving, the way that we express our thanks to God.

These passages suggest a pattern of thanksgiving. We ought to be thankful in the ways these verses describe thanksgiving. We can be thankful in many ways, but we should make sure that we are expressing our thanks in the ways that the Bible describes.

I'll be mentioning many passages, so we'll be jumping around a bit in the NT.

I. Give thanks to God unceasingly.

Eph 1:16 *[I] Cease not (οὐ παύομαι) to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; -- to "cease not" means that you are doing something continually, regularly, frequently. It's a normal part of your life.*

Cf. 1 Thes 5:17 *Pray without ceasing (ἀδιαλείπτως)*

Col 1:3 *We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you—the word "always" in these passages (πάντοτε) means literally "all whenever."*

2Th 2:13 *But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, ...*

1Th 1:2 *We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;*

Heb 13:15 *... let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.* – “continually” here (διαπαντός) means literally “through all.”

These verses tell us a couple of things:

- A. Thanksgiving should be a lifestyle. To give thanks without ceasing, always, and continually does not mean that we are expressing thanks every moment of every day—that would be impossible.

But it is possible to have an attitude of gratitude all the time. We can be thankful as a matter of course. We live a thankful lifestyle. We can have thanksgiving in our hearts all the time. We can express thanksgiving as a regular part of our lives—normally, frequently.

- B. These words—without ceasing, always, continually—also suggest that we are thankful on every occasion, for all things. Many things happen to us that we would typically not be thankful for. E.g., illness, accident, conflict, even death. Why would we be thankful for these things?

1. The trials and tribulations of life can have positive results. If we look, we can usually find something in an event to be thankful about. Even the worst of circumstances may have something positive about them.

Illus.: I recall a story about Corey ten Boom as she was in the prison camps during WWII, she was complaining about the fleas, but her sister pointed out that the fleas prevented the male guards from harassing them. Her sister was thankful for the fleas.

2. And even when we cannot see anything good in a set of circumstances, we can be thankful that God is with us through our trials and has a purpose in them. We can be thankful that God has a purpose for every part of our lives, even the hard parts.

Trans: It may be hard to maintain an attitude of gratitude all the time—without ceasing, always, and continually—yet that is what God wants for us. Even in the trials of life, we can still be thankful. We should strive to be unceasing in our thanksgiving.

II. Give thanks to God abundantly.

Col 2:7 *Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.*

“Abounding” (περισσεύω) means “to exceed, to overflow; to exist in abundance; to furnish richly.”

2 Corinthians 4:15 *For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.*

A. Our thanksgiving to God ought to be rich, overflowing, and abundant. God’s grace is abundant, and our thanksgiving should likewise be overflowing.

If you are saved, you have a lot to be thankful for—God’s grace has been “abundant” to you. You should express thanks to God profusely.

B. 2 Cor 4:15 says that our thanksgiving can overflow “to the glory of God.” God is glorified when we give him thanks. How do we bring glory to God? By expressing our thanks to God.

C. And we ought to be overflowing in our expressions of thanksgiving to those who benefit us in various ways. Many people deserve our thanks, and we should be profuse in expressing our thanks to those who have helped us.

D. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, we should be especially effusive and abundant in our expressions of thanks to God and to others. Take more time to do that. Our expressions of thanks should overflow at this time of year, both to God and to others.

III. Give thanks to God universally.

1Th 5:18 *In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

Eph 5:20 *Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;*

2 Corinthians 1:11 *... thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many.*

Col 3:17 *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.*

1Ti 2:1 *I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;*

Note the key words – everything, all things, many persons, whatever, all men; you might say that we should be universally thankful. These words suggest that...

A. Everyone ought to be thankful.

1. Almost every single person on earth has something to be thankful for. Even the most downtrodden and oppressed person can be thankful for something. Things are not as bad as they could be for most people.
2. God commands Christians in particular to be thankful. Whether we feel like it or not, we must give thanks—it's an expectation for all Christians.
3. The Bible condemns ingratitude
 - a) Rom 1:21—the words “neither were thankful” imply that even the ignorant heathen person should be able to look at creation, recognize that there is a good and powerful Creator, and give thanks to God. God expects even the unsaved to be thankful. God will hold such people accountable if they fail to give thanks to God.
 - b) 10 Lepers (Lk 17)—only one returned after being healed to give thanks to Jesus for what he'd done.

In my experience, people who receive generously are often *not* particularly thankful, or at least they don't express their gratitude very well. People today have a sense of entitlement—they feel like they have the right to various things; they are entitled; they deserve all the good things in life. Instead of feeling entitled, we should be humble and thankful for what we get.

B. We should be thankful for all things. “always for all things” (Eph 5:20)

1. This is probably one of the most difficult commands of the Bible to truly and sincerely obey. It's easy to be thankful for the good things of life. These are the kinds of things we thank God for all the time—family, health, home, job, church, nation, etc.
2. Being thankful “always for all things” is a very difficult thing to do. Some of the things that happen to us are not good. Some of the things that happen to us are sinful or the results of sin, yet we are supposed to be thankful.
3. Some of the things that happen to us are destructive and even lead to death.

E.g., woman who lost her arms and legs; MBU student (Hannah Glass) who had intense allergic reaction to food and died. When I put myself in place of those people or their families, I find it would be very difficult to be thankful while enduring such experiences.

4. Yet the biblical expectation is that we are thankful for all things. The only way that we can do that is if we believe verses like Rom 8:29. If God is providentially providing and guiding in all areas of life, then we can be thankful for everything God gives us or allows into our lives.
5. I'm not suggesting that everything that happens to us is good; far from it. Much of what happens is very bad and sinful. Yet, because these things come to us through the will of God, we can be thankful for them.

Php 1:20 [Paul's desire was that] *Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.*

Is it possible that God might be glorified through my trials or through death? Yes. If a loved one dies, and through that process God is glorified, should I be thankful? Yes.

Trans: Our desire should be that we are thankful universally—we should strive to give thanks “always for all things” (Eph 5:20)

IV. Give thanks to God diligently.

Col 4:2 *Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;*

- A. The word “watch” (γρηγορεύω) refers to vigilance, giving strict attention to something, to being active. We are to be active and vigilant in prayer with an attitude of thanksgiving. Be diligent and active in thankful prayer.
- B. Jesus used the same word when he told his disciples, “Watch and pray” (Mt 26:41). He told his disciples to “pray and not faint” (Lk 18:1).
- C. The exhortations suggest that thankful prayer is sometimes difficult. Thanksgiving requires active diligence. If thanksgiving were easy, we would not have to be vigilant about it; we would do it naturally. Being thankful is sometimes rather difficult, so we need to be diligent about it.
- D. Thankfulness is often not natural. We usually have to teach our children to be thankful. We have to remind them to say “thank you.” We have to remind them that they have much for which to be thankful.
- E. Sometimes gratitude comes naturally, but often it does not. If you are like me, you sometimes have to remind yourself to show gratitude and to express thanksgiving.

Trans: We must be diligent about expressing thanks. We have to work on it, we have to actively think about it. The Thanksgiving holiday reminds us to be diligent in giving thanks.

V. Give thanks to God sincerely.

Lu 17:16 *And [one of the lepers who was healed] fell down on his face at [Jesus'] feet, giving him thanks....*

- A. This is a verse from the story of the 10 lepers whom Jesus healed. Only one of them turned back and thanked Jesus.
- B. What do you suppose was the significance of falling down on his face? To bow down before someone is an act of worship. To fall down on your face is an intensive form of worship.
- C. If you had been healed of leprosy, do you think you would be sincerely thankful? I think so. You would probably want to demonstrate how thankful you were about that.
- D. Most of us have not been healed of a deadly disease like leprosy, but some of us have recovered from various diseases or illnesses. Maybe our recovery was not miraculous like the lepers, but we still ought to be thankful, whether the recovery came through a miracle or if it came through modern medicine.
- E. Maybe we have not experienced the miraculous healing of disease, but we may have experienced other remarkable blessings. Maybe what you were worried about did not happen, or maybe what you never dreamed would happen did happen. Whether such things are miraculous or not, when we receive unexpected, remarkable blessings, we should be especially thankful.
- F. This verse also links thanksgiving with worship. This man fell at Jesus' feet in worship. We might not exactly do that, but we do worship God by expressing our thanksgiving to him. Sincere thanks ought to be a regular part of our worship of God, both in private and as a congregation.

VI. Give thanks to God eternally.

Rev 7:11-12 *And all the angels stood round about the throne, and [about] the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, [be] unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.*

The heavenly beings are pictured as expressing their desire that thanksgiving may be ascribed to God “forever and ever.”

We don’t know exactly what heaven will be like, but I assume that we will join the heavenly host in thanking God. Perhaps we will forever be expressing our thanks and praise to God for what he’s done for us. We ought to be thankful for the prospects of heaven.

If you are *not* saved, you won’t have anything to be thankful for when you face eternity. Unbelievers will be judged for their sins and spend eternity in a place of severe punishment. I don’t know that anyone in hell is thankful for anything.

If you are saved, you ought to be thanking God unceasingly, abundantly, universally, diligently, sincerely, and eternally for salvation. It’s only by God’s grace that we’ll escape the punishment that we deserve because of our sin. We ought to be exceedingly thankful to God for sparing us from eternal damnation and for promising us a home in heaven. If you are saved, thanksgiving should be a significant part of your life now, and it will be part of your life throughout eternity.

Trans: One final category—and I didn’t know quite how to categorize this one; but given the fact that most of us will be feasting rather excessively later this week, I suggest that we should...

VII. Give thanks to God gastronomically.

Gastronomically is a word that pertains to food and cooking. The Greek word *γαστήρ* means “stomach, belly.” Anything gastronomic pertain to food or the stomach.

There is one particular occasion upon which the biblical authors seem to attach the giving of thanks, and that is giving thanks before eating. We ought to eat with thanksgiving. We should express our thanks for food.

Lu 22:17, 19 And [Jesus] took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: ... And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, ...

John 6:11 *And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would.*

Ac 27:35 *[Paul] took bread, and gave thanks to God in presence of them all: and when he had broken it, he began to eat.*

Ro 14:6 *.... He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks;*

1Ti 4:3 *... God hath created [food] to be received with thanksgiving ...*

1Ti 4:4 *For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving:*

These verses tell us several things:

- A. Christians should express thanks God before they eat. The primary purpose of a prayer before a meal is to thank God for the food. We are giving thanks to God for providing the food we need.

And I think we should do this both at home and out in public. Teach your kids to pray over meals at home, and pray over meals when you are out in public. We should not be ashamed of praying in public. We don't need to make a spectacle of ourselves, but we should pray.

Are you embarrassed to pray in public? I hope not. A simple, brief prayer of thanksgiving for your food ought to be just about the most natural thing that we do before we eat. If we do that regularly at home, it won't be a big deal when we are out in public. And prayer in public can be a good witness to others. It also shows our children that we are not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.

- B. We should receive our food with thanksgiving. When we give thanks to God, we are acknowledging that all our resources come from God. We are dependent upon God and we are thankful for whatever he provides.

Jas 1:17 *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, ...*

- C. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, most of us will be enjoying special, rich, high quality foods. We'll be feasting in ways we usually don't. We'll enjoy delicious foods in large quantities. I imagine that some of us will be breaking our diets. We'll be celebrating and rejoicing and feasting and thanking God for all that he has given us.

De 12:7 *“And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all [your labor], you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you.*

I wonder if we are giving thanks biblically, in the same ways we find reflected in the NT. I hope that during the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, we'll be thanking God unceasingly, abundantly, universally, diligently, sincerely, and gastronomically. Our expressions of thanks to God “always for all things” should extend throughout our lives and keep on going throughout eternity.