

Four Thanksgiving Commandments

This week is Thanksgiving. I'm told that there are only three nations in the world that have a thanksgiving day—the Philippines, Canada, and the US. Of course, our Thanksgiving has a long history.

The first Thanksgiving was celebrated in 1621 to commemorate the harvest reaped by the Plymouth Colony after a harsh year. Governor William Bradford proclaimed a day of thanksgiving, and had a harvest feast to which they invited the Wampanoag Indians.

The nation began to recognize Thanksgiving in 1789, when George Washington declared it a holiday. His proclamation is famous, and you can read it online. Surely this says something positive about our nation, that most of us still look to a God in heaven for our blessings.

Thanksgiving was hit and miss for many decades, until President Lincoln revived it as a way to unite the nation. In 1863 he issued a Thanksgiving proclamation, declaring the last Thursday in November a perpetual holiday. His proclamation is also inspirational, and can be read online.

From then on, Presidents issued annual Thanksgiving proclamations. All the Presidential Thanksgiving proclamations can be read online, and their common feature is a prayer to God. So far, that's still politically expedient—but it must be recognized that not everybody is mindful of God. There are a lot of “harvest festivals” going on out there. For many it's a time for a vacation or family reunion or cranberry stuffing, but being thankful to God is not part of the project.

I'd like to give you four commandments to keep in mind regarding thanksgiving, not just for this week, but for always.

Thank the Right One

Harriet Martineau was an atheist. One day, she and a friend stepped outside into the glories of a beautiful fall morning. As she saw the brilliant sun shining in a blue sky, the brightly colored leaves swirling on the trees, she was filled with the beauty of it all and burst forth, “I am so thankful for days like this!” Her friend said, “Thankful to whom, my dear?”

Psalms 100, labeled “a psalm of thanksgiving,” says, “Give thanks to Him; bless His name, for the Lord is good.” Everything we enjoy comes from God. Withdrawing money from an ATM is possibly the most detached form of gain we can experience. But it's not (as kids sometimes think) a matter of punching the right buttons on a magic money-spitting machine. Certainly, there's no point in saying “thanks” to the machine. But neither should we heap praise on ourselves. God provided the gain! We can be thankful that God gave us the strength and ability to provide, that God gave us a free country, that God gave us a job, that God gave the sunshine and the rain to provide life itself. If it weren't for God's hand, we'd have no money to withdraw, nor would we have cereal, medicine, hamburgers, gasoline, hot water, or air conditioning. Sure, man invented the ipod, but God gave him the brains and raw materials.

Let us be sure that we're not expressing some vague and sanitized notion of “we've got a lot

to be thankful for,” (worse yet, “we’re so lucky”); but that we truly appreciate the source of our blessings, and that we are not ashamed to tell Him, and to tell the world.

Be Thankful in All Circumstances

Sometimes, our thanksgiving attitude is inconsistent. The Bible says “in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18) and says we should be “always giving thanks for all things” (Eph. 5:20). Everything and always.

It must be admitted, some years we feel more blessed than others. Some may spend this fourth Thursday of November 2016 in a hospital bed, or with a newly-empty chair at the dining room table, or with a \$7 canned ham and Kraft mac and cheese. It can be a challenge to be thankful in such circumstances.

Decades ago, a Snoopy cartoon came out Thanksgiving week. Inside the house, the family enjoys a big meal. Snoopy sits on the porch staring at the dry dog food in his bowl. He says, “How can I be thankful being a dog on Thanksgiving?” In the last frame, Snoopy finally says, “I guess it could be worse; I could be a turkey!”

For the Christian, there are always lavish blessings to count, even in the worst times. We are convinced that God has a benevolent purpose in everything, and that we have redemption and an incomparable eternal inheritance. We can praise God for the good, and we can praise God for the bad.

Thank God Before Asking for Stuff

I’m really annoyed that many retail stores are open on Thanksgiving this year. I’m even more annoyed that many shoppers will be there, trampling one another to get toys, video games, and flat screen TVs. Such behavior indicates that asking for more stuff is quickly superseding being thankful for the stuff we already have.

In biblical prayer, giving thanks always comes first. Requests follow. Jesus starts the model prayer “Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matt. 6:9) and only toward the end says, “Give us our daily bread.” Thus, Paul advises, “With thanksgiving let your requests be made known” (Phil. 4:6). Make sure all prayers have an overall “attitude of thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2).

Failure to Give Thanks is the Beginning of Much Worse

Lest anyone think I’m just being sentimental or cranky, realize that one of the symptoms of a doomed world is that God’s children fail to honor him or give Him thanks.

Paul traces the downfall of the Gentile world, saying that even though everyone can see God in the world He made, “they did not honor Him as God or give thanks,” and this led to all sorts of sin and corruption (Romans 1:20–23). But maybe Moses said it best. He warned the Jews on the border of Canaan, The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs ... a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey, a land where you shall eat food without scarcity, in which you shall not lack anything... When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by

not keeping His commandments ... lest your heart become proud and you forget the Lord your God... You may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my own hand made me this wealth.' But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth. And it shall come about if you ever forget the Lord your God ... you shall surely perish (Deut. 8).

God is the Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and King. He deserves thanks on a daily basis for our great blessings. Once we stop giving Him the credit, we descend into all sorts of problems.

"Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever" (Rev. 7:12)! -- *John Guzzetta*