

True Thankfulness...

1. Thinks first of God
2. Cares more for others

A pastor tells this story of an elderly man:

During my days in college, one day an old man showed up at the door of the house we were renting. Opening the door a few inches, we saw his eyes were glassy and his furrowed face had a prickly, grey beard. He held a wicker basket with a few unappealing vegetables. He greeted us with good morning and offered his produce for sale. We were uneasy enough to hastily purchase something just to get him to go away – in both pity and fear.

To our chagrin, he returned the following week. He introduced himself as Mr. Roth and explained how he lived down the road in the tiny shack. As our fears dissipated, we realized that it was cataracts, not alcohol, that gave his eyes a glassy disposition. During future visits he would shuffle in with two mismatched right shoes and play his harmonica. With an attitude fixed on future glory in heaven he would sing old gospel tunes and we'd visit about vegetables and religion.

On one visit he exclaimed. "The Lord is so good! I came out of my shack this morning and found a bag full of shoes and clothing on my porch!"

"That's wonderful, Mr. Roth!" I said, "I'm so happy for you."

"You know what's even more wonderful?" he asked. "Just yesterday I met some people that could really use them!"

There's no doubt that we've all met people like Mr. Roth before, though it is a rare thing. These are the people who embody what it means to be thankful to the Lord. They express their thankfulness through generosity to others. They want others to feel the love of God as they do. Consider another example, this time from the Bible:

Luke 21:1-4 Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, 2 and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. 4 For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." (ESV)

What we see here is a lesson on true thankfulness. I'm going to venture to guess that the topic of thankfulness can be an uneasy one for Christians. I say that because we're dealing with a topic that is pointed at our lives. Thankfulness is something we express. It is a good thing, but never the less still something we do. Our greatest comfort in life always comes from what God does. That's why we center around His Word in church. We want to hear and be reminded of what God does. That's where comfort and hope come from.

Although Thanksgiving is no doubt a cheerful holiday as well as a major theme in the Bible, we can struggle with it at times because it is within the realm of our responsibility. This is true in similar areas of our faith that are also directed at our lives. Things like: prayer, praise, offerings, stewardship, and fruits of faith. Sometimes, it's second nature to neglect these aspects of our faith because they are secondary to what God does. Of course, it's also easy for the opposite effect to take place, namely

that we make more of them than we should. How do we strike the appropriate balance? We get a lesson from this widow.

Part 1

First of all, she is entirely dependent on God. We're told that the widow offered two small copper coins that day. The only other account to describe this story, from Mark's Gospel, provides a little more detail. Mark tells us that the two coins made up what was called a "quadrans." This is a foreign term to our ears so it's hard to really grasp what the widow gave. But by comparing other monetary figures from this time we can understand that a quadrans was about 1/128th of a denarius. A denarius was the amount of one day's wages. That really helps us understand the widow's poverty. All she had was a mere fraction of even one day's wage. Even if she kept those two copper coins she would still have nothing of any value.

Yet, there must have been a certain amount of fear in her heart as she committed her offering. This was truly all she had. As Jesus described, there was much more going on than just her offering something to the Lord. She was committing her life to the Lord. That's the first marker of a truly thankful spirit. The exact amount of money doesn't matter. The significance of the offering isn't as important. God wants us to give of ourselves, before we give of our possessions. He wants us to commit our hearts to Him by faith – a faith that trusts and relies on Him in all circumstances.

Paul describes the same mindset in Romans: **Romans 8:31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** Faith is not having all things figured out on your terms. It is knowing that even though life is chaotic and out of your control, that God holds firm to you. Faith also looks most of all at forgiveness in Jesus. If God accomplished that, free of charge we might add, why would He neglect your daily needs? If God is for you, nothing can be against you – in food, clothing, shelter, protection, and eternal life.

Is that how you approach your offerings? There are many pitfalls associated with giving. Many are the ways we can fall from true thankfulness. Sometimes we think that giving to God is more of an investment than an offering. Isn't it only logical to conclude that the more a person gives the more influence, power, or responsibility in church they should have? Not according to Jesus. That's giving on the outside without giving from the heart. That's trying to serve the Lord without trusting the Lord. This widow gave because she knew that God had control of her life. She believed that God would not abandon her. She trusted that her reward in heaven far surpassed any wealth of this life. And she was thankful of God's gifts. Because she kept God first and foremost in her life, she abounded with generosity and thanksgiving. She was focused on God's will and not her own cares and desires.

Part 2

The second aspect of a truly thankful heart is that it cares more for others. We're not told what the money given that day was spent on. Surely, the widow's coins amounted to nothing in terms of what is accomplished for the temple work. Yet, that doesn't mean it wasn't powerful in its effect. By submitting herself to the Lord, the widow also showed a higher regard for others in her life. She did not esteem herself as more important than her fellow citizens and believers of God's family. A truly thankful attitude points in the same direction.

It's easy to let our thankfulness be like our forgiveness – only offering it when the situation meets our terms. Sometimes, we refuse to forgive because someone isn't sorry or they haven't reached out to us and apologized first. Likewise, there are times when we are only thankful if our expectations are met. Did the Lord provide what we thought He should, or when we thought He should? Do I have the quality or standard of life that I feel I need? Would I really be content and thankful with just clothing and food?

The widow's caring attitude, putting others above herself, was a product of operating on the Lord's terms. Our human flesh looks at that as restrictive. God tells us it is actually liberating. His terms free us to genuinely serve Him and care for others. The widow did not live by her definitions of rich or poor, or society's. The Lord's terms, as given through His Word, guaranteed that He alone determined her quality and worth. It wasn't about her society or what others said about her. She was valuable to Jesus because He loved her. Her expressions of thanksgiving were valuable, not because of the money or how they looked to others, but because they revealed precious faith in her heart. A believer who trusts completely in God, no matter how poor they are, is truly a powerful thing.

Speaking of power, isn't that why this story is so impactful? The widow was powerless, yet she was commended by her Savior. The widow had nothing, yet she was still thankful. The illusion of earthly power robs us of the same treasures. One of the most famous passages in Scripture is **Philippians 2:13: I can do all things though Christ who strengthens me.** That passage is popular in an age where God's Word is not popular. Why? Because power has not gone out of style. People want power and strength and if Christ can give it, it might just be worth it to follow Him. But so often when people don't get the power they imagine, or their influence doesn't take the form they want, they give up on God. That's seeking Him on their terms, not His.

Most people don't realize the context of that passage. It's very similar to the widow from our text today. In the prior verses of Philippians Paul wrote, **Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.**

Paul's boast of strength in Christ was set in terms of need. He relied on Christ because He needed a Savior, not because it was a popular catchphrase that fit with his line of thinking. The power of the thankful believer always comes back to the same thing – Christ. It is when we are in need that Christ strengthens us. It is through repentance and humility that we receive the power of the Gospel. Jesus proclaimed that He came to save the lost; that those who didn't need a Savior had no part in His kingdom. Never underestimate the power of Christ in your life. What a miracle that He can forgive sin! What a blessing is His underserved love for the lost! And in terms of thankfulness, how amazing it is that He can take ungrateful, self-serving, lost people like us and lead us to gratitude in our hearts. That is powerful indeed.

A truly thankful attitude is a surprising and unexpected thing. But, that doesn't mean it must be rare. You've all seen and experienced those kinds of people before – the ones who defy expectation. The ones who are content despite being in need. The ones who are thankful and trusting of the Lord in all circumstances. Like Mr. Roth, like the poor widow, like the Apostle Paul, you too can rejoice in thanksgiving through the power of Jesus. What a blessing indeed! Amen.

Preached at Redemption, 11/22/18