

“A Course in Thanksgiving”

Psalm 100:4

November 26, 2020

SERMON 1953

by Michael David Henson

Our sermon text is from Psalm 100:4, “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So when are we to be thankful? Some are thankful, when it is appropriate to be thankful—like on Thanksgiving Day. When you receive a gift, a thank you card is always appreciated and in good order. Some are thankful when they are happy. When they receive the present that they were wanting, or they particularly like what they have received. In simple terms you give thanks for the fancy new sweater, but not so much for the obligatory replacement gift of underwear. And thus, thankfulness is based on **my assessment of the gift.**

There are some difficult decisions to make in regard to thankfulness. Normally you would give thanks for a small piece of chocolate cake. But should you consider the blessings of others when it comes to thankfulness? If everyone else has an apple, your thankfulness might abound over the cake which you have. If everyone else has a large piece of chocolate cake, you might reconsider why you got gypped with such a small piece. Is thankfulness then based on **the mean average of those around you**, so that thankfulness implies that you got more than most?

I’ve heard people say, “At least I didn’t get....” Maybe thankfulness is based on not getting the **lowest common denominator**? As long as you aren’t the only one in the room with an apple, you could say, “it could always be worse.” So, is there a cut off for thankfulness?

The ninth and tenth commandments give a prohibition against coveting. Maybe you never noticed that coveting is usually directed against what someone else has, like your neighbor’s wife or your neighbor’s house or animals. You don’t really covet that which your neighbor doesn’t have. If no one has a new bike, then your bike is just fine. In that case, it would seem that coveting is more about **what your neighbor has or doesn’t have.**

But when Luther’s Large Catechism speaks of the ninth and tenth commandments, it speaks of contentment. In other words, not only should a Christian quit looking over the fence and into our neighbor’s garage, but we ought to be content, no matter what is or isn’t in our garage. And that brings me back to thankfulness. **Only those who are content are able to be truly thankful.** Coveting is the sinful desire to have something which God hasn’t given you. Why would someone covet? Because they are not content with what they have been given by God. Thus, without contentment, a person is not able to be thankful.

In Philippians 4:11-12, St. Paul says, “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: ¹²I 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.” What St. Paul says is quite an amazing thing. **He is content no matter what his situation.** Furthermore with contentment, St. Paul was able to live a thankful life, as he exhorted the Colossians says, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (3:13). **St. Paul had both contentment and thankfulness in whatever he did and in whatever state he was in.** How did he do this? Intrigued by his words, I wanted to know more.

I noticed in Philippians 4:12, that St. Paul said that he had “**learned**” to be **content.** I wondered just what kind of course St. Paul took so that he learned “to be content.” Was it a difficult master’s course or could anyone do this? I happened to see that the New International version translated verse 12 saying, “I have learned **the secret** of being content in any and every situation...” They got this idea out of the Greek word, μεμύημαι. For you seminary students, this verb is a *hapax legomena*, which means this is the only time it is used in the entire New Testament. The verb, μύω not only means to instruct, but is used in a religious context “to initiate someone into the mysteries.” Thus, St. Paul’s contentment and thankfulness can only be “learned” by those who are brought **into the Christian faith.** Thus, I have good news for you. As a Christian, you can be taught to be content and thankful.

Here’s the “secret.” In keeping with the premises at the beginning of this sermon, the Scriptures neither direct us to look at our neighbor’s goods, nor at our need or abundance of possessions. Those are dead end streets, which do not give true joy. The Scriptures have a completely different starting point.

Consider the beginning of Psalm 107. These words are repeated many times, as if they might be important. **Verse 1 says, “Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.”** The Scriptures begin with the goodness of God. The first thing which you need to know is that **God is good.** Due to your sinful desires, you are not able to judge your goods or situation until you first know the One who gives us the gifts and places us in our situation. When we know that God is good, then we will know that whatever He provides is good.

Consider St. Matthew 7:9-11, “Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” **Your good heavenly Father always gives out good gifts.** Also consider St. Matthew 5:45, “... for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” **Even if you are evil, our good God is still giving out good gifts.**

When you know that your Lord is good, then you can be content because whatever God has given you is good. Even more than His good gifts are good for you. You know Psalm 145:15-16 Luther’s meal prayer. “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. ¹⁶You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” Your good Lord created all things good. **He is sustaining all things with His good gifts. And He is giving His creation the good gifts that they need “at the proper time!” That is what we mean when we say that God is good!** Even the timing of the gifts are perfectly right and good.

Now there is one more piece of this secret learning which St. Paul understood. The rest of Psalm 107:1 says, "...**For His mercy endures forever.**"

This time I will read a bit more of Psalm 107:1-8. It says, "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. ²Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy, ³And gathered out of the lands, From the east and from the west, From the north and from the south."

Verse 1-3 speaks of our good God's mercy in redeeming them from their enemies. Yes, of course, **God's goodness is seen in His mercy toward us in Jesus Christ.** Our merciful God sent His Son to suffer and die and pay the price which our sins deserved. Through faith in Jesus Christ we are redeemed from the hand of our enemies—death, hell and the devil. Once we were God's enemies, but it was His mercy toward us that saved us. In His mercy our good God provided a holy church to deliver the preaching of the Word and to provide the administration of holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. All of these means provide forgiveness of sin daily and plentifully.

Let me continue with verse 4-8, "They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate way; They found no city to dwell in. ⁵Hungry and thirsty, Their soul fainted in them. ⁶Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, And He delivered them out of their distresses. ⁷And He led them forth by the right way, That they might go to a city for a dwelling place."

Many of the situations described—hungry, fainting, in distress—may not sound as if they should result in thanksgiving. But if God is good, then He knows what He is doing. If God is merciful, then those Israelites were being taken from Egyptian slavery into a dwelling place in the Promised Land. God is doing it in the best way and at just the right time. **All of these trials are serving His purpose.** And as Psalm 107 verse 7 says, "**He led them forth by the right way.**" So it is true for us, too. We have been brought out of slavery to sin and through our baptism have been set free to serve the living God. We are no longer dead in our trespasses and sins, but are born again and we are on the road to eternal life, a dwelling prepared by our Savior.

It doesn't matter if you have experienced hardship or relative ease. You may be hungry and thirsty or even in distress, but our good God is merciful and He is taking you to heavenly bliss. Like St. Paul, you can be content and thankful. **If you have abundance of possessions and more than your neighbors, don't set your heart on them. You, too, learn to be content and thankful.**

Psalm 107 verse 8 says, "Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, And for His wonderful works to the children of men!" **That is the conclusion of the matter and the secret which St. Paul learned.** You too have learned it. You have been initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith. Contentment and thanksgiving are yours in the Scriptures for the learning. You know that you have a good God. His mercy will see you through whatever your situation. This secret is yours for the applying to every and any situation—whether hungry or full, in need or plenty.

Today we used Psalm 100:4, "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name." No matter what our situation or our present condition, we have come to Christ's church to give thanks for God's wonderful works. Thankfulness is one of the secret things of God for those whom He has brought into the faith.