

Giving Thanks and the Sovereignty of God

Colossians 1:3, 4
1 Thessalonians 1:2-4
2 Corinthians 8:16, 17

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We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints (Colossian 1:3, 4).

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, ³ remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God (1 Thessalonians 1:2-4).

But thanks *be* to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. ¹⁷ For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord (2 Corinthians 8:16, 17).

The Goal

What I'd like to address this morning is the sovereignty of God as it relates to our being thankful. It is my goal this morning to get us all to rethink the way we view ourselves in light of God's sovereignty, especially as it relates to thankfulness and humility reasonable to our condition. Along with this objective comes a recognition of our being tempted to a haughty spirit (Proverbs 6:17 – first on a list of things God hates) toward others which easily happens when we get this wrong. Perhaps it can be all summed up in the phrase **'There but for the grace of God go I.'**

Sovereignty

Sovereign is a word which comes from the words *super* (which means over) and *reign* (which means a period of power of a ruler). So a sovereign is someone who rules over. Sovereignty, similarly, is the idea of ruling over. Sometimes nations will seek sovereignty. This means they want to rule over themselves.

So when we speak of God's sovereignty we are speaking of His rule over everything. There is nothing outside the power of God's rule. Weather, earthquakes, illness, health, fortunes gained or lost, hair gained or lost, animals being born or dying in the wilderness, the bird flying across the sky are all ruled by the sovereign power of God. And unlike earthly sovereigns, there is no limit to God's power, knowledge and presence in the governing of all these things.

The sovereignty of God even extends to the decisions we make, moral or otherwise. The sovereignty of God is not revealed in the Scriptures for mere academic reasons; it is not just a matter of understanding some concept. A proper understanding of the sovereignty of God should affect our everyday life. Again, what I'd like to address this morning is the sovereignty of God as it relates to our being thankful.

Universal Thankfulness

At some level, being thankful is a universal claim. There are very few people who would deny ever being thankful. Every one at some time will say they are thankful. Of course this begs the question, 'To whom are we thankful?' We've got to be thanking someone. How much sense does it make to say 'thank you' to no one? I suspect that when most people say they are thankful, what they really mean is that they're happy about something. But being thankful is different than being happy.

In the above passages we read of the Apostle Paul's thankfulness to God for a variety of behaviors in the lives of other people. He thanks God that they have faith and love others. He thanks God for their works of faith, labor of love and patience. He even thanks God for putting "**earnest care**" in Titus for the people at Corinth and then goes onto say that Titus went to them of his own accord (*authairetos* which means self-choice.)

Assuming that the Apostle Paul is not engaging in mindless emotional gushing, there must be some reasonable explanation for why he is thanking God for attributes he sees in other people – even things he sees people doing of their own accord. And what other explanation can there be than that it is God who (to use Paul's term) "**put**" (from the verb *didomi* which mean "to cause to happen) it there.

So even though Paul is thankful to people (Priscilla and Aquila who risked their own necks for his life – Romans 16:4), in a primary sense he is thankful to God. Thankfulness to God ranks quite high when it comes to

true Christian faith; so much so that Paul informs us that futility of thought and foolish darkened hearts are the attributes of those who refuse to glorify God and be thankful to God (Romans 1:20-21). Perhaps this is one explanation for the irrational practice of people saying they are thankful without being able to pinpoint just to whom they are thankful.

Thankful for my Own Qualities

If it is reasonable for me to be thankful to God for the qualities I see in others, it is equally reasonable for me to be thankful for any good quality I might happen to see in myself as well. Since we find ourselves active participants in the process of becoming more sanctified (or more holy), and perhaps working hard at it, we might be tempted to draw the unwarranted conclusion that we deserve the credit or glory for our current ameliorated (improved) state. The common consequence of taking this credit is pride and we all know **“Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).**

As I said, it is my goal this morning to get us all to rethink the way we view ourselves in light of a deeper understanding of God’s sovereignty that we might exercise genuine thankfulness and humility reasonable to our condition while avoiding a haughty spirit toward others – **‘There but for the grace of God go I.’** An illustration may help.

Matthew Henry

Matthew Henry, a 17th century theologian, tells a story of having been robbed. After returning home he uttered a prayer to this effect: “Thank you Lord that even though I was robbed I was not hurt; and thank you Lord that even though I was robbed I didn’t have much to steal with me; and thank you Lord that even though I was robbed I was able to make it safely to my home; but most of all I thank you Lord that I was the one robbed and not the robber.”

Sophie’s Choice

Sophie’s Choice was a movie which came out in the early 80’s. It was about the guilt a woman experienced for having survived the

holocaust. One choice she was forced to make at the insistence of a Nazi guard was to give up one of her two children; the scene was devastating.

The film chronicles her tortured soul. Anyone watching would be thankful they were not Sophie. But what of the nameless, faceless Nazi who made the horrifying demand? It is one thing to go to bed at night having been victimized. It is an entirely more pitiful thing going to bed at night having perpetrated the horror. The self-deception necessary to live a life that rationalizes this type of evil is beyond understanding. To lose happiness is one thing but to lose your soul is more tragic.

Eichmann

Adolf Eichmann was the mastermind behind killing so many innocent people in Nazi Germany. How could he have possibly found solace in South America (to where he escaped) after killing so many? But even if he were able to somehow live with himself, his day of reckoning came 15 years later when justice was met. Eichmann was hanged and had to face the tribunal of God Himself.

So we ask ourselves, in the final analysis, would we rather be the victim or Eichmann, Hitler, Stalin, Manson, Richard Ramirez, Jeffrey Dahmer? Aren't we thankful that our hearts were not left to such abject depravity? And if we are thankful, to whom are we thankful and to what extent? Are we thanking the air or fate or chance or are we thanking God? And if we are thanking God, to what extent are we thankful? Are we thankful He played His part while we thank ourselves for our part?

Do we truly have any idea what we are capable of apart from the grace of God? We tend to have this "I'd never do that" mentality when it comes to certain levels of evil. But the Bible indicates that apart from the grace of God (in a world which rejected the preaching of Noah) men are morally reduced to a condition where **"every intent of the thoughts of (man's) heart was only evil continually"** (Genesis 6:5). A sobering thought!

Ordinary Men

I recently read a book entitled *Ordinary Men* by Christopher R. Browning chronicling the atrocities of World War II Germany. Toward the end of the book Browning dedicated a chapter (the chapter entitled

Ordinary Men – after the book) investigating how ordinary men (librarians, carpenters, teachers, etc.) could be brought to the place where they could actually do awful things I'd rather not mention at this point.

He cited things like the dehumanization of the enemy, the pitiful condition Germany had been left in after WW I, the submission to authority (referencing the Milgram study), peer pressure, a belief in a greater good, etc. The bottom line was that there was no sufficient answer to the question in terms of a pure sociological/psychological study. Perhaps the best explanation is given by Walter Reich in his *New York Times Book Review*:

In his finely focused and stunningly powerful book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Christopher R. Browning tells us about such Germans and helps us understand, better than we did before, not only what they did to make the Holocaust happen but also how they were transformed psychologically from the ordinary men of his title into active participants in the most monstrous crime in human history. In doing so he aims a penetrating searchlight on the human capacity for utmost evil and leaves us with the shock of knowledge and the lurking fear of self-recognition.

There But For the Grace of God Go I

Friends, we may consider thanking God for things outside of ourselves, but how about thanking God for that which is within us? Again, Moses wrote of the entire human race (except Noah's family) that **"Every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually!"** Why do you and I not fall into this category? I'm not perfect, neither are you, but my every intention and every thought is not continuously evil. I could be a lot worse than I am. I am not as evil as I can be. There are moments when I seek after God. Even Paul when he was expressing his despair at his own sin admitted that there was within him a desire to do good (Rom. 7:18). The only answer to this is, **"there but for the grace of God go I."**

It is so easy for us to be frustrated with other people. We watch the news and look in disgust at gang members, or dishonest politicians or

people who refuse to work or obey the law. That behavior is wrong and there are due consequences, whether that means being confronted, arrested or convicted. What I am teaching here should in no way be construed as lessening human culpability.

What I want to put before us this morning though is a proper understanding that apart from God's grace in our lives we would be in the same condition as those who we find most reprehensible. Let us be challenged this Thanksgiving not to glory in our own character but to thank God for any good we might see in ourselves and for His restraining hand in keeping us from where we would, by our own natures arrive.

Still and Unprofitable Righteousness

One last thought. Jesus tells a story of a man who had the presence of mind to thank God for his own righteousness. But the man's behavior is shed in worst possible light.

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. 11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' 13 "But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' 14 "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted (Luke 18:9-14).

This Pharisee was willing to give God the glory for his righteousness. He said **"God, I thank thee..."** and yet it was the tax-gatherer who went down to his house justified.

It is an insidious trap to trust in the righteousness we've been given. No matter how righteous God might make us, we must never trust in that righteousness to be justified. What does that mean, to be justified?

Justification is a declaration by God of 'being pardoned'. I don't know how well you feel you're doing in this life as far as righteousness is concerned but the standard is perfection – sinlessness – the standard is Jesus.

This means that if we're going to trust in our own righteousness to be 'pardoned' by God we must be as righteous as Jesus; that means no infractions at all! Nothing dishonest no matter how minute! No evil thoughts even if we repent afterward! Friends, the standard for a 'pardon' is beyond our grasp. Our only hope is to be clothed in Christ, to trust in His righteousness or as Luther said "the alien righteousness of Christ".

We ought to thank God for whatever righteousness we might find in ourselves. But let us never be tempted to trust in that righteousness to be 'pardoned' before a righteous and holy God. Clemency before the living God is found in the blood of Christ alone?

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED (BY THE BLOOD OF CHRIST) . 8 "BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT (Romans 4: 7, 8).

Questions for Study

1. What is the sovereignty of God (pages 2, 3)?
2. Is it possible to be thankful without thanking someone (page 3)?
3. What are some of the qualities Paul is thankful for in the passages that are quoted (pages 1-3)?
4. Should we be thankful to God for whatever good qualities we might find in ourselves? Should we be thankful to ourselves (page 4)?
5. How evil can man get (pages 5, 6)?
6. Is there danger, even in thanking God for any good we may see in ourselves (pages 7, 8)?