

Introduction

Earlier in the service, we sang the Thanksgiving hymn, *Come, Ye Thankful People Come*. Let me ask you the question it raises. Are you and I thankful people? That's a vital question and our text, Deuteronomy 8:7-20, assists us in answering it. It teaches us what it means to be thankful people and why it's imperative that we be that.

Our Prosperity

In the Book of Deuteronomy, God spoke to the Israelites just before they entered the Promised Land. Notice in verses 7-13 what He promised He'd give them when they did – abundance of water, food, natural resources, gold, silver, homes, capital, and more. He'd bless them materially, in other words, as no nation had ever been blessed.

What God promised *to give* them, He *has given* us. The material blessings we enjoy as Americans are staggering. Take food for instance. According to the FDA, the average American consumes almost 2000 pounds (a ton) of food per year. Americans eat 815 billion calories each day, 200 billion more than needed, which is enough to feed 80 million people. Or consider energy. The per capita energy consumption of Americans is 98,000 kilowatt hours per year as compared to a worldwide per capita figure of 21,000 kilowatt hours per year. One American uses as much energy as 2 Japanese, 6 Mexicans, 13 Chinese, 31 Indians, 128 Bangladeshis, and 370 Ethiopians.

The point of those statistics isn't to make us feel guilty. It's to make us feel blessed, which we are. What God promised *to give* the Israelites, He *has given* us. Consequently, what He told them about their incredible prosperity, He's telling us as well. What He told them – and us – is how we should respond to it. We should be three things.

Be Grateful

One is found in verse 10. God declared, **"When you have eaten**

and are satisfied, you shall bless Yahweh your God.” To bless Yahweh is to identify something good He’s given or done and say **“Thank you.”** But remember what Jesus taught. What we say and do comes from what we are. Routinely and sincerely thanking Yahweh is an outer act that comes from an inner condition. That inner condition is gratitude.

Ironically enough, it’s prosperous people who tend to be the least grateful. That God warned the Israelites to thank Him implies the possibility or even probability that they wouldn’t. He doing so reflects a fact of our existence. The more we have, the less grateful we tend to be.

There’s a reason for that. It’s because familiarity breeds apathy. That’s part of our psychological makeup. The pull of our personality is toward indifference. No matter how extraordinary something it is, it becomes ordinary to us as we experience or do it over time. And the more ordinary it becomes to us, the less we grasp its wonder and value. And the less we grasp that, the less grateful we are for it.

How many of you remember driving a car for the first time and the sheer joy of doing so? Question – how many of us get as much joy driving a car now as we did the first time we drove one? It’s probably none of us. Our joy is far less because familiarity breeds apathy.

You and I need to overcome the pull of our personality toward indifference. We need to purposefully cultivate an attitude of gratitude. We’ll routinely express that gratitude by thanking God if we do.

Cultivating an attitude of gratitude requires something of us. In the old Anglo Saxon language, **“thankfulness”** means **“thinkfulness.”** To thank we must first of all think. We ponder the nature and order of things, which in turn opens up their wonder and value to us.

The renowned English poet and cleric John Donne shared a profound insight that implies one way of doing that, **“There is nothing that God has established in the constant course of Nature, and which therefore is done everyday, but would seem a miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once.”** Do you get what he was saying? Blessings that seem pedestrian to us because we’ve experienced

or done them so many times would seem wondrous to us if experienced or did them only once, like driving a car.

That means we can recapture their wonder by pondering just that – how we'd think and feel about them if we experienced or did them only once. My favorite pastime is reading. Suppose I've never had eyeglasses and for years now have struggled to read the blurred words in all the books I've read. But then I'm given these eyeglasses for five minutes so that I'm able to read with clarity and ease, after which they're taken away forever. I'd recognize the wonder of eyeglasses wouldn't I?

That illustrates a strategy for cultivating an attitude of gratitude. Using our imagination, we ponder how we'd think and feel about a blessing if we experienced or did it only once. Doing that unveils to us how wondrous it is and how much value it adds to our lives, which in turn makes us grateful to God for it.

So that's one thing we should be in our prosperity – grateful.

Be Generous

Another thing we should be is generous. One would think that'd be easy for us. Because we're more prosperous, we have more to give. And since we have more to give, it only makes sense that we'd give more.

But that isn't the way it is. Social observers have conducted studies to determine the correlation between how much people have and how much they give. All of those studies show the same thing. As the money that people earn increases, the percentage of it that they give decreases. I think of a presidential candidate a few years ago. He made \$500,000 the year before and gave only 1% of it away, despite being considered an advocate for the poor. It's true. The more people have the less generous, the less giving, they tend to be.

Verses 14 and 17 reveal one of the dynamics behind that phenomenon. Notice the opening line of verse 14, "**then your heart will become proud.**" Now look at verse 17, "**Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this**

wealth." That reminds me of a story many of you know. A farmer and his friend were admiring the farmer's bountiful field of wheat. **"It's amazing isn't it what God can do,"** the friend said. **"What God can do?"** the farmer replied, **"You should have seen this field when He had it."** That's the attitude many prosperous people have. What / have / worked for and earned. It's a result of my efforts, not anyone else's.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The last phrase in verse 10 reveals what the truth is. In verses 7-9, Moses mentioned blessings the Israelites will have. He then identified their source in verse 10, **"which He (Yahweh) has given you."** Consider how much wheat that farmer would have if God quit sending the sun and rain (Matthew 5:45). The moral is that everything we have, God provided it. As verse 18 says it, **"for it is God who is giving you the power to make wealth."** Think of the house in which you live. You didn't provide that. God did. Or think of the feast you'll serve on Thanksgiving Day. You aren't providing that. God is.

Please grasp what that means. God is the owner of what we have. His rights to it are absolute. We're stewards of what we have. Our rights to it are derivative. God, not we, owns and controls all the money and property we have. We should, therefore, do with it whatever He tells us to do with it.

But what is it He tells us to do with it? The Bible's answer is succinct and clear, **"Give liberally."** Relying on the Bible and good sense to guide us, we determine what needs and wants are within the bounds of the kind of life to which God calls us. We then commit our money and property to meeting those needs and wants of ours, after which we give the rest to build God's kingdom and to meet human needs.

John Wesley exemplified what I mean. He once said, **"If you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, give all you can."** He practiced what he preached. He told his family and friends that if he died with more than 10 pounds, they could call him a robber. But he didn't. Even though he was making 1400 pounds a year from his books, a

huge sum in 18th century England, he lived on 28 pounds, which provided for his needs and wants, and gave the rest away.

I'm not saying we should do specifically what Wesley did. I am saying we should be what he was, generous. He knew that the money and property he had were God's not his. So, he did with it what God told him to do. He gave liberally. We should do the same.

Be Godly

There's a third thing we should be, godly.

Look at verse 11. After mentioning Israel's prosperity, Moses wrote, **"Beware that you do not forget Yahweh your God."** We see the same language in verse 14, **"and you will forget Yahweh your God."** Those verses strongly imply that the more we have, the less godly we tend to be. Here we have prosperity's greatest threat. It will, if we allow it, make us forget God, that is, neglect Him. It will make us think, feel, and act as if He's secondary.

We all know why by experience. It's because the more we have, the more complicated life becomes. Contemplate some of the things we have to think about and do because we're so prosperous: rake the leaves, wash and maintain our cars, oversee our stock portfolios, take our children to all their lessons and games, watch our favorite sitcoms, get ready for Christmas, and on it goes. In addition to all of that, we have our professions and jobs. The more we succeed in them, the more time, energy, and effort they require of us. Don't misunderstand me. There's nothing wrong with those things. They're divine blessings in fact. It's just that God tends to get lost in the shuffle of it all. It's easy to get so preoccupied with the blessings that we end up neglecting the one who gave them. I wrote a note in my Bible beside verse 14. It's one of life's greatest ironies, **"The very things God gives that we love Him become the objects of our devotion and attention."**

There are two extremes in life that test our devotion to God. One is adversity. The other is prosperity. Of those two, prosperity is the

greater test. Friendship with God is actually more difficult in prosperity than adversity. The celebrated Scottish essayist, Thomas Carlyle, said it well: **“Adversity is hard on a man, but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred who will stand adversity.”** We need to take Carlyle seriously. Out of every 100 of God’s followers who remain faithful to Him in adversity, only one will remain faithful in prosperity.

Our call is to be that one. This is a matter of intention. We intend to be primarily devoted to God and not the blessings He gives us. We then carry out our intention. Think of it in these terms. We don’t arrange our discipleship to Jesus around the blessings. We arrange them around our discipleship to Jesus. We modify or eliminate anything that gets in the way of discipleship.

A friend of Jesus I knew in Akron, David, didn’t want his legal practice to interfere with his devotional life and a nursing home ministry to which God called him. So, he purposely limited the number of clients he had, referring some to other competent attorneys. He was godly you see, which means he didn’t arrange his discipleship to Jesus around his legal practice. He arranged his legal practice around his discipleship.

Conclusion

That then is how we should respond to the extraordinary prosperity God has given us: be grateful, be generous, and be godly. We’re thankful people if we do. The fact is thankfulness goes beyond what we say to what we are. It’s a condition or state of being grateful, generous, and godly. In his classic book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law asked a question, **“Who is the greatest saint in the world?”** He also answered it, **“It is not he who prays most or fasts most or is more eminent for temperance, chastity, or justice; but it is he who is always thankful to God.”** He was absolutely right. So, let’s be great saints. Let’s be thankful people.