

"Thankful People" **Deuteronomy 8:7-18**

INTRODUCTION

Earlier in the service, we sang the traditional Thanksgiving hymn, *Come, Ye Thankful People Come*. That is a thoroughly Christian hymn. I say that because both the Old and New Testaments are soaked with the language of thanksgiving. God calls us to be thankful people through and through. It is one of His greatest concerns for us.

That raises a question of examen that each and every one of us needs to ask and answer today. That question is this. Am I a thankful person, as the Bible defines it?

To answer that question, of course, we have to know how the Bible defines it. And that's what I'm going to preach about today - how the Bible defines thankfulness, the condition or state of being thankful. Turn to the passage I read, Deuteronomy 8:7-18, and you'll see how it does.

THE PROSPERITY OF AMERICA

God wrote the book of Deuteronomy just before the Israelites entered the Promised Land. He tells them in it what they need to know in order to become the great nation that He intends them to be.

Look at verses 7-9 and 12-13. In them, God promises to give the Israelites an abundance of water, food, natural resources, gold, silver, homes, capital, and much more. He's going to bless them materially, in other words, like no nation has ever been blessed.

What God promises to do for the Israelites He has done for us, Americans. He has blessed us materially like no nation, in all of human history or in the world today, has ever been blessed.

Let me give you just a couple of quick examples of what I mean. The average amount of pocket money for American children, \$230 a year, is more than the total annual income of the world's half-billion poorest people. In terms of buying power, Americans on unemployment benefits are better paid than the professional workers in all but a dozen countries of the world. America exports more food to the rest of the world than

any other 12 countries combined even though we give farmers subsidies to grow less food. I could go on and on but that's enough to make the point. America is the most prosperous nation in history and the world.

That means that what God promises the Israelites in this passage, He has actually given to us. Consequently, we need to understand and live by this passage as much as they needed to. It teaches us that we need to be three things in the midst of our astonishing prosperity.

BE GRATEFUL

The first of those is to be grateful. Look at verse 10. God tells the Israelites and us, "*When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God.*" Blessing the Lord is an outer act that comes from an inner condition. That inner condition is gratitude. All of us should have an attitude of gratitude.

Ironically enough, it is prosperous people like us who tend to be the least grateful. The passage I read, along with its companion, 6:10-15, imply something that we should never forget. The more we have, the less grateful we tend to be.

There's one overriding reason for that. That reason has to do with our psychological makeup. We're so wired in our inner dimensions that familiarity breeds indifference. This will not, by the way, be part of the psychological makeup of our resurrection bodies in heaven. Sadly though it is part of our earthly bodies now. Familiarity breeds indifference. It is a basic fact of our existence. No matter how extraordinary something is, it becomes ordinary to us as we experience it over time. Compare, for example, the joy you had the first time you drove your car with the joy that you have now. The difference is usually a dramatic one.

Our call is to conquer indifference and become grateful people. It's to cultivate an attitude of gratitude for the things that God has given us. We do that in two ways.

First, pray. God will help us if we ask Him to and so that's what we do. Periodically acknowledge to Him this inclination to indifference that

all of us have. Tell Him that you want to have an attitude of gratitude instead and ask Him to assist you with that. He will if you do.

Second, think. A noted Jewish philanthropist, Moses Montefiore, developed a motto for his family, *"Think and thank!"* The two, he taught, are inseparable. Similarly, in the old Anglo Saxon language, the word "thankfulness" means "thoughtfulness." The point is clear. Thinking leads to thanking. Those who don't think, don't thank. So, let's think. Purposely and periodically give things deeper thought. Carefully and consistently consider the implications of having and not having them.

Take something as simple as eyeglasses, for instance. Eyeglasses were invented in the 13th century. I sometimes take mine off and reflect on what my life would be like without them. Everything that I'd see, near and far, would be blurry. One of my greatest joys in life, reading, would become a burden. My quality of life is so much better because of the eyeglasses I'm wearing. Pondering that causes me to recognize the great benefit they are and makes me deeply grateful for them.

What I do with eyeglasses I do with almost all of the things that God has given me. I purposely and periodically give them deeper thought. You can do the same. The next time you watch a black and white movie, for instance, consider what life would be like if you saw everything that way. You'll be grateful for colors and the ability to see them if you do.

So that's the first thing that we should be in the midst of our astonishing prosperity – grateful. Be grateful by praying and thinking.

BE GENEROUS

The second thing that we should be is generous.

You'd think that would 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 would give more.

But that isn't the way it works. 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. It's true. The more people have, the less generous, the less giving, they tend to be.

Verse 14 and 17 tell us why that is so. 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 of an old story that many of you know. A farmer and his friend were admiring the farmer's bountiful field of wheat. The friend said, "It's amazing isn't it what God can do?" To which the farmer vainly replied, "What God can do? You should have seen this field when He had it."* That's the attitude that a lot of prosperous people have. What I have I made and it's mine and no one else's. I worked for it. I earned it. So, I own it.

Nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, this passage teaches us two things.

First, God gave us what we have. The last phrase in verse 10 reveals that. In verses 7-9, Moses mentions all the things that the Israelites will have. He then identifies their source in verse 10, *"which He (God) has given you."* I'd like to see how much wheat that farmer had if God quit sending the sun and rain. The moral is that God provides everything that we have. As verse 18 says it, *"for it is God who is giving you the power to make wealth."* Men, think of the house your family and you live in. You didn't provide that. God did.

This passage teaches a second thing, which is an implication of the first. God is the owner of what we have. His rights to it are absolute. We are the stewards of what we have. Our rights to it are relative. God, not us, owns and controls all the money and property we have. So, we should do with it whatever He tells us to do.

But what is it that He tells us to do? The Biblical answer is, *"Give it!"* The Bible is succinct and clear about this. Live simply and give liberally. Use what God gives us to meet our needs, as the Bible and

good sense, in that order, define them. Then give the rest away to build His kingdom and meet the needs of others.

John Wesley is our model for this. 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 wrote at the end of his life, *"I left no money to anyone in my will because I had none."*

Wesley knew that the money and property he had weren't his but God's. So, he did with it what God told him to do. He lived simply and gave liberally. We should do the same. Be generous.

BE GODLY

There's a third thing that we should be in the midst of our astonishing prosperity – godly.

Look at verse 11. After mentioning Israel's prosperity, Moses writes, *"Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God."* We see the same thing in verse 14, *"and you will forget the Lord 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 make us, if we let it, forget God.

It isn't hard to figure out why. It's because the more we have, the more complicated life becomes. Stop for a minute and consider some of the things that we have to think about and do because we're so prosperous: rake the leaves, clean out the spouting, change the oil in our cars, wash the car, oversee our stock portfolio, keep tabs on our pension, take our children to all their lessons, buy everyone's Christmas presents, watch all the football games on television, and on it goes. Then there are our professions and jobs. The more we prosper in them the more time, energy, and effort they require of us.

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with any of those

things. It's just that God often gets lost in the shuffle of it all. It's so easy to get so preoccupied with all of those blessings that we end up forgetting the one who gave them in the first place. I have a little note I wrote in my Bible beside verse 14, *"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 spirituality. One is prosperity. The other is adversity. Of those two, prosperity is the greater test. There's no doubt that adversity challenges our devotion to God. But prosperity does so even more. Discipleship to Jesus is actually much more difficult in prosperity than in adversity. The great Scottish essayist, Thomas Carlyle, said it this way, *"Adversity is hard on a man, but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred who will stand adversity."* Out of every 100 people who remain faithful to God in adversity, only 1 of those will remain faithful to Him in prosperity.

Our call is to be that 1. This is a matter of intent. We intend to be devoted to God and not the things that He gives us. We then carry out that intent. We consciously arrange all the things that we have and do around our discipleship to Jesus. We don't arrange our discipleship to Jesus around them. We arrange them around our discipleship to Jesus. We get rid of anything that stands in the way of that discipleship.

I knew an attorney who didn't want his practice interfering with his devotional life and a ministry that God called him to in nursing homes. So, he purposely limited the number of clients he had. He was godly you see. He arranged his law practice around his discipleship to Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Those then are the three things that we need to be in the midst of our astonishing prosperity – grateful, generous, and godly. We're thankful people if we are. I say that because gratitude, generosity, and godliness are the natural expressions of thankfulness. Which leads me to the question I began with. Are you and I thankful people - grateful, generous, and godly? If we aren't, let's decide to be this very day.