

“Thankful Citizens”

Introduction: Just a reminder that as we explore Paul’s letter to the Colossian church in these next few months, we’re seeking to answer the question, “Who do we think we are?” And we’re asking that question not only as individuals but as a church community because our mindset, what we think, determines our actions, what we do. In other words, who we think we are has everything to do with how we interact with others, both inside and outside of the church.

In this letter, Paul will answer this question from a variety of angles, but one of the sharpest comes from the part of the letter we’re reading today. Who are we? Paul writes that we are citizens of the kingdom in which Jesus is king. Paul puts it this way in v. 13, “Giving joyful thanks to the Father . . . who has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son he loves . . .”

In this regard, I was struck by an experience we had on our way back from Kenya. We had a stopover and plane change in Amsterdam. However upon landing from Nairobi we couldn’t just go from one gate to the next. Instead, we had to go through several security checks, the first of which came almost immediately after we deplaned. In the corridor stood two Dutch soldiers who wanted to examine each of our passports. Our line began to move fairly slowly and I soon saw that it was because several of the travelers ahead of me had passports from African nations and the soldier in charge of our line was taking great caution as he carefully examined each one. But when it was my turn and I handed him my U.S. passport, he glanced at it very briefly and then said quickly, “Good morning sir. Have a nice day,” and he waved me through. Our citizenship, who we are, makes a difference, and this experience was a good reminder of my citizenship and the status that comes with it.

What we see in this couple of verses is that Paul wants his readers to remember and reflect on their kingdom citizenship and all that this status means for who they are and what they are to do. To help them with this, he encourages them to take on the habit of thanksgiving.

I. The Struggle and Importance of Thanksgiving

A. We’re given a hint of the importance of thanksgiving in the experience of Jesus after healing the ten lepers. All ten had called out to Jesus, pleading that he would shower them with his mercy. All ten responded to his instructions to go and show themselves to the priests. All ten had been healed as they had stepped out in trust to do this. But only one of the ten bothered to turn around, come back, and thank Jesus for the new lease on life that he had just been given!

B. As we think about this, recall from last week that giving joyful thanks to the Father is one of four ways that Paul describes a life that is worthy of, and pleasing to, the Lord (vv. 10-12). This comes out of Paul’s prayer that his readers would grow up in their salvation, through the Spirit’s power, as they work out the gift of new life that they have just experienced. And he wants them to grow up so that they might remain established and firm in their faith (cf. 1:23). The habit of thanksgiving, therefore, is instrumental in Paul’s mind to our spiritual growth.

C. Among other things, what we see is that gratitude requires intentionality. So why is it that we often have such a hard time with it? Why is it that it is so easy to be one of the nine who continued on their way, skipping off to enjoy what Jesus had done for them without a word of thanks? Here are a few possibilities.

1. In our highly automated age, thanksgiving for what someone else has done has become a lost art because we’ve become accustomed to doing things for ourselves. We can pump our own gas,

scan and bag our own groceries, receive cash from a machine, or find directions on our cell phones, without having to ask, or even speak to, anyone for help. Such automation brings with it a certain convenience, to be sure, but it can also leave us with a sense that we can live life on our own, not having to look to or depend upon others for a thing. Being thankful, therefore, rarely crosses our mind.

2. In our highly materialistic culture, we never think we have enough. Discontent is bred when we're made to think we don't have what we want, that is, we don't have what others say we should. So we're goaded into believing that if we have just this one more thing, we'll finally be happy and fulfilled. So we buy it, but instead of being happy, we just become more in debt. This causes our anxiety level to increase, and chokes out any possibility of contentment or gratitude.

3. In our highly self-centered beings, no matter what age we live in, we can become so enamored with the gift—like the healing that the ten lepers experienced—that we forget all about the Giver. All we're concerned about is what something, or someone, does for us. It becomes, as the saying goes, “all about me.”

D. And so, cultivating the habit of thanksgiving is extremely important. Through our intentional practice of it, it can help us to see that life is a gift to be received. When we look to identify the things we can be thankful for, from the smell of freshly ground coffee in the morning to the feel of a soft pillow at night, we can begin to regain our sight, to see signs of God's grace all around us.

Illustration: It's what Ann Voskamp, author of the book *One Thousand Gifts*, discovered. As she began to identify daily and make a list of the things she was grateful for, not complaining about what she didn't have but seeking to give intentional thanks for what she did have, the “rain of grace,” as she put it, began to penetrate her cracked and dry places with joy. God was with her, God did love her; God did have her best in mind.

II. Our Kingdom Citizenship

A. Now, one of the gifts Paul wants us to get in the habit of being thankful for is the gift of our kingdom citizenship. One of the images Paul uses to describe what God has done for us comes out of the word “brought,” or “transported” or “transferred,” as it can be translated. This word describes the ancient practice of kings transporting whole people groups from one place to another. So, Paul writes, has God transported us from the kingdom of darkness, where Satan rules, to the kingdom of light, where Jesus sits on the throne.

B. As we ponder thanking God for this transfer, we understand that it includes enjoying a “share in the inheritance” of God's holy people. We touched on this last week, identifying that phrase as coming out of the exodus from slavery in Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land. When that land was allocated, God's people were being given a share in their inheritance. Now we have an even greater inheritance in which Gentiles take part, the inheritance in the kingdom of God following our being freed from the slavery of sin. That alone is cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving.

C. But two additional aspects of this transfer are worth understanding as we think about what it is we're giving thanks for.

1. Although we might be used to thinking of the kingdom of God as something that is “not yet” but that awaits us in the future at the return of Jesus, there is a very present reality, an “already” to God's kingdom. Notice how Paul highlights this already nature in v. 13: “For he *has rescued* us from the dominion of darkness and *brought* us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we *have redemption*, the forgiveness of sins.” While we await an inheritance in the future in which the dimensions of this world and heaven are finally joined in God's new creation, and there will

be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, (Rev. 21:1-4), that new creation has already begun to break into our existence with the resurrection of Jesus, and his kingdom reign has begun with his ascension.

As Jesus anticipated when he first began preaching and teaching in Galilee, “The time has come, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news” (Mk. 1:15). There is, of course, real mystery concerning how much progress we can expect to see before Jesus comes again. But what is clear is that we’re not to wait around for something to happen in the future. We’re to begin enjoying and proclaiming the benefits of this in-breaking kingdom, beginning with the forgiveness of our sin and then continuing on with living as the body of Christ in the world to bear witness to his reconciling grace in both word and deed. The invitation is to get in step with what God is doing because in Jesus, his light and love have begun to seep into our world.

2. Because of the “already” nature of this kingdom transfer, we can be assured of God’s love for us before we have done a thing for him. This has to do with the status of our citizenship. We do not need to earn his favor; we already have it. If God were the soldier at the head of the line, he would, upon seeing the stamp “Jesus” in our passport, put there by our repentance and faith, simply wave us through. Therefore, we can live and serve him out of gratitude, not out of fear or performance anxiety. As writer and teacher Gordon Smith has put it, “Nothing is so fundamental to the Christian journey as knowing and feeling that we are loved. Nothing.”

And that’s a helpful perspective with which to begin the journey that is the season of Lent. The forty days of this season mirror the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, which in turn mirrors the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. But before Israel entered the wilderness she was rescued from by God’s grace from slavery and brought through the waters of the Red Sea. And before Jesus entered the wilderness and then began his public ministry he was baptized in the waters of the Jordan. There he heard God speak, “You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mk. 1:11). Like Israel, and like Jesus, we are deeply and unconditionally loved by God before we start the journey with him that will lead us into the wilderness of this present age, and then through death and into the Promised Land of new life.

So, who do we think we are? Paul wants his readers to know and rest secure in the knowledge that we are God’s beloved children, citizens of his new kingdom, those who have already been brought from darkness into light. Knowing that, resting in that, will make all the difference in how we understand ourselves, and interact with others.