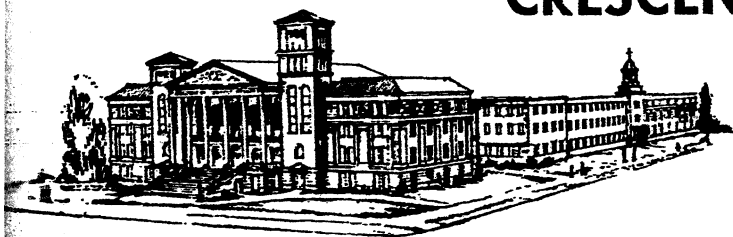


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE NATURE OF GRATITUDE"



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Thanksgiving Service

Thursday Morning, November 23, 1961

Louisville, Kentucky

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Scriptural Reference: Luke 17:11-19

I want to begin this morning by asking you a question: what comes to your mind when you hear the word "gratitude?" I expect that most definitions would run like this: it is the acknowledgment of some benefit received and an expression of appreciation for the same. This describes what took place on the first Thanksgiving. Those Pilgrim fathers had experienced providential care, and they set aside one day to convey their thanks to God. Now much could be said about this familiar approach, but this morning I want us to come at the subject from a different direction. Instead of thinking of gratitude as praise toward God, I want us to consider it as a test of spiritual maturity. I have decided that of all the measurements of a man's soul, none is more penetrating than the reality which is central in the season. Therefore, I want you to think with me for a few moments about the nature of gratitude - not so much what it says about God, but what it can say about you.

Now when I mention the process of testing, I realize I am talking about a unique American phenomenon. We as a nation are probably more interested in personality measurement than any other people in the world. Our whole philosophy of education and business is heavily dependent upon it. From the cradle to the grave, we are the victims of what might be called "assault and battery"; that is, we are assaulted by a battery of tests in every area. The pre-school child is given an aptitude test, the school child an I.Q. test, the high schooler the College Board, the college student the Graduate Record Exam, and on and on. And needless to say, one's performance on these tests wields a mighty influence upon him. I was amused the other day to hear about a father who sent his little son to two years of nursery school and one year of kindergarten. By the time he started to school he was a three-year veteran. The first day he was given a test, and do you know what group they put him in? The Unready Group. When the father inquired about what you had to do to get a child prepared, the teacher answered: "The test indicates that he simply is not ready." Well, suffice it to say, we modern Americans are familiar with tests.

And the same curiosity that motivates men in other areas is also active in the spiritual realm. People are anxious to know how they measure up in their inner lives, and this, of course, presents a difficulty. How do you gauge a man's soul? What criterion do you employ to get an insight into his spirit? You need some test that reflects the whole inner man. In fact, this is what is wrong with so many popular measuring sticks. They are limited to only one facet of the inner life, and do not penetrate the essence of the soul.

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Take for example the test of orthodoxy. There are some who attempt to gauge a man's spirit by analyzing the things he believes. They are interested in his intellectual credo. "Show me the issues to which he gives assent, and I will pass a verdict on his spiritual life," they say. Now I would be the last one to underestimate the importance of doctrinal belief. All action is ultimately rooted in thought, and therefore it does not make a difference what a man believes. But we must realize that intellectual opinion can be detached from the rest of life. I can embrace a certain idea with my mind, and never let it penetrate the vital springs of my personality. I can believe in a metaphysical doctrine of the Trinity, and yet never worship the God above me, the God before me, the God within me. I can believe intellectually in loving my neighbor, and yet at the same time harbor a vicious prejudice against members of another race. I can believe in honesty, yet refuse to invite my conscience in when I fill out my income tax. This is the whole problem; intellect is just one part of life, and a test that involves no more cannot give a true picture. The writer of the epistle of James says: "Even the devils believe." This test is not enough.

Neither is the test of words. Here, again, some put all the emphasis on verbal confession. If a man will just say the right formula, if he will utter the proper phrases or cliches or shibboleths, then this is the measure of his soul. Now, of course, words are important. If we realized how important they were and how much power they wield, perhaps we would be more careful about what we say. But when all of that is admitted, we still must realize that talk is not everything. The problem is that we humans can utter words that do not accord with reality. For example, I am capable at this moment of forming the words: "I am President Kennedy." I can say it, but of course it is not so. Why, I can even say: "I am a rich man," and this is further from the truth than the former statement. You see, our ability to falsify means that words are never enough. Jesus once said: "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven."

These are inadequate tests, and so is another familiar criterion - outward deeds. There are many who exalt this measuring-rod. "Show me a man's conduct," they say. "By their fruit ye shall know them." "I'd rather see a sermon than to hear one any day," they exclaim. And who would deny the importance of good works? They are significant, but can we trust them exclusively to gauge one's spirit? Here again you have a problem. Just as we can utter falsehoods, so we can act deceptively. I can create an appearance by certain actions that is totally different from what I am. This is what angered Jesus so about the Pharisees. They were "play actors," whitewashed tombstones, hypocrites - appearing to be one thing when actually they were another. This capacity to act - to be other than ourselves - invalidates deeds as an absolute test. Again Jesus said: "In the last day many will say, Lord, have not we done mighty works in thy name?" And Jesus will reply, "Depart from me, I never knew you."

But if belief and words and deeds are not adequate tests, how can we ever get a line on our spiritual condition? Here is the way: how grateful are you? When some good deed is done for you, how do you respond? This is far more comprehensive than any of the other tests. This lays bare the inner soul. As a man reacts to the good that comes to him, he betrays the real set of his soul.

Look at the experience that I read earlier in the service (Luke 17:11-19). Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem one day, and ten lepers cried out for help. These men who were totally isolated and hopeless in outlook - Jesus took pity on them and healed them. Now watch what happened. Judged by belief they all passed; for they looked to Him for help. In terms of words they were the same, for they

called out. They even passed the test of deeds, for they all obeyed Him. But here is the crucial test: how did they respond to this act of mercy? Nine were so self-centered that they rushed out to use their new found health as they pleased. Only one recognized that this had come from without, and came back to thank Jesus. Now I say that these responses of gratitude and ingratitude were telling insight into the spiritual condition of the lepers. By what they did with this act of healing, they revealed the central loyalty of their lives. Nine took the experience and interpreted it only in terms of self; one took the experience and interpreted it as a gracious inbreak from without.

These different responses are significant, for the difference between self-centeredness and other-centeredness is ultimate. If you will read the New Testament carefully, it says life is moving in one of two directions. Either we are organizing life around ourselves, or we are organizing it around God and other men. One love is absolute - either love of self or love of that which is other than self. And the two destinies that are depicted in eternity are simply the out-working of these two movements. Heaven is characterized by fellowship - God is there, and with Him all the family who live by love. On the other hand, Hell is characterized by separation - God is not there and men are alone in outer darkness. Now these are not arbitrary states; they are of one piece with the movements of this life, the logical ends of living for self or living for others. The foreboding truth is this: we will get in eternity exactly what we live for - or to be more precise, we will get whom we live for. If that be God and others, then fellowship is our destiny. If ourselves, then solitary confinement is our goal. If the thought of being utterly alone forever and ever is awesome, just remember this follows naturally if all a person ever thinks about in this life is himself.

This, then, is the structure of life, moving in or moving out - and the act of gratitude is the acid test of how we stand. If you have good things happen and you instinctively move toward the outside source - like the one leper - this is a sign of spiritual health. But if you take what comes and never look back, and think only of how you can use it - like the nine - this is a sign of spiritual health. But if you take what comes and never look back, and think only of how you can use it - like the nine - this is a sign of spiritual sickness.

Gratitude then is more than an insight into God. It is an insight into ourselves. Your beliefs, your words, your deeds - all of these are partial. The real question is this: how grateful are you? How do you respond to that which is done for you? Do you move out or do you take in?

I like the story about the man who dreamed that he had died. He was being escorted around the Far Country by an angel who explained that death had stiffened the elbows of the dead. When they went below, it was a scene of frustration. Men had food, but they could not get it to their mouth. Every man was thinking only of himself, and they were fighting and struggling in their desperation. When he was taken above, the atmosphere was utterly different. Here too, the elbows were stiff. But because everyone was concerned about feeding the other, they learned to sit face-to-face and feed each other. Could it be that the Eternal Distinction - the difference in Heaven and Hell - is thinking of others or thinking of self? I think that it is; and gratitude is the grand test to determine one's condition.

Therefore, on this Thanksgiving morning, let me set forth gratitude as a spiritual test, and dare you to apply it to your own life. By it you can learn not only what you are, but also get some intimation of where you are headed.