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“Happy Thanksgivings”

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Brett Younger
Senior Pastor

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The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you've made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

As it is written, "God scatters abroad. God gives to the poor. God's righteousness endures forever."

God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints, but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry, you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ, and by the generosity of your partnership with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that God has given you. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Lots of bargaining is going on this week. Simon Rich imagines grown women negotiating with their mothers: "Okay, mom, I'll stay three days and two nights. I'll stay in my old room—your new Pilates room—but no one can enter the room under any circumstances. If dad uses my bathroom at any point during my visit, you are not allowed to say, 'It's no big deal.' That bathroom has no ventilation and it's right next to the bed, so it is a big deal. If dad uses my bathroom, I will walk out of the house, Uber to the

airport, and fly back to Brooklyn without saying goodbye. There are two other bathrooms in the house. Dad will have to use one of them.”

“Here’s the deal on alcohol. I get unlimited, unmonitored access to a fully stocked bar for the duration of my visit. You will provide a minimum of a half-gallon of vodka and an adequate supply of Diet Coke and orange juice to consume the vodka discreetly. Also, three bottles of white wine and a six-pack of beer. Neither you nor dad will comment on the quantity of my drinking.”

“On the subject of my job, I will offer one five-minute summary of my recent layoff from my startup, including a general description of what the startup did, and a brief explanation of its failure. I will not answer questions about the current state of my finances, health insurance, or job prospects.”

“Here’s how transportation’s going to work. You have to reimburse \$432 for the cost of my round-trip plane ticket, but you cannot tell anyone that you did that, especially not my brother.”

“On Thanksgiving morning, you will refrain from entering my bedroom and opening the blinds in a passive-aggressive attempt to wake me up. If you break this rule, you will admit that your intention was to wake me up. You will not make up an insane lie about wanting to ‘let air in.’ Opening blinds does not let air in. Opening windows lets air in. Opening blinds just lets punishing light into my face.”

“When my perfect brother and perfect sister-in-law show up with their perfect pies and perfect kids, I will hold the latest perfect baby for a maximum of five photos. Mom, if you make any kind of comment implying that I

should have a baby by this point in my life—even if it is said in the most lighthearted, innocuous way— (for example, ‘You look pretty good holding one of those!’), it’s Uber, airport, and racing through the sky to New York.”

“Here are the thanksgiving meal requirements. I will be seated as far as possible from my perfect sister-in-law. I agree to politely listen to a maximum of two updates about my high-school classmates’ parents who still live in town, provided they are of reasonable length. Mom, I agree not to point it out each time you repeat a story, but I will be keeping count. I will try to be a reasonably good daughter, but if it becomes clear that you are not trying to be a reasonably good mother, I will cancel Thanksgiving.” (This is an extremely loose paraphrase of Simon Rich, “Thanksgiving Rider,” *New Yorker*, 10/30, 2023).

That family is not going to be the only one that misses the point of Thanksgiving. Missing the point is easy. Real Thanksgiving is hard.

Thanksgiving can be a selfish holiday. We eat a menu peculiar to the day and not available to many—turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, cornbread, yeast rolls, cranberry sauce, sweet potato casserole, butternut squash, and pumpkin pie. This combination only shows up this week, though the leftovers make it to next week.

At some point during the meal, we take a moment to say thanks for the food on our table, the roof over our head, and the loved ones around us. We will think about how much better our lives are than the lives of those in the hardest parts of the Middle East. We have enough to eat and a warm place to sleep. We do not worry about

paying the grocery bill. Our family is peculiar, but they are the ones with whom we are going to end up. We are doing okay.

Thanksgiving is such an American holiday. We celebrate having more than enough by eating more than enough. We are happy about our affluence, the places we live, and the vacations we enjoy. We are happy about the clothes in the closet and the money in the bank.

We thank God for these things, but we secretly believe we are mostly responsible. We are smart. We work hard. We know how to appear humble, but this can be such a self-centered holiday.

The pilgrim story does not help. The “first Thanksgiving” was named the “first Thanksgiving” years after the fact. People argue about which feast it refers to because harvest festivals had always been a thing for Native Americans. The pilgrims probably did not come up with the idea. Squanto did help the pilgrims learn how to grow crops, but the reason he could speak English was that the English had captured him and sold him into slavery earlier in his life. And, of course, some of these settlements were established on land that had been cultivated and developed by indigenous people who were wiped out by smallpox brought by the English. Celebrating the success of colonialism under the guise of gratitude is tricky.

Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote this Tweet—which will not be read at many Thanksgiving tables— “The desire for so many Americans to be free of collective shame, collective atonement, and collective responsibility for the shameful legacy of centuries of slavery, racism, apartheid, and terrorist violence visited upon fellow citizens is the sign of an immature and selfish culture.”

That is harsh. Real Thanksgiving does not really happen for most. We are glad we have what we have, but gladness is not gratefulness. People eating turkey and dressing will outnumber people having a genuine experience of thankfulness. We need to grapple with what Thanksgiving means.

In a letter to his wealthy nephew, Henri Nouwen writes: "Increasing prosperity has not made people more friendly toward one another. They're better off, but that newfound wealth has not resulted in a new sense of community. I get the impression that people are more preoccupied with themselves than when they didn't possess so much. There's less opportunity to relax, get together informally, enjoy the little things of life. Success has isolated a lot of people and made them lonely. The higher up you get on the ladder of prosperity the harder it becomes to be together, sing together, pray together, celebrate together in the spirit of Thanksgiving."

We might guess that the people who have the most would be the most grateful, but that is usually not the way it works. Wealth gets in the way of gratitude. We end up wanting more, trying to fill our lives with more only to discover that there is no filling.

For most of us, having more has not made us more grateful. We have lives given to comfort rather than lives given to gratitude. We have shallow desires that come from deep down. We want to be wealthy, because we want to control our lives. We want to be wealthy, because we want access to certain social circles. We want to be wealthy, because it gives us power over others. We want to be wealthy, because it makes us feel significant and

secure. We need to ask, what does real thanksgiving look like?

Paul writes to the church at Corinth to invite them to experience real thanksgiving. He quotes a pretty basic proverb: "Sowing less seed will bring in a smaller harvest. Sowing more seed will bring in a bigger harvest."

That is mostly true. A farmer who sows a lot of seed will usually be rewarded with a big crop, but sometimes bad weather ruins a crop. Paul is saying the same is true with money. A stingy planter gets a stingy crop. A lavish planter gets a lavish crop. A person who is generous will usually be rewarded with better gifts.

Being tightfisted does not make sense. Trying to save on seeds when each seed could produce 10, 30, 100 times the amount of seed that you sow is not smart. Paul says the alternative is to be generous.

He writes, "Each of you needs to learn to give joyfully, not begrudgingly. God loves it when givers delight in giving."

We do not have to hoard what we have. Most of us have more than enough, so we can share more of what we have. God gives astonishing gifts that make us want to be generous.

Paul quotes a Psalm, "As it is written: God throws caution to the winds. God gives to the needy with reckless abandon. God's generosity never wears out."

Paul's writing to people who live in a big city, but he sounds like he thinks they are farmers: "God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will make your life richer, a perpetual thanksgiving. We celebrate thanksgiving by giving. We have so that we can give. Thanksgiving fills us with love. God's indescribable gift is generosity, wonder, and thanksgiving."

Thanksgiving leads us beyond self-centeredness to a better way of life.

Carl Jung said, “If our religion is based on salvation, our chief emotions will be fear and trembling. If our religion is based on wonder, our chief emotion will be gratitude.”

If our lives are based on being successful, our chief emotions will be fear and self-centeredness. If our lives are based on thanksgiving, our chief emotion will be joy.

In this sanctuary, Henry Ward Beecher preached, “The art of being happy lies in the power of extracting happiness from common things.”

Thanksgiving leads us to think our commute is time to think, every cup of coffee is delicious, and common things are exciting and new. We feel rich by counting the things we have that money cannot buy. Because life is hard, we need to see the surprising gifts that come our way—like a friendship at a lonely time, a kind word in the midst of sorrow, or a joy that is deeper than our pain. In a society that has us counting money, pounds, calories, and steps, we resist and count our blessings.

Maya Angelou writes, “Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer.”

Real thanksgiving leads to real giving. We do not thank God that we have bread to eat because others starve, but because we can share with the hungry. We do not thank God that we have work to do because some do not, but because we can work to meet another’s needs. We do not thank God for health because others are sick, but because we can use our strength to care for those who are hurting.

When we see what we have to be grateful for, we go beyond speaking our gratitude and give gratefully. We become people who hold the doors for strangers, keep babies entertained in grocery store lines,

and act with kindness to friends who are having a bad day.

We become those who know when we have eaten enough and stop, make a donation to world hunger relief, take a bag of designer clothing to the Thrift Store, clothing that we could have kept, contribute to the warm clothing drive for trafficking survivors and the toy drive for underprivileged children, stand up for those who are being put down, hear God inviting us to a generous life, confess who we are and discover who we are meant to be, and end up less comfortable and more grateful.

The North Carolina state motto is the Latin phrase *Esse Quam Videri*, “to be rather than to seem.” We can be generous rather than seem generous. With God’s help, we go beyond Thanksgiving as usual, and live generously.

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