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Title: The Benefits of Thanksgiving

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Scripture: [Colossians 3:12-17](#)

Text: [Psalm 103, 1-8](#)

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It is the week before Thanksgiving and that signals the beginning of gluttony season. The next month, even the most health-conscious among us succumb to the temptations of holiday food. According to the Calorie Control Council, most Americans will consume around 4,500 calories on Thursday, on dinner alone.¹ "Someone who eats three times the normal calories of a regular meal will have an extra workload for the stomach and intestines and therefore the heart," said a Mayo Clinic doctor. Then he adds, "There is nothing beneficial about Thanksgiving."²

There may be nothing beneficial about a Thanksgiving meal but there are all kinds of benefits for thanksgiving. There is significant medical research that suggests that thanksgiving is very beneficial. The benefits of gratitude include an increased sense of personal well-being, better sleep, reduced depression and anxiety disorders, even better digestion. Thanksgiving is beneficial!³

It didn't take a research project and social scientists to figure this out. Three thousand years ago, David understood this and sings about it in a Psalm, Psalm 103. For David, the heart of thanksgiving is remembering the benefits of God. David says it this way. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits." (Psalm 103: 1-2)

That's the challenge today, a challenge I hope you will take with you to your Thanksgiving Day celebration. "Do not forget all his benefits." I hope by the end of the sermon, you have a list of benefits for which you are thankful. Some of you take notes on your bulletin or on one of the registration cards. I know this because I see you writing. I also know this because sometimes you leave them. We find groceries list or notes between people, like "Where do you want to go to lunch?" My all-time favorite was a child's note to a parent because it was written with a crayon. It said, "How much longer is he going to talk?"

I want you to write a note about the benefits of Thanksgiving. David is going to identify four benefits and you might think of a word or two that connects with your life. Then write it down on bulletin or your smartphone. If you have a really good memory, you can just keep your list in your head. But

research shows that writing down the benefits of thanksgiving makes them evident in your life. At the end of the sermon, you are going to use them.

Before we get to the listing exercise, let's talk about the word benefit. If you took Latin in high school, you know that the root word for benefit is *bene* which means "good." It is funny that people today say, "I got a good job with benes", meaning benefits. They are saying, "I've got a good job with goods." *Bene* plus another Latin word *factum* means a "good fact." A benefit is a good fact. *Bene factum.* ⁴

You may think that sounds a lot like benefactor and you'd be right. Benefactor is related to our word for the factor. It means "one who does good." To be grateful, you must recognize that the benefits or gifts that come your way, aren't random or by accident. They come from somebody, someone who has good intentions for you. That someone, in the case of David and I hope, in your case as well, isn't from a generous boss or a rich uncle. For David and I hope for you, the benefactor is God.

If God is the benefactor and you are receiving the benefits, then you are the beneficiary, the one who receives the good. That's you. You are the beneficiary of the benefits of a God who has your best interests at heart. For there to be gratitude, true thanksgiving, beneficiaries must believe they are receiving something they did not earn, merit, or deserve.

The biggest challenge to thanksgiving, the greatest health risk to our hearts is the belief that what is yours is yours. Ingratitude always derives from a sense of entitlement, the feeling that you've earned what you have, that everything you have has come from your hand and your efforts. There is a myth in American culture that the harder you work, the more successful you will be. We raise our children to believe that industry and ambition can take you anywhere you want to go. One can argue that this work ethic makes our country great. But it may also be the very seed that grows the deadly disease of ingratitude. Like the fat hidden in our Thanksgiving feast when work is coupled with success and prosperity follow, a silent killer can rear its ugly head. We can believe that the blessings of our lives come from our effort alone rather than the beneficence of our Great Benefactor.

The great theologian C.S. Lewis confessed that he thought that prosperity in the middle of his life was a fertile ground for the devil. Why did he say that? Why other than the temptation to think, "I did this; I own this; I deserve this; I'm entitled." Entitlement forgets that benefits are bestowed by a benefactor. For there to be gratitude, beneficiaries must believe they are receiving something they did not earn, merit, or deserve. This is why David

rightly says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits."
(Psalm 103: 1-2)

So what are the benefits that David perceives that come from the Benefactor, the ones that David wants us not to forget? The first is grace, the forgiveness of sin. God is the Benefactor who "...forgives all your iniquity" (Psalm 103:3a). David sees forgiveness and grace as the first benefit of Thanksgiving.

I went to seminary in Claremont, CA and when I first arrived, I was called to serve as an intern at a church in downtown Los Angeles. One of the first calls I made was to see a young woman in the Los Angeles County Hospital. She was an inpatient in the psychiatric ward, the largest mental hospital in the United States. I admit that it is an intimidating place. I found before me a woman who believed that God could not, would not forgive her iniquity. The origin of this belief wasn't biblical. It came from her father, who could not and would not forgive her and she lost her mind over it. You've likely known people like that in your life who no matter how much you ask for forgiveness, no matter how hard you beg, forgiveness will not be granted. The door is closed.

David says, with God, the door is never closed. As we read deeper into Psalm 103, David says, "God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10) God will go the distance with us, no matter how far we wander. "...as far as the east is from the west... God removes our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12) God proves it by sending Jesus so that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:39).

I want you to think about this past week. How far have you wandered from God? Have you had a good week? How about the last month? Maybe even the last year? Whatever you've done, wherever you have wandered, you've been pardoned. That's a good act, a benefit that endures. Take a moment and write down a word or two to remind you of this benefit for which you are thankful. God, the Great Benefactor, "...forgives all your iniquity." (Psalm 103:3a) That's the first benefit of thanksgiving.

The second is healing: God "heals all your diseases." (Psalm 103:3b) Have you been sick recently? Did you struggle this year with a cold, or the flu or something worse...cancer or heart this past year? Did you go to the doctor? Doctors are in the business of identifying illness, putting their finger on the cause and using medicine to make you well. David's not talking about the bad back that he struggled with or the cold that he caught. He's talking about healing that no doctor can broker. David is talking about the benefits

of the soul. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits...He heals your diseases." (Psalm 103:2)

There are inner diseases of the soul that only God can attend to. I fear they have gained footing recently in our fractured country and broken world. The inner disease of hatred and malice, bitterness and spite. We are reminded daily of it with every news report and they are as contagious as the flu. They give voice to a disease that no medicine can touch. Only God can heal these diseases. "He healed me," David says? There is no anger, hatred, jealousy, bitterness in his life.

Has he healed you? Anger, frustration, nastiness, cruelty, pride, greed...what's been there this past week, month, year? There is a word or two there, a disease of the soul which God has attended to or one which you need the Benefactor to address. Write it down. Only God can do the inside work, the healing of diseases of the soul. That's a benefit worthy of thanksgiving.

David then turns to the third benefit, redemption. God is the Benefactor "who redeems your life from the Pit..." (Psalm 103:4) It isn't associated with our anti-thanksgiving expression, "Life is the pits." He's not talking about depression or a tough time. When the Bible speaks of "the pit", it means to be in ruin, to be destroyed, to be in the deepest dark valley of corruption, to be lost. The pit is the grave. This Benefactor delivers us from death itself, God saves the lost.

I hope you know that. I hope you remember that. You were lost but were found. You were like a lone sheep separated from the pack, like a bad boy off in a foreign country. And then God redeemed you. He sent out a search and rescue party of one. David wants us to understand that which he could only anticipate. The Great Benefactor who redeems your life from the Pit and then, "crowns you with steadfast love and mercy" (Psalm 103:4b). It's your crown, not God's, a crown of love and mercy.

When our children were little, they wore hats to the Thanksgiving table, looking like little pilgrims celebrating the first Thanksgiving. Maybe you will have a pilgrim at your table; maybe your feast will include a child's joyful embrace of a historic Thanksgiving.

Around the table though, we who've been rescued from the pit, we wear crowns. It's worthy of a word or two on your list of thanksgiving benefits, don't you think? Surely it is worthy of a word about the gratitude for your redemption and your crown of love and mercy. Write one down now.

Grace, healing, redemption and finally satisfaction. God "satisfies you with good as long as you live" (Psalm 103: 5a) This benefit flies right in the face of the unhealthy Thanksgiving when we gorge ourselves beyond satisfaction and then reach for another serving of dressing or a second piece of the pie. Instead of singing, "We Gather Together" we put on the Stones and sing, "I can't get no satisfaction." Really? Do you need Mick Jagger sitting at your Thanksgiving table?

David says, "God satisfies you with good as long as you live." Do you see that? What's that look like? David's inventory includes the gift of scripture, God's compassion, God's knowledge of David, and God's steadfast love. Over and over again, God steadfast love is acknowledged.

One of the biggest barriers to Thanksgiving is focusing on what is bad rather than what is good. When we focus on that which is bad or hard or difficult, it drains our spirits. There is a lot of that in our lives right now; too much. When we consider what is good, there are great benefits. What science now documents, David knew. Focusing on good renews you. David says our spirits soar like eagles. In scripture, there is a belief that an eagle's strength and vitality grow with age and that the more we embrace God's goodness, the stronger we will be, so strong that our "youth is renewed like the eagle's." (Psalm 103:5b)

Look back, over the past year. What is good? What would you embrace? It is a benefit of Thanksgiving, a benefit of God. Write down your words now.

You have a list now and I hope it isn't of groceries or questioning when I am going to stop talking. I hope it is a list of God's benefits. You might want to use that list on Thanksgiving but I invited you to use it right now as I close. I'm going to pray and you are going to silently look at your list and fill in the blanks. Bow your heads now and look at your list:

Great Benefactor:

Thank you for your grace, for the places you have forgiven me_____

Thank you for your healing, for coming into my souls and addressing_____

Thank you for redeeming me through Jesus, for I was lost and you_____

And thank you God for your satisfying goodness which I see_____

For these benefits God, we have thanksgiving. Amen.

¹ <http://craves.everybodyshops.com/how-many-calories-will-you-consume-at-thanksgiving-dinner/>

²² Ate Too Much? Tight Pants May Be the Smallest Worry, New York Times, November 20, 2017

³ Thanksgiving: Many Benefits & One Drawback, Psychology Today, Peter Bongiorno, November 24, 2011.

⁴ The idea for bene, the list, and closing prayer was from The Great Gratitude Experiment, John Ortberg, read online by subscription at preaching today.