

A Thanksgiving Question

(Text: 1 Corinthians 4:1-7)

There is an old story told about a farmer who received a visit from his priest. The farmer had purchased the farm just three years earlier. Together they walked around and admired the healthy corn, rising as high as a basketball goal. The soybean crop was coming on strongly. The pastureland was knee-deep in good grazing for the cows. The priest said, "My friend, God has certainly blessed you richly." The farmer nodded and replied, "Maybe so, but you should have seen this place when God had it all by himself."

One hopes that the priest then suggested that they sit in the shade and talk. Then he might have asked, "Who gave you the health to work this farm? Who supplied the rain for these crops? Who causes a seed to germinate in the first place? Who provides even your next breath of air?"

The great enemy of thanksgiving is pride. Do you remember the old nursery rhyme Little Jack Horner? "Little Jack Horner sat in a corner, eating his Christmas pie. He stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plum, and said, 'What a good fellow am I.'" There were lots of little Jack Horners in the ancient church at Corinth. Those Christians were proud of themselves. Many were affluent and a bit arrogant. Also, they were partisan and hyper-critical. Some allied themselves with the teacher Apollos and criticized St. Paul. Others sided with Paul and criticized Apollos. In an attempt to help them become grateful, humble Christians, St. Paul asked them to remember three things: i) remember who you are; ii) remember the only evaluation that matters; and iii) remember your source. Then Paul asked a thought-provoking, heart piercing question. I want to send you home today with that question ringing in your minds and hearts: "What do you have that you did not receive?"

i) Paul urges us to remember who we are:

In verse 1 of our passage Paul referred to himself and all Christians as "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. In doing this he wants us to remember who we are. The Greek word we translate as servant meant literally a galley slave who along with other slaves rowed a large boat for his master. This was the lowest kind of slave duty. Imagine that! We are galley-slaves for

Christ! By using this noun Paul's intent is to create in our minds the idea that we are fellow servants of Jesus. We are equal with one another because of our relationship to Jesus. You will remember how hard it was for the disciples to capture this idea when Jesus confronted them one day. As they were walking together their discussion had turned to asking who among them was the greatest. Jesus responded by saying that I am here among you as one who serves, therefore you are to be like me. When we remember who we are there will be no room for pride because our focus is not on comparison with each other but on serving Jesus. When we know who we are the Holy Spirit is able to cultivate in our souls a humble spirit. I like what the nineteenth century American preacher Henry Ward Beecher said at this point.: "Pride slays thanksgiving, but an humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grow. A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves."

Humility allows us to cultivate an attitude which acknowledges that Jesus not only calls us to be servants but also stewards. The word "steward" in Greek refers to the top slave on an estate who administers the affairs of the estate. He is the master's administrative assistant. His position is high among the slaves, but he is still a slave, and he is supposed to always serve the purposes of his master. Paul called himself a steward of God's mysteries and recognized that Jesus entrusted him with the Gospel. Because Paul so clearly understood who he was, he knew that he was a trustworthy steward of the mysteries of God.

In your life, God has entrusted you with responsibilities that differ from Paul's but are equally important. For each one of us the people and responsibilities over which we have stewardship will differ. You might this week look at those areas in your life that determine where you spend most of your time. These are the areas God has entrusted to you as a steward. Prayerfully ask yourself about your attitude towards those areas of responsibility. If we approach these responsibilities as a way for us to serve Jesus and to see ourselves as his administrative assistants then we will be motivated to approach our daily tasks with a thankful heart because we are remembering who we are, servants and stewards of Jesus.

ii) secondly, Paul urges us to remember the only evaluation that matters:

In verses 3 and 4 Paul writes, " ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. ⁴ I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

Paul is so centred on Christ that he knows that he is the one who will judge Paul. Because of this he is able to give himself to the work God has entrusted without undue regard to what other people think. Thomas a Kempis once said "Great tranquility of heart is his who cares for neither praise nor blame." What a way to look at our lives. When this way of life is ours we can more readily hear the praise and criticisms of others without these words either giving us an inflated ego or deflating us to discouragement or despair. Paul knew how to live this way because what mattered most to him was Jesus' assessment of his life.

As we concentrate on God's assessment of us we will see that what most concerns him is the cultivation of a character that reflects Jesus character in our lives. Good character is more to be praised than outstanding talents or stunning looks. Most talents and physical beauty are, to some extent, a gift. Good character, by contrast, is not given to us. We have to build it, aided by the Holy Spirit, peace by peace-by thought, choice courage and determination" As we remember that the only evaluation that really matters is God's than we will give ourselves more fully to the cultivation of a good character.

iii) Finally, Paul urges us to Remember your Source:

Paul brought this message home to the Corinthians by asking a penetrating question: "What do you have that you did not receive?" That is, when you consider your really significant assets, what do you have that was not a gift? James writes "Every perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of lights." (James 1:17)

Don't use Thanksgiving as an occasion for self-congratulation. Instead, let it be a time when we count our many blessings and name them one by one. What do you have that you did not receive? This morning I would like us to take a few minutes to share with each other what we our thankful for on this Thanksgiving Sunday. And remember that God is the source of all good gifts, is the one whose evaluation ultimately matters because he is the one who has entrusted us with our lives as his servants and stewards.

