

Thankful for the Gospel

Psalm 48, Hebrews 12:18–25

It is fitting to set aside a day for thanksgiving, as we will do this week. In a recent sermon series on 1 Thessalonians we heard once again the apostolic command, “In everything *give thanks* (ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε): for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:18). Let that truth grip you and get a hold on you: giving thanks is God’s will for every one of us. We are to do that, whether we are having a good day, a bad day, a so-and-so day, or a traumatic day. We do not give thanks because everything always goes precisely perfectly, but because to do so is the will of God. He tells us, “In everything give thanks.”

Beloved, we have a wise and loving heavenly Father who sent his Son to purchase our salvation. He teaches us that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Nothing in this fallen world can separate us from the love of Christ. The testimony of the Heidelberg Catechism is ours: “I trust God so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends upon me in this vale of tears. He is *able* to do this because he is almighty God; he *desires* to do this because he is a faithful Father.”¹

Many Christians, particularly at the season of Thanksgiving, express thanks for the blessings God bestows upon us: our families, our church family, God’s provision and day-to-day care, healing, protection, liberty. But often we forget to give thanks for the *gospel*. The gospel is the good news that God saves sinners and grants us eternal life. Without the gospel there is no future, and no other blessing.

I have three points this morning: (1) The law requires perfection; we cannot save ourselves; (2) Gospel preaching sets Christ before us; and (3) To refuse to listen is to reject Christ; to receive it is life eternal. First,

1. The law requires perfection; we cannot save ourselves.

Our New Testament reading this morning contrasts the law and the gospel. It begins: “For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: ‘And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.’ And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.’)”

The “mountain that may be touched” is Mount Sinai, where God spoke his Ten commandments.

¹ <https://all-of-grace.org/resources/heidelberg-catechism>

Imagine that you were an Israelite, recently delivered from Egyptian bondage. You had personally seen the ten plagues that God sent to defeat your Egyptian captors: the waters turning to blood, the frogs, the lice, the flies, the death of the livestock, the boils, the hail, the locusts, the darkness that could not be escaped, finally culminating in the death of the firstborn son in every household that failed to smear the shed blood of the Passover lamb on the lintels and doorposts.

You had personally seen these ten terrifying expressions of God's mighty power. You also had seen the waters of the Red Sea part in two, piling up a wall of water on each side, allowing the children of Israel to pass safely through on dry land, then ultimately rushing in again, drowning the Egyptian armies.

You had heard Moses' instructions for the people to sanctify themselves and gather around Mount Sinai to hear the voice of the LORD Jehovah speaking audibly from heaven.

You had witnessed the flashes of lightning, the peals of thunder, the smoke billowing up from the mountain, the long, piercing blasts of the trumpet. You heard the voice of the LORD God thundering over the mountain. You and your fellow citizens were terrified. Even Moses, who earlier had heard the voice of the LORD God speaking to him from the burning bush, was terrified. He said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling." If Moses, who was on a first-name basis with God, was exceedingly afraid, then the common people were terrified.

But think of what was said: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image . . . you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children . . . of those who hate Me You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. Remember . . . the Sabbath of the LORD your God. . . . Honor your father and your mother You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. . . . You shall not covet"

Here is the voice of the LORD God, codifying his holy law that he has written in the heart of every man, woman and child born of Adam's race, in ten memorable commandments. Man intuitively knows that God's law is true. Paul testifies that the "Gentiles, who do not have the law . . . show the work of the law *written in their hearts*, their conscience also bearing witness."² Here are God's universal requirements binding upon the whole human race. God requires perfect obedience and will justly call every infraction to account.

² Rom. 2:15

Now when the Israelites who heard the thundering voice of God witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the trumpet blasts, and the mountain smoking, they tried to pull back from the holy presence of God. They stood afar off, trembling. They said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but don’t let God speak with us, or we will die.”

When God speaks, it is a moment of crisis. If a person listens and assents and says in his heart, “Speak, LORD, for thy servant heareth,” then he or she is saved and will ultimately go to be with Christ in glory, but if a person refuses to hear and obey, he or she will perish, away from the presence of the LORD. This is how it is, anytime the Word is preached. It may seem as if nothing has happened, but God promises that his word, that goes forth from his mouth, will not return to him void, but will surely accomplish the purpose for which God sent it. He who listens and assents is saved; he who refuses to listen is damned.

The law spoken at Sinai requires perfection. No man attains to it, except the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot save ourselves; it is absolutely impossible. As one of Job’s friends asked, “How . . . can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?” (Job 25:4). The answer is: he cannot. We cannot save ourselves. Our only hope of eternal life is Christ.

Consider, secondly,

2. Gospel preaching sets Christ before us.

Keeping God’s holy law cannot save us, for God requires absolute perfection and cannot overlook sin. Consider the second part of our New Testament text:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”

Here the writer alludes to the opening verses of our Old Testament text, Psalm 48: “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.”

When the writer to the Hebrews says, “You have come to Mount Zion,” the “you” here is plural. He is speaking to the whole church. Here is the experience of the whole church, the whole New Covenant people: “You have come to Mount Zion . . . the heavenly Jerusalem.” You yourself may or may not have ever visited the earthly city of Jerusalem in the land of Palestine in the Middle East. At the time Hebrews was written, the second temple was still standing, and the Levitical

priests were still offering animal sacrifices.³ But this would shortly come to an abrupt end.⁴

In this text the author's focus is not on the physical temple built of stones and mortar but on the heavenly temple that it represented. He says, "You have come to . . . the *heavenly* Jerusalem."

Notice the past tense: "You *have come*." He is speaking to the church, using the past tense, indicating completed action. Salvation, which was impossible under the law because of man's inability to keep it perfectly, has come to the people of God through Christ the Savior. We have come to the *heavenly* Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the *firstborn*, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling. The term "the firstborn" refers to Christ, the "the firstborn of a new humanity which is to be glorified, as its exalted Lord is glorified."⁵ The term "firstborn" is a term of exaltation: "the firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15).

New Covenant preaching is focused on the gospel, the good news of God's salvation in Christ, whose blood shed upon the cross washes away our sins. If a sermon doesn't point to Christ, it is powerless to save. A *Christless* message—no matter how eloquent, how insightful, or how powerfully delivered—cannot save.

Paul's detractors said that his letters were "weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2 Cor. 10:10). They made fun of his message, refused to receive it, and died without Christ. May we avoid their fate and insist that the preachers in our churches faithfully preach Christ.

That brings us to point three,

3. To refuse to listen is to reject Christ; to receive it is life eternal.

As we have seen, the writer to the Hebrews, speaking to the New Covenant church, says, "You have not come to the mountain that may be touched . . . but you have come to Mount Zion . . . the heavenly Jerusalem . . . to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant."

New Covenant preaching is distinctly Christ-centered. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and man, the only Savior for lost sinners. There is no other way to be saved.

After giving this powerful instruction, helping us to understand the futility of trying by our own good works to attain to God's perfection; after demonstrating the superiority of the New Covenant message and the necessity of the gospel of God's grace, assuring us that we are not saved by our own merit, but by the finished work

³ Heb. 8:4

⁴ Heb. 8:13

⁵ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, πρωτότοκος (Logos Bible Software), Rom. 8:29

of the only Mediator, the Lord Jesus, the writer to the Hebrews pointedly says: “*See that you do not refuse Him who speaks.*”

What’s he saying? To answer this question we have to remember the audience he is addressing. Hebrews was written to Jews who by God’s grace had come to faith in Jesus Christ. They had come to see the glorious, liberating truth that the Lord Jesus, born of the virgin Mary, was indeed the promised Messiah, the Lord of glory come to earth. These Jews had professed the Christian faith, but because of persecution, and because of a longing for the familiar ceremonies of the law, and because of pressure from their families, were now tempted to give up the Christian faith and return to Judaism. As he had said back in chapter 6, “it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, . . . if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” To profess faith in Christ, and then to walk away from the faith is *apostasy*, a serious sin.

But the message “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks” is applicable to us as well as to those it was originally addressed to. *We*, like the Jews of the first century who professed Christ, worship with God’s people. Week after week we assemble to worship the Lord, to meet with the risen Christ. We pray to him, we sing his praises, we hear his word read and preached, we sit down with him at the holy Supper. We confess our faith together and receive his blessing together. We come to worship not to be entertained, but to *serve* the Lord. This is our duty, according to Scripture. It is the duty of every member of our families as well. Heads of households are to lead their families by example and make sure their family members worship as well. “As for me and my house, we shall serve the LORD.” We should not take puzzles or art supplies into church. When we are supposed to be singing or participating in a congregational reading, we should not stay silent or refrain from participating. We should *participate*—that is our duty. We should open our Bibles to the Scriptures being read and follow along. We should not let ourselves daydream but discipline ourselves to pay attention to the Word. It is the *Lord’s* word—it is more important than anything else. We should not let ourselves be distracted. To *receive* the Lord’s word is life and salvation. To *reject* it is death and damnation; it is ultimately to go to hell. Worship is serious business!

Worship is not the time to make unnecessary trips to the bathroom. If it is truly an emergency, that is one thing, but if it is *not* an emergency, you should stay in your seat and focus on the sermon. To receive it is life. That is the message of our text this morning: “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.”

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this duty. This is the duty of every man, woman and child in the congregation. Obviously, it is hard to teach this to a three-year-old. But heads of households should try. “*See that you do not refuse him*

who is speaking.” During the preaching of the word, it is God who speaks. It is more important to listen in church than to listen to your teacher at school. It is more important to listen in church than to listen to a club leader or to one of your friends. Active listening means doing our best not to be distracted by people around us. For children it means not to be distracted by a child down the row who keeps trying to get us to giggle. It means exercising self-control. It means looking attentively at the minister and not paying attention to distractions around us.

Worshiping is very serious business. It is doing business with God. It is having a sense of the great importance of what we are doing. *We must not refuse the One who is speaking.* If the minister is faithfully explaining and applying Holy Scripture, then the sermon is the voice of God. We do not go to church to hear the opinions of man; we go to church to hear God’s voice. It is not the time to daydream. It is not the time to think about other things. It is the time to focus our minds on the message that God has for us that day. *See that you do not refuse the One who is speaking!*

Worship requires *active listening, eager participation, and a wholehearted response* to the Word. Our Shorter Catechism asks, “How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?” Answer: “That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must *attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives*” (Q&A 90). We should never have a “ho-hum” attitude toward the Word. We should never say, “That’s boring; I want something more exciting.”

This week is Thanksgiving. It is more than a day just for turkey and football. It is a time for reflection on all the ways that God has blessed us. But as we share the things for which we are thankful, let us not forget the most important thing of all: the Gospel. Let us each one be thankful for the Gospel.

After I had chosen our congregational response following the benediction today, I noticed how closely the hymn matched our theme. The hymnwriter wrote: “*Thanks we give and adoration for your gospel’s joyful sound: may the fruits of your salvation in our hearts and lives abound: ever faithful, ever faithful to the truth may we be found.*”⁶

At this Thanksgiving season, as we express our thanks to God for his every good and perfect gift—life, health, family, sound minds, safety, friends and lovers—let us not forget to be thankful for the *Gospel*, the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord. May he grant us grace to sing his praises in the Spirit and with our understanding, and to long more and more for the Word, today and always! Amen.

⁶ <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/lord-dismiss-us-with-your-blessing/>