

SERMON 7

THANKFULNESS FOR MERCIES RECEIVED, A NECESSARY DUTY

A FAREWELL SERMON, PREACHED ON BOARD THE WHITAKER, AT
ANCHOR NEAR SAVANNAH, IN GEORGIA, SUNDAY, MAY 17, 1738

*Psalm 108:30-31 "Then art they glad, because they are at rest,
and so he bringeth them unto the haven where they would be.
O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness,
and declare the wonders that he doeth for the children of men!"*

Numberless marks does man bear in his soul, that he is fallen and estranged from God; but nothing gives a greater proof thereof, than that backwardness, which every one finds within himself, to the duty of praise and thanksgiving.

When God placed the first man in paradise, his soul no doubt was so filled with a sense of the riches of the divine love, that he was continually employing that breath of life, which the Almighty had not long before breathed into him, in blessing and magnifying that all-bountiful, all gracious God, in whom he lived, moved, and had his being.

And the brightest idea we can form of the angelical hierarchy above, and the spirits of just men made perfect, is, that they are continually standing round the throne of God, and cease not day and night, saying,

"Worthy art thou, O Lamb that wast slain, to receive power and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing." Revelation 5:12.

That then, which was man's perfection when time first began, and will be his employment when death is swallowed up in victory, and time shall be no more, without controversy, is part of our perfection, and ought to be our frequent exercise on earth: and I doubt not but those blessed spirits, who are sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation,

often stand astonished when they encamp around us, or find our hearts so rarely enlarged, and our mouths so seldom opened, to show forth the loving-kindness of the Lord, or to speak of all his praise.

Matter for praise and adoration, can never be wanting to creatures redeemed by the blood of the Son of God; and who have such continual scenes of his infinite goodness presented to their view, that were their souls duly affected with a sense of his universal love, they could not but be continually calling on heaven and earth, men and angels, to join with them in praising and blessing that “high and lofty one, who inhabiteth eternity, who maketh his sun to shine on the evil and on the good,” and daily pours down his blessings on the whole race of mankind.,

But few are arrived to such a degree of charity or love, as to rejoice with those that do rejoice, and to be as thankful for other mercies, as their own. This part of Christian perfection, though begun on earth, will be consummated only in heaven; where our hearts will glow with such fervent love towards God and one another, that every fresh degree of glory communicated to our neighbor, will also communicate to us a fresh topic of thankfulness and joy.

That which has the greatest tendency to excite the generality of fallen men to praise and thanksgiving, is a sense of God’s private mercies, and particular benefits bestowed upon ourselves. For as these come nearer our own hearts, so they must be more affecting: and as they are peculiar proofs, whereby we may know, that God does in a more especial manner favor us above others, so they cannot but sensibly touch us; and if our hearts are not quite frozen, like coals of a refiner’s fire, they must melt us down into thankfulness and love. It was a consideration of the distinguishing favor God had shown to his chosen people Israel, and the frequent and remarkable deliverance wrought by him in behalf of “hose who go down to the Sea in ships, and occupy their business in great matters,” that made the holy Psalmist break out so frequently as he does in this psalm, into this moving, pathetic exclamation, “that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness, and declare the wonders that he doeth for the children of men!”

His expressing himself in so fervent a manner, implies both the importance and neglect of the duty. As when Moses in another occasion cried out,

“O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would practically consider their latter end!” Deuteronomy 32:29.

I say, importance and neglect of the duty; for out of those man thousands that receive blessings from the Lord, how few give thanks in remembrance of his holiness? The account given us of the ungrateful lepers, is but too lively a representation of the ingratitude of mankind in general; who like them, when under any humbling providence, can cry, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Luke 17:13. But when healed of their sickness, or delivered from their distress, scarce one in ten can be found “returning to give thanks to God.”

And yet as common as this sin of ingratitude is, there is nothing we ought more earnestly to pray against. For what is more absolutely condemned in holy scripture than ingratitude? Or what more peremptorily (absolutely, emphatically) required than the contrary temper? Thus says the Apostle, “Rejoice evermore; in every thing give thanks,” 1 Thessalonians 5:16,18.

“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God,” Philippians 4:6.

On the contrary, the Apostle mentions it as one of the highest crimes of the Gentiles, that they were not thankful. “Neither were they thankful,” Romans 1:21. As also in another place, he numbers the “unthankful,” 2 Timothy 3:2 amongst those unholy, profane person, who are to have their portion in the lake of fire and brimstone.

As for our sins, God puts them behind his back; but his mercies he will have acknowledged, “There is virtue gone out of me,” says Jesus Christ, Luke 8:46 and the woman who was cured of her bloody issue, must confess it. And we generally find, when God sent any remarkable punishment upon a particular person, he reminded him of the favors he had received, as so many aggravations of his ingratitude. Thus when God was about to visit Eli’s house, he thus expostulates with him by his prophet:

“Did I plainly appear unto the house of thy fathers, when they were in Egypt, in Pharaoh’s house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel, to be my priest, to offer upon mine altar, to

burn incense, and to wear an ephod before me? Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice, and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation, and honorest thy sons above me; so make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people? Wherefore the Lord God of Israel saith, I said indeed, that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever; but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me, for them that honor me will I honor, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed”
2 Samuel 2:27-30.

It was this and such like instances of God’s severity against the unthankful, that inclined me to choose the words of the text, as the most proper subject I could discourse on at this time.

Four months, my good friends, we have now been upon the sea in this ship, and “have occupied our business in the great waters.” At God Almighty’s word, we have seen “the stormy wind arise, which hath lifted up the waves thereof. We have been carried up to the heaven, and down again to the deep, and some of our souls melted away because of the trouble; but I trust we cried earnestly unto the Lord, and he delivered us out of our distress. For he made the storm to cease; so that the waves thereof were still. And now we are glad, because we are at rest, for God hath brought us to the haven where we would be. O that you would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness, and declare the wonders that he hath done for us, the unworthiest of the sons of men.”

Thus Moses, thus Joshua behaved. For when they were about to take their leave of the children of Israel, they recounted to them what great things God had done for them, as the best arguments and motives they could urge to engage them to obedience. And how can I copy after better examples? What fitter, what more noble motives, to holiness and purity of living, can I lay before you, than they did?

Indeed, I cannot say, that we have seen the “pillar of a cloud by day, or a pillar of fire by night,” going visibly before us to guide our course; but this I can say, that the same God who was in that pillar of a cloud, and pillar of fire, which departed not from the Israelites, and who has made the sun to rule the day, and the moon to rule the night, has, by his good providence, directed us in our right way, or else the pilot had steered us in vain.

Neither can I say, That we have seen the “sun stand still,” as the children of Israel did in the days of Joshua. But surely God, during part of our voyage, has caused it to withhold some of that heat, which it usually sends forth in these warmer climates, or else it had not failed, but some of you must have perished in the sickness that has been, and does yet continue among us.

We have not seen the waters stand purposely on an heap, that we might pass through, neither have we been pursued by Pharaoh and his host, and delivered out of their hands; but we have been led through the sea as through a wilderness, and were once remarkably preserved from being run down by another ship; which had God permitted, the waters, in all probability, would immediately have overwhelmed us, and like Pharaoh and his host, we should have sunk, as stones, into the sea.

We may, indeed, atheist like, ascribe all these things to natural causes, and say, “Our own skill and foresight has brought us hither in safety.” But as certainly as Jesus Christ, the angel of the covenant, in the days of his flesh, walked upon the water, and said to his sinking disciples, “Be not afraid, it is I,” so surely has the same everlasting I AM, “who decketh himself with light as with a garment, who spreadeth out the heavens like a curtain, who claspeth the winds in his fist, who holdeth the waters in the hollow of his hands,” and guided the wise men by a star in the east; so surely, I say, has he spoken, and at his command the winds have blown us where we are not arrived. For his providence ruleth all things; “Wind and storms obey his word:” he saith to it at one time, Go, and it goeth; at another, Come, and it cometh; and at a third time, Blow this way, and it bloweth.

It is he, my brethren; and not we ourselves, that has of late sent us such prosperous gales, and made us to ride, as it were, on the wings of the wind, into the haven where we would be.

“O that you would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness,” and by your lives declare, that you are truly thankful for the wonders he had shown to us; who are less than the least of the sons of men.

I say, declare it by your lives. For to give him thanks, barely with your lips; while your hearts are far from him, is but a mock sacrifice, nay, an abomination unto the Lord.

This was the end, the royal Psalmist says, God had in view, when he showed such wonders, from time to time, to the people of Israel, “That they might keep his statutes, and observe his laws,” Psalm 105:44 and this, my good friends, is the end God would have accomplished in us, and the only return he desires us to make him, for all the benefits he hath conferred upon us.

O then, let me beseech you, give to God your hearts, your whole hearts; and suffer yourselves to be drawn by the cords of infinite love, to honor and obey him.

Assure yourselves you can never serve a better master; for his service is perfect freedom, his yoke, when worn a little while, is exceeding easy, his burden light, and in keeping his commandments there is great reward; love, peace, joy in the Holy Ghost here, and a crown of glory that fadeth not away, hereafter.

You may, indeed, let other lords have dominion over you, and Satan may promise to give you all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, if you will fall down and worship him; but he is a liar, and was so from the beginning; he has not so much to give you, as you may tread on with the soul of your foot; or could he give you the whole world, yea, that could not make you happy without God. It is God alone, my brethren, whose we are, in whose name I now speak, and who has of late showed us such mercies in the deep, that can give solid lasting happiness to your souls; and he for this reason only desires your hearts, because without him you must be miserable.

Suffer me not then to go away without my errand; as it is the last time I shall speak to you, let me not speak in vain; but let a sense of the divine goodness lead you to repentance.

Even Saul, that abandoned wretch, when David showed him his skirt, which he had cut off, when he might have also taken his life, was so melted down with his kindness, that he lifted up his voice and wept. And we must have hearts harder than Saul’s, nay, harder than the nether millstone, if a sense of God’s late loving kindnesses, notwithstanding he might so often have destroyed us, does not even compel us to lay down our arms

against him, and become his faithful servants and soldiers unto our lives end.

If they have not this effect upon us, we shall, of all men, be most miserable; for God is just, as well as merciful; and the more blessings we have received here, the greater damnation, if we do not improve them, shall we incur hereafter.

But God forbid that any of those should ever suffer the vengeance of eternal fire, amongst whom, I have, for these four months, been preaching the gospel of Christ; but yet thus must it be, if you do not improve the divine mercies: and instead of your being my crown of rejoicing in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, I must appear as a swift witness against you.

But, brethren, I am persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though I thus speak.

Blessed be God, some marks of a partial reformation at least, have been visible amongst all you that are soldiers. And my weak, though sincere endeavors, to build you up in the knowledge and fear of God, have not been altogether in vain in the Lord.

Swearing, I hope is, in a great measure, abated with you; and God, I trust, has blessed his late visitations, by making them the means of awakening your consciences, to a more solicitous inquiry about the things which belong to your everlasting peace.

Fulfill you then my joy, by continuing thus minded, and labor to go on to perfection. For I shall have no greater pleasure than to see, or hear, that you walk in the truth.

Consider, my good friends, you are now, as it were, entering on a new world, where you will be surrounded with multitudes of heathens; and if you take not heed to “have your conversation honest amongst them,” and to “walk worthy of the holy vocation wherewith you are called,” you will act the hellish part of Herod’s soldiers over again; and cause Christ’s religion, as they did his person, to be had in derision of those that are round about you.

Consider further, what peculiar privileges you have enjoyed, above many others that are entering on the same land. They have had, as it were, a

famine of the word, but you have rather been in danger of being surfeited with your spiritual manna. And, therefore, as more instructions have been given you, so from you, men will most justly expect the greater improvement in goodness.

Indeed, I cannot say, I have discharged my duty towards you as I ought. No, I am sensible of many faults in my ministerial office, and for which I have not failed, nor, I hope, ever shall fail, to humble myself in secret before God. However, this I can say, that except a few days that have been spent necessarily on other persons, whom God immediately called me to write and minister unto, and the two last weeks wherein I have been confined by sickness; all the while I have been aboard, I have been either actually engaged in, or preparing myself for instructing you. And though you are now to be committed to the care of another (whose labors I heartily beseech God to bless amongst you) yet I trust I shall, at all seasons, if need be, willingly spend, and be spent, for the good of your souls, though the more abundantly I love you, the less I should be loved.

As for your military affairs, I have nothing to do with them. Fear God, and you must honor the King. Nor am I well acquainted with the nature of that land which you are now come over to protect; only this I may venture to affirm in the general, that you must necessarily expect upon your arrival at a new colony, to meet with many difficulties. But your very profession teaches you to endure hardship; “be not, therefore, faint-hearted, but quit yourselves like men, and be strong,” Numbers 14. Be not like those cowardly persons, who were affrighted at the report of the false spies, that came and said, that there were people tall as the Anakims to be grappled with, but be ye like unto Caleb and Joshua, all heart; and say, we will act valiantly, for we shall be more than conquerors over all difficulties through Jesus Christ that loved us. Above all things, my brethren, take heed, and beware of murmuring, like the perverse Israelites, against those that are set over you; and “learn, whatsoever state you shall be in, therewith to be content,” Philippians 4:11.

As I have spoken to you, I hope your wives also will suffer the word of exhortation,

Your behavior on shipboard especially the first part of the voyage, I choose to throw a cloak over; for to use them mildest terms, it was not

such as became the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, of late, blessed be God, you have taken more heed to your ways, and some of you have walked all the while, as became “women professing godliness.” Let those accept my hearty thanks, and permit me to entreat you all in general, as you are all now married, to remember the solemn vow you made at your entrance into the marriage state, and see that you be subject to your own husbands, in every lawful thing: Beg of God to keep the door of your lips, that you offend not with your tongues; and walk in love, that your prayers be not hindered. You that have children, let it be your chief concern to breed them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And live all of you so holy and unblameable, that you may not so much as be suspected to be unchaste; and as some of you have imitated Mary Magdalen in her sin, strive to imitate her also in her repentance.

As for you, sailors, what shall I say? How shall I address myself to you? How shall I do that which I so much long to do; touch your hearts? Gratitude obliges me to wish thus well to you. For you have often taught me many instructive lessons, and reminded me to put up many prayers to God for you, that you might receive your spiritual sight.

When I have seen you preparing for a storm, and reefing [could also be reeasing] your sails to guard against it; how have I wished that you and I were as careful to avoid that storm of God’s wrath, which will certainly, without repentance, quickly overtake us? When I have observed you catch at ever fair gale, how I secretly cried, O that we were as careful to know the things that belong to our peace, before they are forever hid from our eyes! And when I have taken notice, how steadily you eyed your compass in order to steer aright, how have I wished, that we as steadily eyed the word of God, which alone can preserve us from “making shipwreck of faith, and a good conscience!” In short, there is scarce anything you do, which has not been a lesson of instruction to me; and, therefore, it would me ungrateful in me, did I not take this opportunity of exhorting you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to be as wise in the things which concern you soul, as I have observed you to be in the affairs belonging to your ship.

I am sensible, that the sea is reckoned but an ill school to learn Christ in: and to see a devout sailor, is esteemed an uncommon a thing, as to see a

Saul amongst the prophets. But whence this wondering? Whence this looking upon a godly sailor, as a man to be wondered at, as a speckled bird in the creation? I am sure, for the little time I have come in and out amongst you, and as far as I can judge from the little experience I have had of things, I scarce know any way of life, that is capable of greater improvements than yours.

The continual danger you are in of being overwhelmed by the great waters; the many opportunities you have of beholding God's wonders in the deep; the happy retirement you enjoy from worldly temptations; and the daily occasions that are offered you, to endure hardships, are such noble means of promoting the spiritual life, that were your hearts bent towards God, you would account it your happiest, that his providence has called you, to "go down to the sea in ships, and to occupy your business in the great waters."

The royal Psalmist knew this, and, therefore, in the words of the text, calls more especially on men of your employ, to "*praise the Lord for his goodness, and declare the wonders he doeth for the children of men.*"

And O that you would be wise in time, and hearken to his voice today, "whilst it is called to-day!" For ye yourselves know how little is to be done on a sick bed. God has, in an especial manner, of late, invited you to repentance: two of your crew he has taken off by death, and most of you he has mercifully visited with a grievous sickness. The terrors of the Lord have been upon you, and when burnt with a scorching fever, some of you have cried out, "What shall we do to be saved?" Remember then the resolutions you made, when you thought God was about to take away your souls; and see that according to your promises, you show forth your thankfulness, not only with your lips, but in your lives. For though God may bear long, he will not forbear always; and if these signal mercies and judgments do not lead you to repentance, assure yourselves there will at last come a fiery tempest, from the presence of the Lord, which will sweep away you, and all other adversaries of God.

I am positive, neither you nor the soldiers have wanted, nor will want any manner of encouragement to piety and holiness of living, from those two persons who have here the government over you; for they have been such helps to me in my ministry, and have so readily concurred in every thing

for your good, that they may justly demand a public acknowledgment of thanks both from you and me.

Permit me, my honored friends, in the name of both classes of your people, to return you hearty thanks for the ears and tenderness you have expressed for the welfare of their better parts.

As for the private favors you have shown to my person, I hope so deep a sense of them is imprinted on my heart, that I shall plead them before God in prayer, as long as I live.

But I have still stronger obligations to intercede in your behalf. For God, ever adored be his free grace in Christ Jesus! Has set his seal to my ministry in your hearts. Some distant pangs of the new birth I have observed to come upon you; and God forbid that I should sin against the Lord, by ceasing to pray, that the good work begun in your souls, may be carried on till the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The time of our departure from each other is not at hand, and you are going out into a world of temptations. But though absent in body, let us be present with each other in spirit; and God, I trust, will enable you to be singularly good, to be ready to be accounted fools for Christ's sake; and then we shall meet never to part again in the kingdom of our Father which is in heaven.

To you, my companions and familiar friends, who came over with me to sojourn in a strange land, do I in the next place address myself. For you I especially fear, as well as for myself, because as we take sweet counsel together oftner than others, and as you are let into a more intimate friendship with me in private life, the eyes of all men will be upon you to note even the minutest miscarriage; and, therefore, it highly concerns you to "walk circumspectly towards those that are without," I hope, that nothing but a single eye to God's glory and the salvation of your own souls, brought you from your native country. Remember than the end of your coming hither, and you can never do amiss. Be patterns of industry, as well as of piety, to those who shall be around you; and above all things let us have such fervent charity amongst ourselves, that it may be said of us, as of the primitive Christians, "See how the Christians love one another."

And now I have been speaking to others particularly, I have one general request to make to all, and that with reference to myself.

You have heard, my dear friends, how I have been exhorting every one of you to show forth your thankfulness for the divine goodness, not only with your lips, but in your lives. But “physician heal thyself,” may justly be retorted on me. For (without any false pretenses to humility) I find my own heart so little inclined to this duty of thanksgiving for the benefits I have received, that I had need fear sharing Hezekiah’s fate, who because he was lifted up by, and not thankful enough for, the great things God had done for him, was given up a prey to the pride of his own heart.

I need, therefore, and beg your most importunate petitions at the throne of grace, that no such evil may befall me; that the more Go exalts me, the more I may debase myself; and that after I have preached to others, I myself may not be cast away.

And now, brethren, into God’s hands I commend your spirits, who, I trust, through his infinite mercies in Christ Jesus, will preserve you blameless, till his second coming to judge the world.

Excuse my detaining you for long; perhaps it is the last time I shall speak to you: my heart is full, and out of the abundance of it, I could continue my discourse until midnight. But I must away to your new world; may God give you new hearts, and enable you to put in practice what you have heard from time to time, to by your duty, and I need not wish you anything better. For then God will so bless you, that

“you will build you cities to dwell in; then will you sow your lands and plant vineyards, which will yield you fruits of increase,”
Psalm 107:37.

“Then your oxen shall be strong to labor, there shall be no leading into captivity, and no complaining in your streets; then shall your sons grow up as the young plants, and your daughters be as the polished corners of the temple: then shall your garners be full and plenteous with all manner of store, and your sheep bring forth thousands, and ten thousands in your streets,” Psalm 144

In short, then shall the Lord be your God; and as surely as he has now brought us to this haven, where we would be, so surely, after we have past through the storms and tempests of this troublesome world, will he bring us to the haven of eternal rest, where we shall have nothing to do, but to praise him for ever for his goodness, and declare, in never-ceasing songs of praise, the wonders he has done for us, and all the other sons of men.

“To which blessed rest, God of his infinite mercy bring us all, through Jesus Christ our Lord! To whom with the Father and Holy Ghost be all honor and glory, might, majesty, and dominion, now, henceforth, and forevermore. Amen, Amen.”