

Give Thanks!
John 18:33-38

In his book entitled "Table Talk" Martin Luther, the great reformer and founder of the Protestant church wrote this: "The greater God's gifts and works, the less they are regarded". In other words, they are inversely proportional to one another. That is true both in a broad sense and on a more personal level. Despite the fulfillment of prophecy and all of the great miracles that Jesus performed, including raising Himself from the dead, there were those and still are those who refuse to believe that He is God. They either witnessed those things with their own eyes or heard reliable and credible testimony from those who watched with their own eyes, yet they remained unconvinced.

Today, empty churches confirm that Luther's observation was correct, even in those churches that still bear his name. The troubling thing is that it is often true for those of us who have responded to God's grace, those of us who do believe that Jesus is the Son of God and proclaim Him to be our Savior and King. Of course, we can thank God for our blessings in a personal way, and we should. Even so, God's blessings are not meant to be enjoyed in isolation from other believers. **Proverbs 18:1**

The more selfish we are, the less thankful we will be. Why is that so often the case? Has God simply been too generous to us for our own good or does the answer lie somewhere else? The problem is not with God. He knows exactly what we need and when we need it and gives to each of us accordingly. The answer lies elsewhere. Some are just unwilling to confront the greed and selfishness that is part of our human nature. Others have been blessed with such a great abundance of grace and blessings that they begin to believe that they have either earned them or are entitled to them. They believe the lie from elsewhere that says more possessions, power, and prosperity will bring more joy, happiness, and satisfaction. That lie comes from the liar of liars, Satan and the elsewhere is the world in which he is living. The more we have, the less likely we are to recognize God and return thanks to Him for what we have.

The opposite is also true. **The more thankful we are the less selfish we will be.** Those of us that are involved with ministries to the poor know firsthand that people waiting in line for a free meal are generally more grateful to God and more polite and civil to one another than those fighting for a cheap television or a particular social cause. That suggests that a lack of gratitude is not the result of too many people having so little, but too many people not being satisfied with having so much. To say it another way, they love the things of the world more than they love the truth and people.

Consider some of these headlines from years past: gang fight at Black Friday sale, man punched in face and pulls gun on a line-jumping shopper, shots fired outside of Wal-Mart, shoppers smash through doors at Urban Outfitters, customers run over in parking lot by drunk driver, thousands storm Victoria's Secret, men steal boy's shopping bag outside of Bed, Bath and Beyond. It is highly unlikely that those who will be pushing and shoving on Black Friday will be sitting next to us in church on Sunday morning. They will be going back for more. To make matters worse, the unruliness and violence have now escalated and gone beyond holiday sales to opportunistic rioting, looting, and burning of retail stores under the guise of social justice and equity. It is a quest for possessions for some, and a quest for power and prosperity by others. If you have ever wondered what hell will be like or who will be there, look no further. **Revelation 12:12** is unfolding right in front of our eyes. It is a picture of two kingdoms, the heavenly kingdom of truth ruled by Jesus and the earthly kingdom of lies ruled by the devil.

It is a lie that our possessions, power, and prosperity in the earthly kingdom will satisfy our longing for joy and happiness. The truth is that joy and happiness come from our relationship with Jesus Christ. Our satisfaction is in knowing and believing His promise that a much better kingdom, a new heavenly kingdom, awaits the vigilant, those who believe the truth rather than the lies of Satan.

The more we have, the more we want. That is a good thing, provided we want more of the truth. It is obvious by those examples I just shared that there are a great number of people who don't. But that is nothing new. John's gospel makes it abundantly clear that the same thing was true for many people in Jesus day. Pilate was one of them.

At least he was curious. Look at the question he asked of Jesus. Are you the king of the Jews? It is one of those great questions of the Bible, one of those questions that transcend time, people and places. Why would Pilate want to know? Remember that he wasn't a Jew but a Roman ruler doing his best to keep the peace among several factions of people. On the surface it seems his curiosity was purely selfish- Pilate wanted to know if Jesus was who He claimed He was because he wanted to know how it might affect Pilate. If Jesus really was an earthly king, then his own place of power and prestige might be in jeopardy.

Jesus put his fears to rest. "My kingdom is not from this world". Pilate then asked Jesus a follow-up question that is most important. *So, you are a king?* In other words, just what kind of a king are you? It was one thing to execute a political rival but quite another to take the life of someone who might be connected with some kind of higher power. Verse 38 reveals that Pilate did what so many others do. *"What is truth?"* Not only did he quit looking for it, he expressed contempt for it. He didn't like what he was hearing inside the Praetorium so instead he went back to his old routine. He was quite satisfied with life in fast lane of the earthly kingdom, believing the lie that says possessions, power, and prosperity will satisfy our longing for joy and happiness. He heard what he wanted to hear, the voices of the crowd outside that were demanding Jesus to be crucified. He went along to get along and things went downhill in a hurry, at least for Pilate. But the earthly kingdom can be a dangerous place. Unable to live with his decision to have Jesus crucified, history records that he eventually took his own life. **There is never room for two kings in the palace. Luke 6:13** We must decide if it will be us or Him.

Elsewhere in John's Gospel (8:31-32) Jesus reminds us of this: ***'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'***

The word that Jesus speaks of is the Scriptures. He is the truth, and He frees us from the inevitable disappointment that comes when we follow earthly kings and treasure our earthly possessions instead of our Heavenly King and our heavenly home. Truth frees us from the fear of judgment without grace, and it frees us from the fear of death without resurrection. In short truth is king, and that King is Jesus. So what does any of this have to do with our giving thanks? Everything, when you consider that Jesus has given each of us something truly life-changing and deserving of our gratitude- the grace, ability, and choice to believe the Truth.

Abundance can be good, provided that our abundance is of spiritual things. Can we have too much of God's grace? Can we have too much truth? Can we have too much compassion? Can we love God too much? Of course the correct answer to those questions is no. Speaking of truth the apostle Paul says this in Philippians 4:8: ***Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.***

By and abundance of God's grace we have heard His Word and became free people, people freed from the power of sin and death. In this season, let us also be especially thankful people for the abundance of that truth and then share that abundance with others. I pray that through our witness and ministry the opportunity will come for more people to choose Jesus as their King as well. Amen