

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
November 19 & 20, 2016  
John Crosby  
Thank God for Mercy | 2 Corinthians 9:12-15**

Is it ok to admit that you like Thanksgiving more than Christmas sometimes? Even if you're in a church? Even if you're the pastor? But a lot of times I do. I think Christmas and the other holidays—they're a lot of work. You have to work down to get to the true meaning. Thanksgiving is more like...it just is what it is...it's a gift. It's a feel of grace. And while it can be weird to get together with the family and the weird uncles and aunts, it's a gift where you get to say that the reason we are here is to give thanks. I want you to leave here today feeling like you have a head start on being thankful for this week, so that you can bring thankfulness to others. As we wrap up this series on listening to God's voice and talking to God—we've been talking about how the apostle Paul was trying to teach people who didn't know about God how to hear God's voice—we are going to end up with this idea of thanksgiving.

Have any of you...how many of you have downloaded these texts? I have loved them, I really have. I loved yesterday's—*We pray when there is nothing else we can do, but God wants us to pray before we do anything at all.* And the one the day before that, written by Corrie Ten Boom, who went to the concentration camps to learn about prayer—*What wings are to a bird, and sails are to a ship, so is prayer to the soul. I want to learn to be thankful.* I want you to learn together to be more thankful people, and I think the way that you learn to be thankful is by watching people be thankful—by watching people who are thanks-filled people. I think most of you are not thankful people. I think most of you are worried people. I think most of you are powerful people. Most of you are figured out people. Most of you are control freaks. It's hard to do any of those and be thankful people. We need to learn from people who are learning how to give thanks. So, we asked the people who are sitting right around you what you are thankful for, and for two and a half minutes, this is what they said:

- I am grateful for my relationship with Christ.
- I'm so thankful each day for the hope that Jesus has given me, that I'm going to be healed from a two-year struggle with pain.
- I am so thankful to have other faith-filled people in my life to walk along the

- journey of parenting.
- This has been a big year for me, and every time I come to CPC I feel connected. The relationships that I've built here are helping me to grow closer to God.
  - Every day there are problems, and every day I am faced with certain situations that I don't know how to deal with, but with Christ in my life I am able to hear His voice and I'm able to make the decisions I need to make.
  - I am thankful for my understanding of what is important in life—that life is not about me.
  - I think a lot about the verse, “The joy of the Lord is my strength” and it reminds me of the relationships in my life that point me to God and bring me joy and I'm very thankful for those relationships.
  - I'm in awe of what Jesus has done for me. Sometimes I think we go too deep trying to figure it out, and we don't need to. We just need to have the faith.
  - I'm grateful this fall for the journey that I'm on with Christ where He is teaching me more of who He is and how to see other people more through His eyes and not my own eyes.
  - I'm thankful for understanding what makes me feel whole, what makes me feel together. That's where the true enjoyment of life is.
  - This year has been a lot of loss...watching my mom in her last days, and when it came to September when she finally passed, we had the hope in Jesus and that got us through.
  - I'm really thankful and grateful this year for how my high school leaders in Elevate that I mentor every Wednesday night are really challenging me and helping to bring me closer to Christ.
  - I'm thankful for the growing awareness that I'm not alone, that Jesus is always with me, that I don't have to be anxious or afraid. He's always by my side, and I can count on Him, always.

That's the third time I have seen those. You know what struck me the very first time was the contrast between the adults and the kids. It takes a kid about a half-a-second to say why they are thankful. We almost have to relearn what thankfulness means because we live with real pain and loss and fear, and the thoughtfulness that I heard in those praises of thanksgiving was different. I want us to learn to be thankful, this week and every week.

To do that I need to digress for just a second. I told you that Laura and I went on a World Vision every-third-year conference in Bogota, Columbia, and while we were

there—I'm saying this in part because it's a social media thing; you're not sure who knows and who doesn't—while we were there Laura was out walking with another woman and they got mugged. Laura was assaulted and robbed, and she is fine. She was shaken up, but robbed very near our hotel. In any event, last week we spent some time in the room, and on Sunday we actually watched the CPC service by live stream in Bogota, and it was terrific. I thought that the prayers were great, the music was great; I thought that young Matt did a terrific job. I thought he was just great, and I particularly loved Jay's stewardship moment, when Jay Carroll talked about stewardship and giving, and he talked about the idea that the pledge cards are coming...the pledge cards are still coming...and look out for them as they come, because I felt like it was a great time to teach about stewardship. Just as we need to learn to be thankful people, and we need to be thankfully generous givers, I also think we need to learn to be thankful pray-ers, and I thought we were on the track of that last week.

So let me start by saying that I am so thankful for this community. I am thankful that you are here. I am grateful for what God does here, and I pray that in terms of the stewardship campaign...I pray that we ain't seen nothing yet. I pray that as God warms our hearts, we will just increase in our response. But it's just like our mission statement: To boldly extend the invitation Jesus makes to us to everybody else. Well, I think you do not get people to invite by just standing up, week after week, and saying *invite people, invite people, how come you're not inviting people?* That's not the way you get people to invite people. *Give money, give money, give money.* That's not the way you get people to give money. You have to show them why. That's how Jesus did it. He told stories about the why. And then you have to show them how. You have to have someone go first, whether it's inviting or praying or giving or forgiving, somebody has to go first. That's what the apostle Paul is trying to do with this group of people—they're in a little house church in Greece, in Corinth—and this is the second letter he sends them, trying to get them to be thankfully joyful. He wants to root into their DNA that following Jesus is all about generosity and joy and thanksgiving. This is what he says:

This service that you perform...

That service is that they are doing an offering for the poor back in Jerusalem. All the little churches around the Roman Empire are gathering their money together and sending it to Rome where the poor are just dying. That's the service that they are performing.

<sup>12</sup> This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. [2 Corinthians 9:12]

In other words, what they are doing is resulting in the strengthening of faith and the giving of joyful thanks by people that they have never seen. Paul is saying *because of the service by which you have proved your faith, it's not just words for you. You've decided you don't want to be the kind of church that just believes the right things; you want to do the right things.*

<sup>13</sup> Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. <sup>14</sup> And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.  
[2 Corinthians 13-14]

In other words, when you are generous with thanksgiving, other people will pray for you. In their praise for you, their hearts will go out to you.

It's not *I thank God for Judy and for Jean and for Jerry*. It's a mom who walks away from The Joy of Giving, looks down and sees her five-year-old excited about being able to give a Christmas gift to her brother, and she's going to say, "Thank God! Thank God for those people in Edina. I don't know nothing about 'em, but thank God." They will give thanks in their hearts because of the surpassing grace that God has given you. Thanks be to God.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! [2 Corinthians 9:15]

Laura and I had dinner on Friday night with a couple of young couples. Had them over to the house, getting to know them better, and Laura, who is of course, trying to give me help with the sermon, turns to these young adults and says, "Tell me, who has been a model of generosity for you? Who has modeled generosity to you and what difference has that made?" And they went around the table, and it was so interesting. One said, "Well, I'm almost embarrassed to say, but it's my mom. She worked two jobs so that we could go to good schools. We never had the most, but we had the best that she could afford. Our dinner table always had a guest. She never left church without talking to somebody. I look at my mom and I think, I could never do that, but I want to do that." And another one, she was from down

south, she said, “My grandpa and grandma, they had nothing, but he was part of what was called the Chainsaw Gang, and he would go all over the south with his chainsaw when a big storm hit, and he would use his chainsaw to clear away the trees off the streets and off the houses, and just help the little way he could. And he lives next to a woman who is a single mom and abusing her kid, and so the kid comes over and sits at their table, and when they went on vacation, they took this little kid with them, and that was just normal for them.” That’s what struck me—that was just normal for them. And then Laura told a story that reminded me that when you see generosity, when you see it, it becomes part of the legacy of that person, and it impacts you.

I married into the Cleaver family. They were just a “Leave it to Beaver”, all-American family, and when I was first coming into their family, grandma and grandpa were still alive and I remember the first time I met them. I had just started dating Laura. I came into the house and kicked my shoes off to walk barefoot down to the basement, and as I went I could hear my future mother-in-law saying to her mother, “I know...but he’s not like a usual pastor.” And for thirty years I’ve been trying to turn that into a compliment, and it just...But I loved her! I loved Laura’s grandma. She was a little, little woman whose name was Isabelle, and she was married to Conrad. Conrad and Isabelle from Kansas City. They retired to Tulsa. They lived a long time—into their 90s—and in their late 80s Isabelle started to go blind, and became blinder and blinder. And she said, “Well, I know I can’t help anymore but you know what? I have a lovely voice. I could call the people who visit the church.” And so she did that. And then they got involved in Tulsa with an organization called Little Lighthouse for the Blind. They had nothing. They were lower middle class; had no extra funds at all, but she would bake cookies and they would help at the fundraisers. And then they had a fundraiser that was one of those runs—you know, where you raise money by running. And they thought *we can do that...we’re only 90*. They were just going to walk...they said *we can walk all the way around the track, a quarter of a mile. We could do that*. They went to all their friends and raised \$1000 if they could walk a quarter mile, and this is a picture of them at the race. People came out of the stands and started cheering for Conrad and Isabelle. *Come on! You can make it! You can do it!* He’s holding her arm like he’s done for 70 years, and they’re going around the track, and they get to the home stretch, and they’re so proud...they’re going to make it, they’re going to raise \$1000, and as they get to the finish line, Conrad turns to his wife and says, “Come on Izzy, let’s give it another go!” But they didn’t have enough money for that so they had to stop. That’s the legacy of generosity. That’s what happens when your heart is open and you are generous and thankful.

CPC has been a model of generosity for many. Some of you are unbelievably generous—in service, in time, in money. It's been unbelievable to me, and for some of you this has been a journey where you are learning to be generous people. I loved all the facts and figures and stuff in Jay's story, but the part I liked best was when he said, "You know, Kari and I have not always been able to do this. We would listen to these stewardship pitches and say, 'They're talking about someone else because we don't do this.'" But then he said he and Kari had started talking about how God had blessed them and wanted to increase their giving. I have to tell you, their kids were watching them when they weren't giving a lot, and their kids are watching them as they are learning to give sacrificially, and their kids will be changed by both of those. Just like the people in your life.

So, this Thanksgiving, coming up, I would urge you to have a conversation. Maybe it's around the table, or if the table is too dysfunctional, maybe it isn't around the table, but at some point maybe you could just say to someone else, "Who has been a model of generosity for you, that you thank God for on Thanksgiving? Who has been a model of generosity that you thank God for, and what difference has it made?" And this Thanksgiving, let's pray with thanksgiving for them, and let's ask God to help us become them. Because this is a becoming thing, and it changes not just our lives—Paul says it changes lives that we don't even know about.

When I was just new, just starting to follow Jesus, I fell under the spell of a bald preacher—I never thought I'd become a bald preacher—and his name was Tony Campollo. He's been here. Tony, a wild man, and wherever he went and spoke, he would almost always include a pitch for sponsored children. He'd say, "I bet we could have 100 kids for Compassion here." And I'd say, "Tony, we're a World Vision church." He'd say, "I bet we could have 100 kids sponsored for World Vision." Or World Relief, or whatever...and I bet there are hundreds of thousands of kids around the world who have been sponsored because of Tony's encouragement. And one time I said, "Tony, what's up with all the sponsored kids with all the different organizations?" He said, "John, I'm going to die, and when I die I'm going to go to the gates of heaven and Jesus is going to open the doors, and he's going to say, 'Tony, why should I let you in?'" And Tony said, "John, I just want to be able to lift my arms and have kids come running out of the gates. Kids from all over the world. I want them to come and surround me, and I want those kids that have been helped be able to say, 'Jesus, Jesus, it's ok. He's with us.'" Wouldn't you like to have that as your legacy? *He's with us*. And it doesn't matter if it's \$500,000 or \$50; God knows our hearts. *He's with us*.

Because of the service by which you have proved your faith, others will praise God for your obedience and your generosity. And the prayers of their heart will go out for you. They will pray for you. *He's with us*. Because of the grace God has given you, thanks be to God for His gift.

Lord Jesus, I thank you for this idea that You have given us of thanksgiving. And I give thanks for all of these sisters and brothers here, some of whom have taught me to be generous instead of grudging. Some of whom have taught me how to be forgiving instead of judgmental. Some of whom are learning with me what it means to give thanks with joy. I pray that as we are generous, people look at us and don't say how cool those people are, but *who is their God? Who is their God?* And they will give thanks with great joy. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*