

Engage360 | Episode 15: A Reflection on Gratitude

Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, Happy Thanksgiving and welcome to Engage360, I'm your host Don Payne. This week we are going to depart from our normal interview format for a brief Thanksgiving reflection. You know, I don't often eat gravy, but when I do it better be thick, and particularly at a Thanksgiving meal. Today, I'm going to use that as my metaphor of choice for this holiday because the commercialization of any holiday tends to thin it out, and it's easy for that fineness to infect even Christian approaches to this holiday and we need to think about that. Now I recognize that American Thanksgiving is just that, it's an American holiday. Our Canadian friends have their own Thanksgiving holiday and for international listeners, whether you are American expats or citizens of other countries, you may not be thinking about Thanksgiving at this time or in the same way that we are here in the States. But as American as it is, I tend to think it's good anytime that we focus on gratitude. At the same time, the way this holiday has been popularized and commercialized makes it important for followers of Jesus Christ to be particularly thoughtful about what gratitude really is. And not merely focus on the things for which we're thankful, though in many cases, there are a lot of them and I have my own list of those this particular year.

But here's why we need to focus on what gratitude really is. Gratitude can be thinned out to very little more than a social grace. Gratitude can be seasonalized in our really perfunctory sense that just lets us assuage our consciousness for the rest of the year. Gratitude can be compartmentalized, so that it applies only to those for whom something has gone particularly well. And gratitude can be romanticized into a kind of warm and fuzzy experience that's all fireside and hot chocolate. Now, each of these possibilities has an important and a valid element to it, but none of them turn out to be sustainable or life-giving or character-shaping, unless they have some deep theological anchor points. So what are those theological anchor points? Well, for those who know the living God through Jesus Christ, and remember what Jesus said to Phillip in John 14: 8-9, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." So for those who know the living God through Jesus Christ, gratitude is first a sort of mystified response to the God who has taken revealing and redeeming initiative toward us. And the God who's done so in ways that don't quite fit the calculus we use to make sense of the world. I mean, after all, why would God move toward people whose own history, both individually and collectively, is to move away from God? Why would God do good things to bad people? Who is this God who gives and commits, and yet also can seem so elusive at times? The God who will be our God but not be our genie?

Well, those questions force us to realize that gratitude is a response to divine overtures, divine initiatives that we can't calculate. There is an element of awe

and mystery that comes along with genuine gratitude. It's a response to the undeserved and the unexpected and maybe more than anything for Christians, gratitude and Thanksgiving are not primarily for what, but to whom. And that's probably the reason Paul could say in first Thessalonians 5:18 to give thanks in all circumstances, because God is present to us in all circumstances. God is not late to the game or stuck in traffic when we happen to be in need. Now I don't know how God's presence in all circumstances works the way it does, but this promise is what robs evil and the loss from having the final word on our lives. Of course it generally feels in the moment that whatever is crushing in on us, has that sort of power, but God never sees our losses exactly as we do. That's not to gloss over or trivialize our losses because God does see how we see them and God does experience how we experience them, but without being limited to our view of those losses and our experience of those losses. And that's why the incarnation is every bit as relevant to Thanksgiving as it is to Christmas. God, the Son, took up a residence in our humanness and redeems us from inside the human predicament with all its pains and losses and unpredictability, as well as its joys and delights and triumphs.

So gratitude for Christians is far more than a social grace, even though I for one, would love to see a Renaissance of certain social graces, but the presence of God through the incarnation and the presence of God by the spirit liberates Thanksgiving. It liberates gratitude in general from the tyranny of agreeable circumstances. As one of my theological mentors used to insist, Thanksgiving is not just for the winners, those to whom life has dealt out a particularly good hand in one area or another. Gratitude is not tied to having the positive side of life's ledger a little bit bigger than the negative side. Gratitude is not at the mercy of such arbitrary calculations or precarious circumstances. If our gratitude is fundamentally to whom, rather than for what, then we're free from the burden of running those numbers, either literally or figuratively. We're free to receive and to relish the good things of life, large and small as gifts from the hand of our gracious God and yet without clutching to the more demanding them. And we're also free in a sense, even when life itself sucks the life out of us or flattens us, we're free to be grateful for the presence and the promise of God because that's what heals our sense of identity and purpose and belonging and worth, even when it does not cure our situations. I learned some years ago from a paraplegic individual that there is a big difference between being healed and being cured. God does not always offer a cure for everything that bedevils us in this lifetime, but God always extends the grace that heals our capacity to trust God and our capacity to see God is good and is adequate, and to be a part of God's purposes.

That's a thicker sort of gratitude that can buoy our spirits and our responsiveness to God even when there's not that much to cheer about circumstantially. And at the same time, it helps us see what's really good about the good times and the things that do go well. It makes those times less precarious because we're less dependent on them always staying on the plus side of the ledger. And with all that said in so many cases, there is much for which we can be grateful and should be grateful. And pausing like this can help

us refocus on that, especially if we're prone to miss it. And we do hope that you get to relish some time with family or friends and enjoy the bounty of God's creation this Thanksgiving holiday. And we hope that you get to gather with God's people this week and celebrate that unique meal that anticipates the great feast around the table with our Lord when he returns. And at last, all things are made new. This Thanksgiving holiday, please, please receive our gratitude for lots of different gifts that you give or that you are to Denver Seminary. Many of you support us financially so that we can keep on training men and women to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture. We're grateful for you. Many of you are alumni whose presence with us for a season of your life was a gift to this community and its legacy. And in turn, you then give those gifts to the world, and hopefully that season of your life was a gift to you as well.

To those of you who work for Denver Seminary in any capacity, you give a gift of your talent and your life when in many cases you could do much better for yourself working elsewhere. And to all of you who listen, that's a gift to us of your investing some of your time and connecting with us through this medium. We're grateful for that. We hope that each of you this Thanksgiving season are keenly aware of that. We hope that you're encouraged by God's grace through lots of positive things in your life. Gains, wins, avoidance of tragedy, provision, health, good relationships, meaningful and productive work, travel, fun, and the list could go on, but we know that that that will only be the case for some of you. Because for many, life is a really mixed bag right now. For others, life may be as difficult, as dark, and as distressing as it's ever been, but you know what? When gratitude, Thanksgiving is liberated from our circumstances and focused on the God who self-reveals and who redeems, everyone can give thanks. That's thick gratitude and it's even better than good, thick gravy. Well, this has been Engage360. We hope that you'll tell others about us. If you enjoy the podcast and we hope you'll write to us podcast@denverseminary.edu.

And this season, I want to offer a special thanks to the team that invests so much to make this podcast happen. Dusty Di Santo is our vice president of student life and enrollment management. Christa Ebert, who is on the boards most of the time making this happen and editing and is our online student support specialist. Rob Foley our dean of students; Aaron Johnson, our associate dean of educational technology; Michael Roberts, our marketing manager; Maritsa Smith, our communications coordinator; Sean Truman, our director of educational technology; and to Andrea Weyand, our senior director of communications. For all of them and for Denver Seminary, I'm Don Payne. Thanks for listening. Happy Thanksgiving, and we hope you'll connect with us again next week.