

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Wednesday, November 26, 2008
Thanksgiving Eve**

THE SACRIFICE OF PRAISE

Hebrews 13:1-16

I always enjoy the time we have at this service each year to share with one another what we are thankful for. I hope you won't mind if I take a little time this evening to share with you some of the reasons I am particularly thankful this year.

Just before Thanksgiving a year ago, I learned that I had a brain tumor known as an acoustic neuroma. Since that time, as you know, the last year has been quite an adventure for me and my family. So, first of all, I am thankful to be here. I am thankful to be alive. I am thankful to be vertical and warm instead of the alternatives (!). I am thankful that the Lord has brought me and Mary Sue and our family through a difficult season and a series of disruptive moments whose ripple effects are still with us. Though my recovery is still a work in progress, I am thankful to be as well as I am.

I am no longer able to play basketball or to go running anymore, but I am thankful that I am able to walk. And I can even do it in a pretty straight line – at least most of the time.

I am thankful that I am able to drive. For seven months, from the end of February to the beginning of October, I was completely dependent on Mary Sue mostly, or one of the kids or some of the men of Faith, to get me where I needed to go. I am so grateful for the help I got which was so graciously given during that time. But I am so thankful to be able to drive again. It has made my life much less complicated and given me a freedom I cherish.

I am thankful that I can still hear – even if it is with just one ear. I am thankful that I can see. I am thankful that I can sing. I am thankful that my heart is healthy. I am thankful that I can still think – even though there is some lingering foggiess in my brain and I am still experiencing some memory problems.

I am thankful beyond words for my wife and three children, who love me far more and far better than I could ever deserve. Each of them has demonstrated that over the last year in ways that have touched my heart profoundly. I am especially thankful for Mary Sue, who has made huge sacrifices to care for me and to nurture me back to health after my brain surgery and subsequent brain injury. When the Lord gave me Mary Sue for a wife, I got a gift worth more than the biggest government bailout you can imagine.

I am thankful for you, my church family. I am thankful for your generosity, your support, your prayers on my behalf, and your patience during my recovery, which is still ongoing to this day.

I am thankful that I have always had enough – more than enough – to eat. Not everybody in the world can say that. But for me, I have never had to worry about where my next meal would come from. That is probably true for you, too. It is a huge reason to give thanks to the Lord.

I am thankful for the sacrifices made by brave men and women who have served to protect and defend our nation and the blessings of freedom. I am thankful to live in “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” which is “the land of the free” *because of the brave*. I am thankful today for those who lost their lives – who gave their lives – in service to our country. We are blessed because of their sacrifice.

I am thankful, too, for the blessings of life we enjoy, but often take for granted in the hurriedness of daily life. Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council expresses it well when he says: “Today we seem to be floating on a tattered raft of bad news, but this is a week for Thanksgiving, and it seems only right to note that for all the trouble we face, we live in the most blessed times in human history.” It is true. We enjoy greater abundance and have greater capabilities than any generation in history. With abundance and capabilities come responsibility and some dangers, of course, but I am thankful today for the incredible blessings God has given us in such areas of life as food production, communication technologies, medical research and care, transportation, and more. We are more blessed than we know.

I am so thankful for the love of my heavenly Father. I am so thankful for the assurance that God loves me, undeserving sinner that I am. I am so thankful for Jesus and His saving work on the cross in my behalf and yours. I am so thankful for the presence and power of God the Holy Spirit in my life and in the world today.

I am so thankful for the Word of God, as I have received comfort, guidance, encouragement, hope and insight for living from it during this trying time in my life. I am thankful, too, for the blessing of wisdom and insight I have received from other godly men and women who are further along on the road to Christian maturity than I am.

I am thankful for the sunshine. I am thankful that God’s mercies and compassion, like the sunrise, are new every morning. I am thankful that I am a forgiven sinner. These familiar words from the hymn *It Is Well with My Soul* express the sentiment of my heart:

My sin – O, the bliss of this glorious thought,
 My sin – not in part but the whole,
 Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
 Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.
 - Horatio G. Spafford

I am thankful for the wonder of God’s grace, which seems more and more amazing to me the longer I live. I think “grace” is the most beautiful word in the English language – in any language – and I will be eternally grateful for it.

These are some of the things I am especially thankful for this Thanksgiving. And, lest there be any doubt, the One to whom I am most thankful is the Lord our God, who is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). It is right and good always to give thanks and praise to Him.

Sometimes it is easy to give thanks to the Lord. Sometimes it is a delight to praise Him. I love the words of the song we sang in worship two Sundays ago. The song is *Blessed Be Your Name* by Matt Redman. It goes like this:

Blessed be Your name
 In the land that is plentiful
 (that is our land, isn't it?)
 Where Your streams of abundance flow
 Blessed by Your name

Then, later in the song:

Blessed be Your name
 When the sun's shining down on me
 When the world's "all as it should be"
 Blessed be Your name

When life is going the way we want it to go, in times of peace and prosperity and good health, when we feel the warmth of God's smile in our lives, when His blessing in our lives is obvious, it is easy to give thanks and praise to God. Isn't that true in your life?

But sometimes in life it is not so easy to recognize God's presence or blessing. Sometimes it involves a kind of sacrifice to praise God. In times of pain or suffering or loss of some kind, praise and thankfulness to God don't come easily. Back to the song *Blessed Be Your Name*, which also has these words:

Blessed be Your name
 When I'm found in the desert place
 Though I walk through the wilderness
 Blessed be Your name

And later:

Blessed be Your name
 On the road marked with suffering
 Though there's pain in the offering
 Blessed be Your name

Can you identify with any of that? I can.
 Do you feel like you're in some desert or wilderness?
 Do you know what it feels like to be there?

Do you find yourself on a road marked with suffering?
Do you know what it means to praise God in the midst of pain?

Sometimes it may feel like a sacrifice to give thanks and praise to God. But it is still the right thing to do. The Bible's encouragement to praise the Lord and give thanks to Him is more than just a suggestion. It is a command. An imperative. Again and again in the Psalms, especially, we are told to "praise the Lord" and to "give thanks to Him." The last five psalms in the Book of Psalms, Psalms 146 through 150, for example, all begin and end with the command: "Praise the Lord." Psalm 136 begins and ends with the call to give thanks to the Lord, for His love endures forever (136:1-3, 26). And then there is Paul's explicit three-fold injunction in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18:

Be joyful always;
Pray continually;
Give thanks in all circumstances,
For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

In all circumstances, both good and bad, God's will is to give Him thanks and praise. Whether we are "in the land that is plentiful where (the) streams of abundance flow" or "on the road marked with suffering (and) there's pain in the offering," God's will for you and me is the same.

There is a lot of good stuff in Hebrews 13, but I want to focus specifically on verse 15, which says that the kind of sacrifice which pleases God is the sacrifice of praise: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess His name." Regardless of our particular circumstances, there is never a time when it is not time to praise the Lord. There is never a time when it is not right to give thanks to the Lord. Never a time.

The Old Testament system of animal and grain sacrifices was central to the religious life of the Jews. In the law of Moses, especially in the Book of Leviticus, God laid out for His people Israel the details of the sacrificial system at the heart of their life as a people. But all of those sacrifices have been rendered forever obsolete by the perfect, once-for-all, all-sufficient sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. No more sacrifice for sins is needed. Jesus paid it all.

But there is still a sacrifice to be offered to the Lord. The sacrifice God wants is the sacrifice of praise. The fruit God desires is the fruit of lips that bear witness to Him and give honor, glory, and thanks to His name.

And this sacrifice of praise is to be in our hearts and on our lips continually. In all circumstances.

We do not offer these sacrifices to God in order to somehow achieve salvation or to gain His approval. Jesus has already taken care of that for all of us who put our trust in Him alone as Savior and Lord of our lives. We offer our sacrifices of praise not in order to

gain God's favor, but to thank Him for His favor and goodness, and to praise Him for who He is. We praise Him because of His worth-ship. We give Him our worship and praise because He is worthy.

But I know this is not always easy to do. Maybe it isn't easy for you this Thanksgiving. Maybe there are circumstances in your life that are hanging like a dark cloud over your life. Maybe this last year has been a hard one for you. Maybe it has been a season of pain or suffering or loss in your life. Or in the life of someone you love. Even so, you can still offer a sacrifice of praise to God. Even in the midst of your pain or grief or heartache.

The first Thanksgiving – the feast celebrated by the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians at Plymouth in 1621 – did not come without great sacrifice and loss. Only half of the Pilgrims who sailed to the New World on the *Mayflower* in 1620 survived the first year. In that first year in America, the Pilgrims made seven times more graves than huts. Many of those who lived through the first winter thought seriously about going back to England. But they stayed. And they set aside a special time – the first Thanksgiving actually lasted three days – to give thanks to the Lord for all His provisions and blessing.

If they could offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord despite all their hardships, how much more can we?

Let me read to you part of this year's Thanksgiving Day Proclamation by President Bush:

“Thanksgiving is a time for families and friends to gather together and express gratitude for all that we have been given, the freedoms we enjoy, and the loved ones who enrich our lives. We recognize that all of these blessings, and life itself, come not from the hand of man but from Almighty God.

“Every Thanksgiving we remember the story of the Pilgrims who came to America in search of religious freedom and a better life. Having arrived in the New World, these early settlers gave thanks to the Author of Life for granting them safe passage to this abundant land and protecting them through a bitter winter. Our Nation's first President, George Washington, stated in the first Thanksgiving proclamation that ‘it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor.’ (Amen to that! A little editorial comment on my part!) While in the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln revived the tradition of proclaiming a day of thanksgiving, asking God to heal our wounds and restore our country.

“Today, as we look back on the beginnings of our democracy, Americans recall that we live in a land of many blessings where every person has the right to live, work and worship in freedom. Our Nation is especially thankful for the brave men and women of our Armed Forces who protect our rights while setting aside their own comfort and safety. Their courage keeps us free, their sacrifice makes us grateful, and their character

makes us proud. Especially during the holidays, our whole country keeps them and their families in our thoughts and prayers.

“Americans are also mindful of the need to share our gifts with others, and our Nation is moved to compassionate action. We pay tribute to all caring citizens who reach out a helping hand and serve a cause greater than themselves.

“On this day, let us all give thanks to God who blessed our Nation’s first days and who blesses us today. May He continue to guide and watch over our families and our country always.”

Amen and amen!

The sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving are the sacrifices God desires. And deserves.

More than five hundred years ago, Martin Luther said: “It is clear that a sacrifice must consist of praise and thanks, if it is to please God. And if it is without praise and thanks, He neither wants nor likes it, as indeed He says (in Isaiah 1:11): ‘What are all your sacrifices to me? I have no pleasure in them’ We cannot give God anything; for everything is already His, and all we have comes from Him. We can only give Him praise, thanks, and honor.”

Not just on a day set aside for national thanksgiving, but all through the year – continually, the Scripture says – in the desert place or the land of abundance, when the world’s all as it should be or on the road marked with suffering, there is never a time when it is not the right time to offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.

So, I urge you in your life, in your circumstances, to offer the sacrifice of praise to God. And, in a spirit of gratitude to God, you can offer the sacrifice of loving service (doing good) to others and the sacrifice of generous giving (sharing with others), for with these sacrifices, too, God is pleased (Hebrews 13:16).

May it be so in our lives, to the praise and glory of His name. Amen.