

What's Next?

1 Thessalonians 5:15-24

Hebrews 13:1-9

Thanksgiving Sunday

10th October 2010

There's an old Jewish tale about an elderly man who dines every evening at the same restaurant. No matter what main course he chooses, he always orders the soup du jour.

One day the manager casually asks him if he is enjoying his meal. The old man complains, "It's good, but you could give me a little more bread. 2 slices is not enough." So the next day the manager tell the waitress to give him 4 slices of bread. "How is your meal today, sir?" the manager enquires. "It's good," says the man somewhat grudgingly, "but you could have given me a little more bread." On each successive day, to try and satisfy his customer, the manager increases the number of slices from 8 to 10 to 12 to 14 to 16 slices. Even up to 20 slices. But still the man is not satisfied.

Upset by the man's constant complaining, the manager decides to teach the greedy fellow a lesson. The next day, he has the bakery deliver a 6 foot long loaf of bread. He cuts it down the middle, butters each side and lays it out on the table beside the man's bowl of soup. This he thinks will finally settle this miserable fellow's hash. So when the old man came up to pay for his meal, the manager, smugly asks, "And how was your meal today, sir?" The old man replies, "OK, I suppose, but I see you have gone back again to serving only two slices of bread!"¹

Aren't there lots of people like this in life? Never satisfied with what they get. No matter how much they have, they always want more. No matter how greatly people try to please them, they always want something different.

Why are people like this? Maybe they have a personality trait that emerged in childhood in response to over-indulgent parents. Maybe they have just developed a penchant for complaining over the years. Maybe they have a chronic feeling of deprivation. Or maybe they just enjoy being miserable.

But Vancouver pastor, Mark Buchanan, thinks otherwise. Such discontented people, he says, are created by the kind of society in which we live today. In an article, "Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing", Buchanan, argues that the roots of today's constant longing for more lie in our contemporary, consumeristic society. We are always living endlessly, relentlessly for what's next. The next house. The next car. The next purchase. The next shopping trip. The next drink. The next night out. The next party. The next weekend away.

And this mind-set is so endemic in our society today, says Buchanan, that it is almost like a cult. A cult

with its own preachers and evangelists such as advertising executives and celebrity sponsors. Its own churches and temples such as malls and superstores. Its own liturgies and mantras such as "Two for one ... 50% off ... charge it ... no down payment ...no interest for 3 months." He even believes the cult has its own ecstatic experiences such as the shopping blitz, the spending spree or the periodic binge at the local bar or restaurant.²

The danger for the Christian is to be unwittingly drawn into this cult. To become part of the "next" generation. To project ourselves forward constantly to that next time when we will have everything we don't have now. Things that we think will fulfil our deepest longings.

What can we do to combat this Cult of the Next Thing? In our society? In our own lives? Well, I think the answer is profoundly simple and it's one we have heard many times before. But we need to hear it again and again. The answer is that we need to adopt an attitude of gratitude. We need to rediscover a renewed spirit of thankfulness. Especially for what we have here and now. We need to remember that the Bible tells us to live in the present moment and to be thankful for what we have at the moment – not what we wish we had sometime in the future. As the Psalmist says, "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."³

But it's not just a matter of being grateful on the good days when things are going well and spontaneously have appreciative feelings flow over us. On the contrary, gratitude in the Christian sense is something we actively make a point of doing even in the darkest and lowest moments of our lives. As Christians we don't whine and complain in these times. We do the exact opposite. We look for something in our circumstances for which to give thanks to God. As St. Paul says, "Be joyful always. Pray at all times. Be thankful in all circumstances."⁴

One important thing we always have to remember about the apostle Paul is that so many of his exhortations to be thankful and joyful were not made at the best and happiest times of his life. In fact, when he was writing words like these it was at times when he was upset by the behaviour of many of the believers in the early church. It was at times when he saw them reverting back to their old heartlessly legalistic ways of the old religion instead of following the new law of Christ's love. It was at times when he heard about their immoral and lascivious ways of living. It was at times when he was being told that many were being taken in by fraudulent leaders who were enticing new converts into believing in false gods.

Not only this, in so many instances when Paul was promoting thankfulness and rejoicing among the early believers it was at times when he was sitting in a jail cell, not knowing what the future held for him and fearing for his own personal safety. So when he was saying, “Be joyful always. Pray at all times. Be thankful in all circumstances,” he was living out exactly what he was preaching – and then some. He was saying these words at the worst moments of his life when he felt miserable and depressed, even believing that he had failed in his Christian missionary work.

So let’s follow St. Paul’s example and give thanks in all circumstances. Even the worst possible circumstances. Let’s give thanks even at those times when gratitude seems to fly in the face of all normal emotions. Even at those times when gratitude would be the very last emotion we would want to feel. Yes, even though it seems so difficult, we must make that extra effort to do what seems so unnatural and give thanks.

But, also, let our gratitude be total and without reserve rather than the partial and limited kind of thankfulness we so often practise. Let our thankfulness be wholehearted rather than the meagre thanks we so often give out sparingly, a little bit at a time.

A man from the city went to visit his country cousin, a farmer. The first thing he saw running around the yard was a turkey with a wooden leg. “Why,” asked the city fellow, “does that turkey have a wooden leg?” The farmer replied, “Let me tell you about that turkey. One day my tractor fell on me and the turkey ran for help and saved me from dying. Sometime later, my son was drowning in that pond over there, and the turkey swam out in the water and saved him. And then, still later, my house caught fire, and the turkey woke us up and saved our lives from that burning building. I am so thankful to that turkey.” Said the city fellow, “That’s really great but why does the turkey have a wooden leg?” The farmer replied, “Don’t you know anything? You never eat a turkey like that all at once. You are so thankful you just eat it a little bit at a time!”⁵

Give thanks in all circumstances. Give thanks totally and without reserve. But let’s remember also to give thanks for the small things of life that we have here and now. The things that we so take for granted that they never show up on the radar of gratitude.

Mark Buchanan tells of a trip he made to Uganda some years ago. He went to church in a small township called Wairacka, where about 100 people gathered to worship in a small tin-roof building with rough wooden benches on a dirt floor. The service was a most vibrant affair with much singing, dancing, clapping, interspersed by hallelujahs and amens. But what caught Buchanan’s attention was that part of the service where the worshippers were encouraged to praise God for something particular in their lives. One woman got up and said, “The Lord is so good to me. I praise him at all

times for he is so kind.” Then lifting up one foot after another, she continued, “He is so kind because he gave me shoes. I have never had shoes before. The Lord is so good. Hallelujah. He is so good.”⁶

I wonder if we have ever given thanks to God for our shoes. Or, for any of the other seemingly small and inconsequential things of our lives. Maybe we should learn the very important lesson this poor Ugandan woman has to teach us. That it is good to give thanks for the small things we take for granted. Remembering that they are also important gifts from God.

At this Thanksgiving time, let us remember once again that gratitude is a powerful weapon against the soulless consumerism of our times generated by the Cult of the Next Thing. So let us give thanks in all circumstances. Let us give thanks totally and without reserve. Let us give thanks especially for the small things in life. And by doing these things I am certain we can turn the tide in favour of Christ’s way and in the way of creating a better world in which we all can live.

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¹ Brett Blair, “I Am The Bread Of Life”, www.eSermons.com

² Mark Buchanan, “Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing”, *Christianity Today*, 6 September 1999

³ Psalm 118:24

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:20

⁵ Brett Blair, “Trouble on the Mountain”, www.eSermons.com (adapted)

⁶ Mark Buchanan, *op .cit.*