

## **FULL TABLES OR FULL LIVES**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

I don't often change like this. In fact I think it's the subtle humor of the Lord that did it because this last week I was guest lecturer in a preaching class on the subject of expository preaching. I was stressing the importance of being prepared. I noted that one of my study habits was I did not prepare sermons on Saturday. Especially Saturday night. In fact the nine years I've been pastor I think there's only been two times when I have left the office on Friday and the sermon has not been ready at least in note form. I've only spent two Saturdays in nine years working on a sermon trying to get it ready for Sunday. But would you believe I was down here at 9:00 last night. The Lord is kind of preparing my heart in changing directions. He said just speak on a thanksgiving theme and that's what I propose to do.

I propose to ask you a question: Full tables or full lives? Which is better? A little verse in Proverbs 15:17 "Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fat calf with hatred." It's great if you can have full lives and full tables. There's some people who have empty tables and empty lives. But if you can have a choice or if you have to make a choice between a full life and a full table better to choose the full life.

I must share with you that I've always had a theological problem against Thanksgiving. As an American to sit down and thank God for the blessings that I have – my freedom, my prosperity, the food that is on my table. I have somewhat of a twinge when I sit down saying, why is it that I'm able to thank God for these things when there are Christians in other parts of the world that cannot thank God for the same thing. I have to set myself down what in thanksgiving can I join in praising God for when not all my brothers and sisters in Christ in every country of the world and under every condition can likewise sit down and give thanks with me? Can I find a common denominator of thanksgiving?

I found you can. It revolves around the theme of having a full life rather than having full table. I thank God this Thanksgiving which I plan to do unabashedly. I thank God for my country and the freedoms which we have. The freedom of political assembly. The freedom of assembly for worship. The freedom of speech. The guarantees which our constitution provides. The heritage of our country. As I thank God for it I have to ask myself, what about Christians in repressive regimes. They don't have that same ability. What about Christians under demonic governments. As I thank God for my full table, I must remember there are Christians who do not have a full table. They are suffering and starving in the world. There are believers today who eke out a very meager subsistence.

As I thank God for the health which I have, I must remember also there are those in the body of Christ that are in pain and are suffering. I thank him for my vigor but I must remember there are others who do not have. Is it selfish to thank him? No. But I must remember that when I thank him I am simply acknowledging not so much a privilege which he has given me but a responsibility that he has handed me to be a steward of what he has placed in my hand.

When I thank the Lord for my shelter and my home I have to wonder about Christians who this day in various parts of the world are incarcerated for their faith. They are literally vagabonds and wanderers on the earth.

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So I come to Thanksgiving, can I find something that every believer can join me in thanksgiving for? I think I can.

As I enter the gospels I find a room in which Christ gave thanks. The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us about this room in which the Lord gave thanks. The times which the Lord gave the thanks was on the evening of his betrayal. The evening of his Gethsemane experience. And his arrest and trial, the evening before his crucifixion. As he sat at what was for them their thanksgiving meal, the Passover, which involved with it the historical memory of God's blessings upon their nation for hundreds of years. As he took part of that traditional meal of his day and era and nation, he sat and gave thanks. All three gospels tell us that when he took the bread he gave thanks and all three gospels also tell us that when he took the cup he gave thanks. It's one thing to give thanks when everything is going well but Jesus is facing his crucifixion. And on the evening before his crucifixion he's giving thanks for what is ahead of him. But he offered thanksgiving in the room in which he was to spend the thanksgiving festival with his own.

He could not give thanks for his government because his government was repressive. He couldn't give thanks for his prosperity because he had no place to lay his head. In a sense he couldn't give thanks for his health because the next day his health even was to be taken from him on the cross.

What did he give thanksgiving for in the room of his suffering? I believe that Jesus gave thanksgiving for the value and the purpose of life. That's a starter. It's not maybe the most important but it's certainly an integral element. He says in that thanksgiving room, John 17:4 "I have brought you [speaking to the Father] glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." In his continual conversation with the Father in that room Jesus shows his sense of worth. He shows he knows who he is. That he is the Son of God. And he shows also not only his sense of worth, which gives value to life, but he shows also his sense of work. He had a job and he's able to say to the Father, I have finished the task which you have given me to do and thereby have brought you glory. What was his task? His task was to come to us who were distanced from God because of sin. Who were ignorant of God because of sin and who were unlike God in sin and to bring an end to the distance by creating a bridge. To bring an end to the ignorance by giving us the knowledge of the one true God. And to create an end of the unlikeness of God that is in us by stamping upon us his own nature and personality and character so that the highest goal of life that can be expressed is I think the goal to be like Jesus.

So the Lord in the room of his thanksgiving can evaluate the value of his life and the value of his work. I think that when we come to a thanksgiving time we can rejoice in the beauty of the gift of life that God has given to us. We realize how very sacred that life is to God and therefore if the life is sacred to God how very much sacred it should be to us. Only one life we have and that is ours to live. The value of life is that it's not simply for this time but it is our life forever. So valuable to God that Christ Jesus came into the world for us. A little bird has great value, grass of the field has great value. He also indicates to us that we are of more value.

I would say in thanksgiving is one of the things we should set down and do is honestly thank God that we are on earth, that we were born. And not only were we born but we were born into his kingdom and we've been made children of his and heirs of his in the kingdom that's coming. And we know that there's value and meaning to our life.

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Even if we're not doing anything public, anything splendidous, anything which the world calls great Jesus says that it is in doing the small tings of life greatly that there is value.

The room of thanksgiving Jesus not only gave expression to the value and purpose of life but also in the room of his thanksgiving Jesus knew the presence of family. I believe he was thankful for that family. It so happens that the family which were with him were his brothers in the faith, those who had done his will by coming after him. It is that family for which he gives thanks. That family in John 17 that he prays for. Indeed in Jesus' family on that evening of his Passover there were problems within the family which necessitated Jesus begin a servant.

There are problems of interpersonal relationships that will surround you at your thanksgiving table this thanksgiving. Part of an act of thanksgiving is to recommit yourself in service to those who are about you. Jesus so much wanted these with him in the room of his thanksgiving he says in the gospel of Luke, Oh, how I have desired to eat this Passover with you.

And how also we desire to be with one another, to be with those who are near to us not only in a family sense but who are near to us in the faith as well. For some of you this may be your first Thanksgiving without a loved one. There will be a familiar place at the table that will not be occupied this Thanksgiving time. For some this may be a Thanksgiving that you will eat as did Jesus with one who will betray you in the coming days. For others this may be a Thanksgiving which will be your first Thanksgiving away from home. For others this will be a Thanksgiving when your family for the first time is all together again after many years of absence. Or maybe all together again because it seems like it's always happened that way. Or maybe this will be the first Thanksgiving your family will be separated from one another.

So whether there are empty seats or not around the dinner table we ought to have Thanksgiving to consciously give thanks for those who are about us. Whom the Lord has surrounded us with. As is characteristic of the entirety of Christian life there ought also be characteristic of Thanksgiving that we not be alone. May I say that if you were planning to be alone this Thanksgiving that should not exist and we will take steps to see that that doesn't exist if you will so indicate that you were planning to spend Thanksgiving alone. Fill out a card in the pew or see me personally and you will be at a table on Thanksgiving. The body of Christ is greater even than the family structure. And in the body of Christ the Lord has called us to give thanks one to another.

Next to God the most priceless possession we have is those of our fellows who are around us. Whether they are family or whether they are brothers and sisters in Christ. So we give thanks. And that is something every believer, everywhere can give thanks for the people that God has put into their life.

If I were to isolate the most important thing that I can give thanksgiving for this season it would be simply this. In the room of his thanksgiving Jesus knew the presence of his Father. His Father is with him. If there is any joy that any Christian anywhere can share in common it is the joy of knowing that God is with us. Jesus on that evening of his betrayal said that the shepherd would be stricken and the sheep would be scattered. He in fact says "All of you will run away from me and you will leave me alone." But he says, "Yet I am not alone. For the Father is with me."

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There are times we need to consciously recollect that the only person that can be with us is God. Indeed the only person who really has access to the deepest parts within us is God. The heritage of the Christian is knowing that God is with us in every circumstance. I am not alone for the Father is with me.

I've found that there are two kinds of loneliness. I don't know about you but I think I could identify two kinds of loneliness. There is the kind of loneliness called isolation. That is when we are physically not present with others whom we love. That can be a terribly depressing experience, can't it?

When we find ourselves in those terrible moments of loneliness and maybe don't have access to another person in a physical sense God has promised that he's going to be with us in those moments. The promise of his presence: "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

But there's another kind of loneliness which sometimes can be worse than the loneliness of isolation. It's the loneliness of insulation. When we are caring a grief or a need or a burden or a problem that is so great that no one else understands it. We wrestle with it. I have been in a group when some devastating news has been brought me in regard to some particular situation. I have not been able to share that and had to keep on in my relationships with persons in the group and carry that need within my own heart. That is a loneliness all of its own kind.

Yet the Lord tells us in the midst of that loneliness of insulation "I will never leave you nor forsake you." I stake my life upon that as a Christian. That God is with me through Jesus Christ and I can give thanks.

The great and precious thing about thanksgiving is that if we know Christ and know him truly we can say, God is with us.

I've had a very fresh experience of God being with us. All the time in our life among the living we are called upon to confront death very few times. But in my mom's going to be with the Lord, just three weeks ago yesterday I came to a new sense of what it meant for the Lord to say, I will never leave you nor forsake you. You feel so helpless in a moment when someone is slipping away from this world and you realize that they have gone with you and you have gone with them only so far. But there is someone who can go with them further. I had a glorious sense of the presence of the Lord in our family. That I think is the bottom line of life. It isn't how much you've accumulated or not accumulated in life that really counts. But the Lord goes with us.

In that last week with mom we continually reminded her of the scripture which she loved, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." That was the Lord's words which he intended to keep. As she got ready for that time, the day of her home-going, she became I believe increasingly conscious of the presence of the Lord to go with her. But she did a beautiful thing on her deathbed I thought I'd share with you.

I was not there when Mom passed away because I had come home thinking that she was rallying some what and it would be safe for me to attend an engagement. My father, my brother and my sister were there. She had evidently picked up increased pain and had begun to reflect that pain. She indicated that she wanted something. My sister wasn't for sure what it was mom wanted. Mom was lying there on bed with IVs in her arms. My sister bends down close to her where she

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can hear what Mom has to say. As soon as my sister leaned down, Mom took those arms with the IV and just embraced my sister in one beautiful last act – a final embrace. Mom was conscious until about 10 minutes before she went to be with the Lord. Then Mom too had carried a great prayer burden for all of her kids and my brother had been away from the Lord throughout much of his adult life and only 2 years ago had really rededicated his life to the Lord. Mom had spent many hours interceding for Paul and his spiritual needs. As she did for us all. As it came time for her to go her concern was for her children. Not only did she hug my sister Doris but she said with all of her strength – and she didn't have a lot of strength at that moment – Paul, Paul!

Paul had a sense of what mom wanted and came over to mom's bedside and knelt down right by her, tears streaming down his face, put his cheek right up against hers and said to her, "Mom, I'll see you in heaven." And mom said, "uh-huh." That was the last thing she said and the last thing she did.

I thought as I reflected on that, my mom always in her life showed the character of Jesus. It didn't dawn on me until last night when I was praying about this story whether I should share it or not. The Lord said go ahead and share it because I want you to see that in your mother's very act of dying my personality was being reflected. When your mom reached for your sister with those tubes in her arms and embraced remember my arms that were spread out on the cross that had nails in them. You've always looked at the cross as though I were positioned and fixed to the cross and I couldn't do anything with my hands or arms. But don't you know that when my arms were nailed to the cross I'm really reaching out with those arms and I'm enfolding you and embracing you. I want everybody to know that.

Never again I think will I be able to look at a visual symbol of Jesus Christ crucified on the cross and simply see him there positioned helpless. Those arms with the nails are reaching around me and embracing me and loving me.

And the bottom line from Jesus on the cross is will I see you in heaven? "I came that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly." Jesus came to give us quality life now here and now. But he also came because eternity is ahead for us. That is his concern as he is dying. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom says the man on the cross." "Today, thou shalt be with me in paradise." The most priceless position we have is our relationship with God. The greatest gift that any of us can have is the personality of Jesus Christ living in us and the gift of eternal life which he brings and the very simplicity of thanksgiving is responding back to God in thanks. Every believer can join in that thanksgiving regardless of their country, their status, their position and calling in life.

Lord, we thank you for the things which are true. Your love which changes not. Your grace which does not fail us. Your presence which never leaves us nor forsakes us. At this Thanksgiving time we do praise you from the depths of our hearts that you are in our lives. And that you have found us and we have responded to you. We bless you and praise you. While our hearts are in prayer and our heads are bowed may I just ask a very gentle and profound question to all of you. Is the person of Jesus Christ living in you? Has he heard from you "I'll see you in glory." I'd like to give a simple invitation to receive Christ to any here who have not personally invited Jesus Christ into your life and received the gift of eternal life which he came to bring. What do you do to receive that gift? Open your heart to him. Open your will to invite him in. Could I ask you to do that? Is that the desire of your

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heart? This Thanksgiving is going to be different because Jesus lives in your life. Where you're sitting, with words that come to you would you just invite Jesus into your life? Simply express it from your heart: Jesus come into my heart. Take up your dwelling place in me. And he will. Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the son of man has no where to lay his head." Except in us. Jesus, we open our hearts to receive you. For the many who in this congregation are witness to the fact that you live in them I give you thanks. We cherish that which above all is most precious your love for us, your life for us, your wonderful character and person. Thank you, Lord. Amen.