

This is Thanksgiving week, so naturally we're all thinking more explicitly about giving Thanks. Or food and football, at least. It's pretty awesome that we as a country have set aside a whole day dedicated to Gratitude. Granted, since we're an officially secular nation it's a fairly vague holiday - be thankful *for* everything you have, but not necessarily *to* anyone in particular. But nevertheless, as people who follow Jesus, it's an excellent reminder for us to engage one of the central practices of our faith: Saying Thank you.

These days, gratitude is rarer and rarer. Not in terms of Thank You notes and spoken affirmations, but in a larger sense: we seem to be missing the relational core of gratitude. These days, an earnest "thank you" has been replaced with "I owe you one."

You know this impulse. We don't usually *say* it. In fact, we still say "Thanks" most of the time. But our "thanks" doesn't actually mean "thank you". It means "I'm now trying to figure out how I can repay you so I can rebalance our relational scales." [image?]

Someone gives you a gift and rather than enjoying the moment, rather than being fully present to receive the gift, your mind is racing to calculate when the last time you gave them something was and what you could get them now to equal (or surpass!) this gift. Someone picks up the check at dinner and you say, Thanks. I'll get it next time!

Of course, there's nothing wrong with responding to gifts with more gifts, or with friends taking turns picking up the check. When this economy of generosity and gratitude is healthy, it's the beautiful foundation for life-giving relationships.

But what could be hurting our relationships is our attitude behind those responses, a desire to repay, to equalize, to balance some relational scales.

When "Thanks" means "I owe you", not "I love you", we've got a serious problem. And only you know what's behind your spoken gratitude, so as we explore gratitude today, I want to invite you to be honest with yourself and with God about what is beneath your gratitude.

Everything we're talking about today is internal. No one can tell by looking (or listening) what's behind your Thank You. So this is all on you today, to examine yourself honestly, and to take the next right step in becoming a more gracious person.

Where we want to be, where we find life and wholeness is when our thanksgiving affirms our relationships. When we're engaged in what the scriptures call "mutual surrender". Essentially, it's when we're not worried about coming out on top because we give and receive out of love.

I know that's a bit abstract, so consider a ledger sheet (you should've received one on the way in). We're all tempted to live our lives on a ledger like this we keep in our heads. [let's picture this too]

You know how ledgers work: you track income and outgoing expense. And everyone's goal is to be in the black, which means you have more income than expense. If you think of giving as relational capital, then when you give – maybe you spring for donuts & coffee on the way to the office or something, we could imagine you're gaining relational capital. You're moving into the black [maybe label the bars?]

But when someone does something for you, when you are the recipient of the gift – say they pick up the tab at dinner, it feels like you go in the red. Like you're in debt. There's a relational gap that's created and we feel a distinct need to fill that gap. To even the scales. Because we can't be in someone else's debt. We don't want to be "below" someone else, smaller. We're taught to be self-sufficient, that need is the same thing as weakness.

So we have our metal ledger sheets where we keep a running tally of everything, always doing whatever we can to make sure we're in the black. That's tiring. Particularly in the time of year we're approaching, the whole economy of gift-giving can become so burdensome we might begin to despise some gift-givers, adding one more obligation to our to-do list. A life on a ledger is exhausting. The good news for us this morning is that, according to the Scriptures, true gratitude is the path to a life beyond the ledger. Thanksgiving can help us find a new freedom and depth in our relationships.

As you might expect, in the Scriptures we find plenty of stories of people offering both spoken and embodied acts of gratitude. And just like today, it's hard to tell what was behind them.

So for instance, Israel is at war, and their battles threaten to spill over into the lands of some of their allies. So Saul, Israel's king, warns them:

**Saul sent this warning to the Kenites: "Move away from where the Amalekites live, or you will die with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up from Egypt." So the Kenites packed up and left. -- 1 Samuel 15:6**

Saul explicitly says this warning is an act of gratitude. You helped us when we were powerless and small. Now that we have the means to help you, we're doing so. Saul is *affirming* Israel's long relationship with the Kenites. This is an alliance, the political version of a personal friendship.

Or consider the story of two widows named Ruth and Naomi. As widows, they have nothing. In the wake of their husbands' deaths, they've moved back to Naomi's hometown. If no one helps them, they'll starve to death. But a man named Boaz does help them. He owns fields, and he allows Ruth to gather more than enough for herself and Naomi. When Ruth returns home, Naomi is (as you can imagine) overwhelmed:

**Where did you gather all this grain today?" Naomi asked. "Where did you work? May the Lord bless the one who helped you!"**

**So Ruth told her mother-in-law about the man in whose field she had worked. She said, "The man I worked with today is named Boaz."**

**"May the Lord bless him!" Naomi told her daughter-in-law. "He is showing his kindness to us as well as to your dead husband. That man is one of our closest relatives, one of our family redeemers." -- Ruth 2:19-20**

Naomi is a great example of gratitude because as a widow, she was going to be eternally in the red. She had no means to pay anyone back. She could only survive if people chose to be generous to her. And of course Boaz was, so she's in the red. Deep in the red. So how does she reply?

With blessing. She invokes God's presence in Boaz' life: May the Lord bless the one who helped you.

That might seem empty to us, but ancient Israel knew words have power. God created the world by speaking and people are made in God's image. Our words create, invoke, shame, praise, inspire, destroy. And so when Naomi says, "May the Lord bless him!" she's not just trying to make herself feel better. She's offering what she has, which is a verbal blessing, an offer of God's presence and provision in Boaz' life.

Again and again in the Scriptures, we see this pattern: a response to kindness, to gift or provision or protection is a similar response, an act or word of gratitude.

Now you might be thinking, Okay wait: this sounds an awful lot like balancing a ledger. Warning allies, offering blessing. Actions and words offered in response to a previous kindness.

But what the Scriptures show us is the very different motivation behind those words and actions. Notice that in both of these cases, the person offering thanks is affirming their relationship with the other person. Saul was affirming Israel's friendship with the Kenites. And Naomi explicitly mentions that Boaz is a relative, that his provision is based on their familial connection, so her blessing is affirming that connection.

The New Testament takes this idea of Thanksgiving as an affirmation of our relationships further, pressing us to see our interactions with each other not as entries on a spiritual ledger but as opportunities to love unconditionally.

Turn to Mark 10 if you have your Bible with you. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, it's on page XXX. If you don't own a Bible, please consider that one a gift from us. And you don't owe us anything for it!

Jesus is trying to teach his disciples that in his new world, relationships work differently than they do in the rest of the world. They're arguing about who's going to be the most important (after Jesus himself of course), who's going to have the most authority and responsibility. So Jesus chastises them, beginning in verse 42:

**"You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." -- Mark 10:42-45**

At first blush, that doesn't seem to have anything to do with gratitude, but consider the world Jesus imagines here: He says, look around you. Everyone's jockeying for position. Everyone's trying to be one up on everyone else. Everyone's trying to have black in their ledger.

But that's not how it is among you. In my kingdom, among my people, it's not about black. It's about red. It's about serving others, giving to them. Placing yourself *below them*, not above them.

According to Jesus, our concern to stay in the black is a warning sign: what's really at the heart of the "I owe you one" mentality is that we don't want to be in anyone's debt. We don't want to owe them because we're *below* them. And yet Jesus says that in his world, we're to be a people who submit ourselves to each other.

Paul echoes Jesus in Ephesians 5 (in our Bibles, on page XXX). Here, Paul specifically ties humility in our relationships to a prior gratitude toward God (as Keven talked about last week). He challenges us to

**Give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. -- Ephesians 5:20-21**

A life lived in gratitude reframes our whole outlook on the world. When we understand that we're *not* self-sufficient, that everything we have comes from God, that there's no such thing as a person who's *ever* truly living in the black, then we're free to live well in the red.

We live in a world defined by God's grace, by the death and resurrection of Jesus, who's rescued us from a life marked by death and invited us into the life that is truly life.

And when we understand that, we can live free of ledgers in our interpersonal relationships, too. Our interactions aren't bound by constant tallying, by the guilt of not doing enough or the resentment of having done more than the other. Instead, we freely give whatever we have to those around us, without worry if we'll be "paid back". We freely receive, not counting costs or tallying paybacks. Our "thank yous" become simple, pure expressions of joy, affirmations of the basic goodness of our relationships.

Our Thank Yous mean not "I owe you", but "I love you."

So: Thursday is Thanksgiving. And Friday is Black Friday. During this week, we will all have some opportunities to give and to receive. This week we'll all be more conscious of the goodness of Thanksgiving, of saying "Thank You".

So what will this week look like for you? [[ledger sheet](#)] Will it be a constant, choreographed dance of fighting and striving to remain in the black? (Even if all the fighting and striving is going on in your own head)? Will it be filled with IOUs and anxiety over how you can keep everything even?

Or will you let go of the ledger, find the freedom that comes with living wholly in the economy of God's gift to us in Jesus' death and resurrection? The reality is that we're all in the red. And that's good news because God is a giver, wholly and fully. God gives us everything we could ever need or want and invites us to pay it forward.

When we learn to give and to receive well, we become like God.

### **Ledger Examine**

I want to close today with an exercise: take out your ledger sheet. I'm going to give you a couple of minutes to make a list on here of people you owe. These are the people who make you feel in the Red. Maybe it's because of some tangible gift they've given you, or maybe it's their constant kindness, or some less tangible service they've given you.

Make a list of those people and write out in the accounting space why you owe them.

[[instrumental musical break](#)]

[[Share some of my names](#)]

Now, take the ledger and fold it along the names. Tear off the accounting part of it. Wad it up in a ball. (It'd help me out a lot if you toss it in the recycle box on your way out!)

But keep the names.

These are people to whom you owe gratitude. But your gratitude toward them must not be motivated by a sense of debt or obligation. Instead, let your response to them be a celebration of your relationship. Do something or say something to them that is an act of thanksgiving with no strings attached, no hidden agenda to balance some scales. Say a genuine, heartfelt Thank You! to them and then

The actions might look similar, but the motivation is wholly different. You're not trying to get in the black, get out of the red. You've wadded up and thrown away that exhausting, broken economy in favor of God's better way, the way of the Cross, the way of the Resurrection, the way that offers blessing and relationship and keeps no records.

Toss the balance sheet, but keep the list of names. This week, say I love you, not I owe you. What will your Thank You look like?

### **Communion Set Up**

Before we can go back into the world to say our Thank Yous, we must first come to Jesus' table. Because this world without ledger sheets makes no sense unless he conquered sin and death by rising from the dead.

On the Cross, Jesus bore the full weight of a world full of IOUs, the full weight of a world fighting and clawing to stay on top.

His death and resurrection opened the way to a new life for us. So when we come to this table, it's to celebrate a life free from ledgers, a life free to love.

We receive the bread...

We dip it in the cup...