

Gratitude and anxiety

By [James Sledge](#)

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Giving thanks is a fundamental act of faith. The Psalms are filled with calls to give thanks and offer thanksgiving. "O Give thanks to the LORD..." In my own Calvinist tradition, gratitude is understood as the prime motivator of a Christian life. And so this week when most all Americans celebrate Thanksgiving would seem to be a moment when an entire nation could engage in a shared religious experience without worrying too much about particular theological doctrines or differences. So it would seem, except that we have a hard time squeezing much thanks or gratitude into what we call Thanksgiving.

Most of us know some version of that first Thanksgiving celebrated by the Pilgrims. But aside from the fact of a meal, I'm not sure it has much in common with our celebration. Theirs was centered around joy that they had survived, that God had provided (with the assistance of Native Americans being a significant part of that providence). In the midst of suffering and death, of the very real threat that none of them would make it, God had seen them through.

But our version of Thanksgiving has become a celebration of abundance and excess. We stuff ourselves, catch a parade, watch some football, and get ready to shop. Some of us may offer thanks for all this abundance, but of course it is an abundance produced by our hard work and by American ingenuity. It is not about God providing our daily bread. It is all about having more.

Despite Jesus' repeated warnings on the subject, despite the Bible's repeated warnings, we have become a nation obsessed with consumption and accumulation. The gospel that spews non-stop from our televisions and other media is that happiness is about having more. And so we simply cannot reconcile our culture's gospel with what Jesus says in today's

gospel reading from Luke. "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me... How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Our need to accumulate is rooted in our survival instinct, a drive to store up enough food to get through the winter and so on. But of course our accumulating has nothing to do with survival. Instead it comes from our anxiety, our worry that others may get more than us, our worry that there isn't enough to go around. At a fundamental level, our need to accumulate is rooted in a fear that if we don't grab our share, we will be left out. We simply do not trust that God's providence will be sufficient to give us all that we need.

I am suspicious that true gratitude becomes more and more difficult the more we have. Wealth often breeds a sense of entitlement. And somewhat surprisingly, wealth often diminishes generosity. People of limited means are often much more generous with what little they have than those who are wealthy. Having more, it seems, often leads to more anxieties and worries about holding on to it. Perhaps this is why Jesus says wealth and the Kingdom of God are so incompatible.

On Thursday, my family will join with a few others to celebrate. We will enjoy turkey and pumpkin pie and good wine and many other delicious dishes. I will have a grand time and wouldn't miss it for the world, nor would I begrudge anyone else such enjoyment. But I do find myself growing increasingly uncomfortable with just what it is that motivates me. To what degree is my life an act of gratitude and thanksgiving? And to what degree is it an attempt to accumulate things, status, reputation, respect, etc? To what degree is my life a joyful response to God's gifts? And to what degree is it an attempt to assuage my own anxieties?

Originally posted at [Pastor James](#).