

A PARENT'S  
TO  
GUIDE

# Thanksgiving

“

I love Thanksgiving. Can't wait to slave for hours over a meal my kids will rudely reject in front of relatives who are judging my parenting.

—a tweet

“

My wife and I each had a role in Thanksgiving Dinner.

She cooked and I took a nap.

It's called teamwork.

—also a tweet

“

I'm really enjoying Thanksgiving break with my kids.

Oh, wait. Never mind. They're awake.

—another tweet

# — Thanksgiving —

## (aka Day of Stress, Expectations, & Pressure)

Few things can make us crazy like family dynamics, particularly in the case of a once-a-year, “everything matters” Thanksgiving get-together with relatives we rarely see but definitely don’t see eye-to-eye with. The theme of the event alone brings untold stress as many of us struggle to be grateful “enough”—even us Christians, who know in our minds we owe everything to God but feel guilty when an authentic sense of gratitude eludes us.

You’re not alone! Historically speaking, the Pilgrims and natives (Wampanoag Indians) who joined hands for the “first” Thanksgiving didn’t get along very well either. But, for three days, they set aside their differences to enjoy peace and friendship. On top of that, think about how hard it must have been for the Pilgrims to be thankful when nearly half of the settlers who had arrived with them on the Mayflower were dead from hunger and disease.

This year, maybe you’re dreading dealing with extended relatives or the cooking and cleaning. Or maybe you aren’t looking forward to the scene after the meal, where all the adults are in one room staring at one screen, while the “kids” all go to separate rooms to stare at the screens in their pockets. Either way, we can all relate to those tweets in one way or another: *Holidays ... Thanksgiving ... dinner ... relatives ... teenager ... \*DO I HAVE TO?!\**

But there’s hope! The Thanksgiving holiday shouldn’t necessarily be a celebration of all that’s great in our lives. That’s an unsatisfactory, unhistorical, and potentially unreachable goal, to say the least (the Pilgrims couldn’t even pull that off!). In truth, life is a mixture of joy and pain, peace and conflict, plenty and want. Maybe the most important lesson we can teach our children is to learn how to balance this tension while maintaining a posture of gratitude.

## — Thanksgiving is all about bringing family and loved ones together to remember God’s faithfulness around a great meal. . . Right?

Sort of.

The Pilgrims we associate with Thanksgiving (more specifically, religious Separatists) didn’t observe many holidays; colonial life in the early 1600s had a way of distracting folks from hanging out and partying. History tells us [they only celebrated about once per year](#)—on the Day of Thanksgiving and Praise, an acknowledgment of God’s favor not tied to any particular calendar moment but spontaneously initiated as He was present in their lives. Their few other remembrance days focused on spiritual discipline, such as the Sabbath and the Day of Humiliation and Fasting. The other guests that day, the Wampanoag Indians, regularly held harvest festivals to celebrate the earth’s bounty.

The only remaining firsthand account of the Thanksgiving feast comes from three-time governor of Plymouth Colony [Edward Winslow](#), who had spent the previous year watching nearly half of his fellow Pilgrims (mostly women and children) perish from hunger, disease, and the harsh New England winter conditions. The colonists’ dedication, along with help from

the Wampanoag Indians, finally brought a relatively successful harvest in 1621, and the victory shone out all the brighter against the prior year's horrors. So Winslow wrote the following [in a letter to a friend](#) in England that year:

*Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors...many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted...And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.*

To the Pilgrims, their faith wasn't just something they added to an observance as a formality; it was central in everything they did. These "[Separatists](#)" saw no distinction between their spiritual and secular lives.

Our modern understanding of Thanksgiving is a mixture of history and myth (they didn't eat turkey!); however, the "official" reservation of the fourth Thursday in November [by Abraham Lincoln in 1863](#) as a national day of gratitude should remind us of our personal and public responsibility to pause and give thanks for the blessings our family and nation enjoy.

## — **Is it wrong if my family and I don't feel like there's much to be thankful for because of everything we're going through?**

It's absolutely understandable if you feel that way. The Thanksgiving holiday may seem on the surface to be a good idea—"Sure, we should spend at least one day being thankful"—but being forced to be thankful on a specific day each year doesn't take into consideration what you and your family are going through. However, something that may help is to redefine gratitude and thankfulness from a more biblical perspective.

Despite the historical backdrop of suffering on that original Thanksgiving, Americans aren't always willing to recognize that suffering has any redemptive value. Our culture promotes the idea that "[happiness is the truth](#)," i.e. the ultimate virtue to pursue and strive for. It's not hard to see how this lends itself to a sense of entitlement and even resentment: "I deserve to be happy!" So if something doesn't make us happy, we should avoid it at all costs or, at the very least, find ways to distract ourselves from or ignore the pain. It's quite possible that this is one of the contributing factors to the increasing rates of addiction in recent years; rather than facing our pain, we've elected instead to anesthetize it with sex, pornography, video games, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and even [the Internet and smartphones](#).

One of the unintended consequences of this elevation of happiness above its proper place is that gratitude has come to mean "being thankful for things that make us happy." Yet that idea is quite contrary to the biblical picture of thanksgiving. We are commanded to "give thanks in all circumstances" ([1 Thess 5:18](#)), "give thanks to the Lord, for He is good" ([Psalm 106:1](#), [1 Chron 16:34](#), [Psalm 136](#)), present our requests to God with thanksgiving ([Phil 4:6-7](#)), sing to God with gratitude in our hearts ([Col 3:16-17](#)), and much more. The Bible is full of commands to give thanks *regardless* of our circumstances, not *because* of them. So in what should we root our gratitude, then? In God's goodness and provision alone. *(continued on next page)*

The Bible is clear that, as followers of Christ, we will face hardship and persecution ([2 Cor 4:16](#), [1 Pet 5:8](#), [John 15:18-19](#), [1 John 3:13](#), [John 17:13-14](#)) and that our sufferings make us holy ([Rom 5:1-5](#), [Heb 12:10](#), [James 1:2-4](#)). So by believing that happiness is our ultimate purpose in life, we not only run away from becoming more like Christ Himself, we live our lives striving after an elusive and fickle muse. As Don Draper from the TV show *Mad Men* explained it, “What is happiness? It’s a moment before you need more happiness!”

## —— So how can we relearn gratefulness?

Matthew Henry, respected pastor and Bible commentator, provides an example to us [in a letter he wrote after he was robbed](#): “Let me be thankful, first, because he never robbed me before; second, because although he took my purse, he did not take my life; third, because although he took all I possessed, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.”

What a great example of perspective. When we’re struggling to feel grateful, it’s often not because there’s nothing to be thankful for, but more so that we’ve narrowed our focus so much that we can’t see the blessings we do have for what they are. But we also have to remember to allow ourselves and our families the time needed to process a difficult circumstance and to achieve better perspective. Most likely, Henry didn’t write that letter the second he returned home after being robbed. He probably was shaken at first, then angry and bent on justice, then eventually able to come around to truly mean the words he penned.

One of the reasons it’s hard to feel truly grateful is because we somehow have come to believe that being Christian means we have to be joyful at every second of every day. But that’s not realistic or healthy. In reality, authentic gratitude stems from struggle—and, really, from nowhere else. If all we ever knew was a cornucopia of provision (see what we did there?), never experiencing want, loss, sadness, or hardship, we’d have a hard time recognizing blessings for what they are; they’d simply be “how things are.” Because of the broken world we live in, the darkness is what helps us recognize and appreciate the light. C.S. Lewis said it like this in *The Problem of Pain*: “We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

So when a loved one is going through a hard time and feeling sad, frustrated, angry, depressed, neglected, alone, afraid, etc., it’s *not* helpful to use gratitude platitudes—“Every cloud has a silver lining”; “The glass is half-full, not half-empty”; “Count your blessings!”—to, in essence, minimize their suffering. Rather, acknowledging their experience, struggles, and emotions as understandable and valid will open the way for further discussion, healing, and, eventually, gratitude: “In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power [to bring hope](#).”

## —— Still, what if we just don’t feel cheerful or like celebrating this year?

Mark Galli, editor-in-chief of Christianity Today, [wrote this](#):

*Here’s the truth of the matter: We can’t keep it up. There are days when we just don’t have the*

energy to count our blessings. And sometimes those days turn into weeks or even years. There are long stretches when we'd like to be thankful, but frankly, we just don't give a rip. Note Paul's words: "... giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ ... " This phrase reveals the utter inadequacy of all our human attempts to manufacture thanksgiving, whether through clichés or any other mood altering activity. Be thankful always? My gosh, is he kidding? Give thanks when you wake up, even if you're not a morning person? Give thanks when I'm on the way to a job I hate? And then Paul twists the knife: "... giving thanks always and for everything..." Even for my spouse and kids or roommates when they are driving me crazy? Even for my church when it fails to meet my spiritual needs? Even for my cancer, which is draining life from me? ... Thankful always and for everything? Are you crazy, Paul? It would take a miracle!

[Youth Specialties reminds us](#) that the holidays can bring up painful, traumatic memories for many—even teens. It might be the first Thanksgiving following a bitter divorce. The event might highlight the loss or absence of someone dear to them. It can even heighten students' awareness that their economic or personal situations do not measure up to those of their peers. In fact, the original colonial celebration actually validates experiencing the day as a reminder of the hurt and broken areas of our lives. And while true gratitude often leads to deep joy, it can be a process that takes time. Changing one's perspective doesn't happen overnight; it's a habit that takes intentional practice. Sometimes, we must choose gratitude until we are grateful. With this perspective, gratitude is a discipline. It is the "explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as [a gift of love](#)."

In light of this, it's important to mitigate expectations of perfection in any aspect of Thanksgiving, while also keeping in mind the role that difficulty plays in the formation of gratitude. And if you or someone in your family is struggling to feel joyous enough to celebrate for some reason, that's ok. In fact, any attempt to invent deep joy because you're "supposed to" actually takes away from the heritage of the holiday.

Instead of forcing a celebration, talk as a family about what each person would like the day to be like. Maybe someone just wants it to be your immediate family. Maybe someone would rather wear pajamas than get dressed up. Maybe someone would rather serve in a soup kitchen than consume another large meal. Take everyone's suggestions into consideration and agree as a family how to make the day work for you.

But we must not forget: ***When no one has the strength within them to be grateful, that's exactly when we must be diligent to call upon God for a miracle.***

To give thanks "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" means admitting that our thankfulness is flawed; we can't do it forever, we can't do it for everything, and we can't do it alone. Only by humbly admitting this before a grace-filled God do we see that true thanksgiving blossoms from the cold, damp soil of suffering:

*Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him. (Rom. 5:6-8 MSG)*

Suddenly, our ability to give thanks becomes a gift from God, not a forced manifestation of



shame, guilt, clichés, seasonal timing, or traditions. He blesses us with feelings of gratitude just like He gives us *everything* of forever-level value ... and this world is powerless to spoil what passes to us through the nail-scarred hands of Jesus.

## In light of the heritage of the holiday, what are some new traditions I can incorporate into my family's celebrations this year?

Thankfulness actually works in a cycle: True gratitude begets more gratitude. As we authentically thank God, we become aware of our inadequacy and ask God to help. He promises to respond to this prayer with love and grace ([1 John 1:9](#); [Matt 7:7-11](#)), and we feel grateful again. It's the blessing cycle of the Christian life, and it powers us with His Spirit to worship Him and accomplish His will.

Thanksgiving is a great season to put this cycle of gratitude to work for our families. Here are a few ideas (or use our ideas as inspiration to come up with your own!):

- 1. Read [Psalm 136](#).** Read it slowly. Read it aloud. Read it together with the family; everyone can take a line. Read it every day if it will help you and your family focus on what truly matters.
- 2. Make a gratitude list or keep a journal.** G.K. Chesterton said, “When we were children, we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmastime. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?” Ask everyone in your home to keep their own list, or keep a running household list on the refrigerator or the inside of your front door. If your family is creative, think of fun ways to display the list.
- 3. Celebrate old traditions while making new ones.** The Bible instructs us to remember the past faithfulness and provision of God in order to power and strengthen our resolve going forward. Reggie Joiner, founder of the ReThink Group, [explains that family traditions](#) give kids a sense of security, builds bonds between family members, communicate the value of family, and remind us of our part in a “bigger story.”

Traditions, however, should fuel change, not prevent it. Chuck Lawless, the dean of graduate studies at Southeastern Seminary, [warns us against embracing traditionalism vs. traditions](#):

- Traditionalism equates God's blessings with our preferences, assuming God wants what we want. Traditions glorify God for what He has done for us and what He will do.
- Traditionalism prefers the past over the future; traditions honor the past but also inform change.
- Traditionalism “guards yesterday's turf” and obstructs creative ideas, elevating traditions to the level of commandment. Traditions evoke unity and encourage us to wisely, prayerfully make changes with an eye toward experience.

Honor old traditions, making sure everyone knows why we keep them. Then consider what new traditions you might include. Family members could, for example, honor a grandmother by attempting to recreate her famous green-bean side dish for the Thanksgiving meal; a competition for best-taste could be judged by the grandmother! Do you have a new

in-law who has an Italian heritage? Incorporate her best ravioli recipe into the Thanksgiving feast. Maybe kids understand Christmas Day as Jesus' birthday; after your Thanksgiving dinner, put up the Christmas tree and add birthday decorations to it. Or maybe the adults who prepared the meal all day could take the teens to the movies after eating while others in the family clean up; the kids will probably be ready to stretch their legs, and the "Oscar season" begins right around Thanksgiving Day (filmmakers release their best films when Academy voters have the best chance to remember them).

**4. Ask your teen to own part of the Thanksgiving event.** Consider what your teen enjoys, then put him/her in charge of some aspect of the day. Maybe they could be in charge of getting everyone's beverages, or they could act as greeter to everyone who arrives and thank everyone who leaves. Maybe they could throw in ideas on décor, or maybe they could keep the little cousins occupied with age-appropriate video games before dinner. If they love to draw, they could make a decorative, unique place card for every person attending. They might write an original poem to read at dinner or play an instrument after the meal. They could do a bit of research and play MC at a Thanksgiving trivia contest, or they could read [Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation](#). They could even write and perform a goofy play or reader's theater for your guests...or rewrite Lincoln's Proclamation in today's verbiage (see our "Parent's Guide to Teen Slang" for help). Ask your son/daughter how they would like to help, and use their ideas as much as you can. And remember, a wholehearted attempt and a memorable result matter more than perfection.

**5. Trade momentary charity and hospitality for ongoing compassion and love.** Yes, giving to those in need at Thanksgiving is very good, and many will indeed go without a celebration of the holiday. Do the connections we make with those in need at this time of year ever feel forced, though? Is there an awkward silence as we stand there in the threshold of a stranger's home with the smell of pre-prepped Thanksgiving dinner while we expect a level of gratitude that doesn't materialize? Do those people living on the fringes of our lives really mean something to us—as they matter to our Father in heaven? Or does a part of us judge them based on their unkempt carpets and a distinct lack of interest in our donation of time and turkey?

The fact is, true charity and hospitality take time and relationship. Thanksgiving food donations and holiday service projects work best as vehicles for further connection. You may even find people living in need, those who have the least, giving the *most* away this holiday season.

Let your family's love *start*—not stop—with Thanksgiving Day. Bring a meal to the family of a teen in your child's marching band whose mother has regular chemo treatments. Before dinner, take your teen with you to a local single-mom's house and offer to check her car's oil, tire pressure, and fluids; get the car washed and fill it with gas, then leave a gift card for a meal on the dashboard. Or go to the nearest college campus and post a sign inviting college students far from home to join you for the big dinner ... and, while they're there, invite them for Christmas dinner, too. God does not want us to simply give of our time, talent, and treasure—He loved us so much that He gave us what would really save us: *Himself*.

**6. Pray.** This seems like a no-brainer; everyone prays at Thanksgiving, right? Some do, but it can be awkward to pray before a bunch of folks you don't typically see (and maybe some who don't believe the way you do). The sample prayer below (based on [the prayer of the Pilgrims](#) that first Thanksgiving) can help you think of ways to express gratefulness to God




despite any pressure. Also, consider asking your teen to pray. He/she may feel a little weird about it, but strangers often feel more comfortable listening to a child pray than an adult, and teens really can understand it more than we think.

*Accept, O Lord, [our thanks and praise](#) for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love. We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side. We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us. We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone. Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of His life.*

## Final thoughts

The best thing that can happen at Thanksgiving is what can happen afterward. As the first colonial celebration of the holiday fundamentally emerged from suffering, so the torture of Christ on earth began ultimate salvation and unspeakable joy for us all. Even the most entitled person can learn to bring gratitude to God and others every day if he/she ***begins to see difficulty as a path to joy and not a diversion from it.*** After all, a valley of sadness implies the presence of a mountain on either side.

Thanksgiving has the power to focus our thoughts on what we have, rather than what we want or what we've lost. It highlights the grace of God, encourages us, and gives us hope for every area of our lives. Those who regularly give thanks to God find themselves quickly ready to give to others. Such is the cycle of blessing, and in the Christian life, it's where all the action is.

  
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