

# Joined in Thankfulness

## Jer 23:1-8; Mt 18:10-20; 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor 8:3-15



We have many things for which to express thankfulness—God, family, freedom, sanctuary, salvation, identity, income, and possessions. The question we might should be asking is not “What are we thankful for?”, but rather, “How shall we express our gratitude?”

In the midst of prophesying the exile of Israel, Jeremiah spoke to the issues of their identity as a nation. *Yahweh* had forged them an identity. Leaving Egypt under the leadership of Moses was still the single most defining element of the identity of the people. It set forth how *Yahweh* had taken a rag-tag band of slaves and made something out of them, fashioning them into a nation, giving them a land of hope, sovereignty, and most of all, an identity with a future. All of this was on the verge of ending, but for the core issue—identity. If anything, Jeremiah warned the people that their sense of identity was on the verge of growing through the coming experience of exile.

This was a preposterous message in the view of many. If Israelite identity was so connected with *Yahweh* having redeemed them from Egyptian bondage, who would they be if they were once more taken into bondage by another people and driven out of their land of promise, hope, and future? It was ludicrous for many to hear these words. If they were to go into exile, they would cease to exist, for the basis of their very identity would be destroyed! The obvious implications of exile were that either *Yahweh* did not really exist, or *Yahweh* had abandoned them.

Jeremiah said, “No.” He proclaimed that the people had rebelled against *Yahweh*, becoming too comfortable with the blessings of the covenant while ignoring their responsibilities and dependence upon *Yahweh*. Oh, they could allow their identity to be destroyed, but only by keeping their backs turned to the One who gave them an identity. *Yahweh* was preparing to refashion them an identity, this time greater as they were to be reclaimed from among the nations of the world to one again be identified as the people that *Yahweh* had rescued from many lands—a greater feat than the first!

*Yahweh* was preparing to restore them not simply to the old identity they had lessened in worth, but to a new identity that could hold for them more meaning. Jeremiah’s words came to prepare them for what lay ahead, so that this nation that was being scattered might continue to be a nation, even as the visible sign of their identity was removed from them. They would continue to be bound together by the commonality and identity in their thankfulness for what *Yahweh* had done for them and would do again in an even greater way. *Yahweh* would reshape their identity, once again joining them in thankfulness.

Jesus spoke often of gathering together those who would be called His sheep. One of the major themes of Jesus’ ministry was bringing in those he considered the “lost sheep of Israel.” It was in the context of teaching the disciples to gather the lost sheep that Jesus set forth reconciliation as the greatest value for the faith community. In the Matthew 18 passage, Jesus speaks of the need for being joined together in reconciliation as an entire community. Many of our translations of the text would aim Jesus’ discussion here at the church as an institutionalized entity, but the Greek term Matthew uses could not mean such to the disciples, as no such entity existed. Jesus speaks, rather of the assembly of the people of the city—their council for conducting business.

Some would force Jesus' words to set forth parameters with the purpose of excluding the wayward from our midst. That misses the point. Jesus' instruction here sets forth the means to unite the lost sheep as one community. We are to take our differences with one another directly to those with whom we have a problem—expressly for the purpose of reconciliation! If we are not heard, we are to take with us witnesses to aid the process and mediate the interchange. We ought to note that these are not witnesses to the reported grievance, but witnesses to the attempt at reconciliation! Reconciliation should go forth to the assembly—not the church as in many translations, but the public business meetings of the locale. They are then to serve as witnesses to our attempts at reconciliation. If the offender will not heed the assembly, he is the one who cuts himself off from the community as a foreigner or traitor to the people.

Jesus offers no recipe to expel an individual from our fellowship, but a process for reclaiming those relationships broken by our missing the mark of fellowship, unity, and love. This becomes clear with the context—"where two or three of you *have been brought together* in my name, I am in their midst." Jesus is interested in seeking out the lost sheep, not expelling them. He sought to bring them back into the community of those called by His name. Jesus was rebuilding that community, fishing them out as Jeremiah had prophesied, one by one.

Paul had spoken of the ministry of reconciliation as being the major extension of Jesus' own ministry and role. In chapter eight of Second Corinthians, he gives the reconciliation effort another face. He speaks to the garnering a gift to meet the needs of the believers in Jerusalem who were suffering in the wake of severe famines that had hit Palestine. He writes to encourage the Corinthian believers to express their love. He calls upon them to share their material blessings as a response to the generosity of Christ Jesus in rescuing them and giving them a new identity. Paul's appeal to them is on not on the basis of the qualities of the Christians in Palestine, nor even the plight in which they live, but on the grace and example of Christ Jesus.

By participating in the offering to aid the saints in Jerusalem, they would be extending their hand of fellowship to those who were yet uncertain as to whether the gospel should even be taken to those who were not of Jewish descent. Paul wanted these converts to Christ Jesus to make a sacrificial expression of their own participation in the grace of God in Christ Jesus. He sets forth not his own sacrificial gifts on their behalf, but Christ Jesus' example in calling even these Gentiles into the new people that God had fashioned.

What would truly join the Gentile and Jewish believers together was not having the Gentiles first become Jews. They did not need to become like each other, accepting the same language, customs, and traditions. What they needed was to be joined together in their thankfulness to God. They were to do all they could, if possible, even to match the gift of Christ in their earnestness to become one people, reconciled together in their thankfulness for what God had done for them. They were joined by God, and it was Christ Jesus who would be the glue to join them in thankfulness.

Will we allow our thankfulness for what God had done for us to bring us together as one body? Will we allow the example of Christ to dictate the value of our responsibility to reconcile the world? How shall we express our gratitude for what God has done for us? Will we allow our gratitude to Christ to unite us as we extend the same quality of grace, reconciliation, and acceptance to others?

—Christopher B. Harbin