

(soft liturgical music)

- It is a curious fact that the scriptures inform us that under one condition, the heavenly father will refuse to look at the conduct of his children. I suppose God has to behold a great deal of sorry performance, a great deal of disheartening iniquity on the part of his children. And you would think that maybe God wouldn't want to look at us at all, but on the basis of what we are told in the scripture, we are led to believe that he does look with kindness, with forgiveness, with judgment upon the children of men. But there is one time, when according to the scriptures, God absolutely refuses to look, and refuses to listen. Now what would you think that would be? Perhaps it would be the time back in history when his son, our Lord Jesus Christ was being crucified. In some ways, the most terrible event in history. We might say that it's when someone is being murdered, or when a theft is being committed, or a rape or some terrible crime of this sort. But that is not it. None of those qualifies. The one time that God has promised that he will hide his eyes and stop his ears, is when we are offering things to him for blessings. That's curious, it's arresting, it rather stabs us wide awake and makes us wonder about this whole business of thanksgiving if it can be so offensive to Almighty God that he will refuse to look and listen. If we turn from the record of God the father in the Old Testament, to the record of God the son in the New Testament, we find the same thing. In the 18th chapter of Luke's gospel there is recorded a parable, which our Lord Jesus Christ spoke in which he described the conduct of two men. The conduct of one man was, that he fell down on the ground when he realized what a horrible sinner he was, and acknowledged the fact that there was no good in him, that he was a sinner and threw himself on the mercy of God. And Jesus said, "This man went down to his house justified instead of the other man." And what was the conduct of the other man? The only behavior which was described by Jesus in this parable, which he invented, it was not a real happening, it was simply a story which he told to make a point. The only behavior which was described by Jesus in this parable was that this man was offering a prayer of thanks. Apparently thanksgiving is a dangerous thing. We run great risks when we give thanks. And if that is the case, then in a thanksgiving service like this one today, it would be well to examine our hearts and our practices to see if we are doing any of the things that are so offensive to God the father, and to God the son. If we are doing any of the things, which God has said, "He will hide his eyes and will not look at if we do. Will stop his ears and will not hear if we say." Now this is a puzzle on the very face of it, because it raises the question of how this can possibly be in view of the fact that God has commanded us to give thanks. He has said, "Come into my house and give things." He has said, "I will bless you and you shall thank me." How can it happen therefore, that the act of thanksgiving itself can become offensive in the extreme and outrage the sensibilities of Almighty God. I really don't know. But my guess is that something happens here similar to what happens with regard to the law. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans in chapters five, six, seven, and eight describes how the law, which was given by God, and which was good to teach us the difference between right and wrong, to tell us the way of God, how the law, which was good, is used by sin to become sinful in the extreme. So that, and this is a direct quote. "Sin used the good thing to become sinful in the extreme." What God intended for good we have corrupted. So he said, "We cannot put our trust in obedience to the law because this may be the very instrument of sin itself." Now I wonder if a similar thing

does not happen with regard to thanksgiving. The act of thanksgiving seems so safely pious. When you lift your eyes to heaven and fold your hands and say, "Thank God." That sounds so safely religious, so theologically correct, so impeccably right. Who can criticize that? What could possibly be wrong with a prayer of thanksgiving addressed to God, acknowledging that that for which we are grateful came from him. And yet, because it is so seemingly safe, so piously correct, sin which is always looking for a successful way to have dominion finds this as its most useful instrument. When Paul Tillich preached here the last time, the topic of his sermon was "The Flight From God". Those of you who heard the sermon will remember that he told how we human beings tend to run away from God. We do not want a face-to-face confrontation with the God of the universe, the God of Jesus Christ. And we try to run from him like Thompson's "Hound of Heaven". God pursues us but we run. And Tillich said in this sermon, that the most successful places we find to hide from God are usually in church. Because when we are in church, we think this must be safe, this must be right, and whatever we do in church cannot be an offense to God. But God has said in his holy word, that some of the things which people do in church, namely, offer prayers of thanksgiving can be offensive in the extreme. So I presume that this is how it happens. Things sometimes do not turn out the way we expect them to. They sometimes do not turn out the way we think they ought to. And illustration of this took place last August at about the time that some of our students from Duke were returning from Project Nicaragua, there was another plane flying in central America that crashed. This plane was a Peruvian plane, a DC-4. And it crashed in the jungles of Panama. There were seven crew man on board that plane, and they had a crate full of poisonous snakes, which had been captured in the jungle in which they were flying out for some zoos. When people who live nearby the site of the plane crash, saw it go down and organized and rescue party. Went to the plane hoping that they would find some surviving human beings. They found that the seven crew members were all killed in the crash. The crash had broken open the crate, and all they found awaiting them was a plane full of live and liberated snakes. Now this is what sometimes happens in an act of thanksgiving, in a prayer of thanksgiving, in a thank offering, if you please, in a service of thanksgiving, that in which we hope to find kept alive and nourished the things of eternal value becomes the means by which the poisonous snakes are liberated spiritually. And we find the act of thanksgiving, the attitude of thanksgiving becoming the instrument of offense to Almighty God. Well, now what are some of these points of danger about which we must be very careful? The first is we must not thank God for ill gotten gains. We must not thank God for things which we have, that we have no business having, which we took out of the blood of others, which we honestly acquired. In the scripture a lesson that was read this morning this was the particular point that was made. God said, "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression." God wants no thanks for anything which we have that we extracted dishonestly, or unjustly from others. I understand that most of the leaders of the minority government of Southern Rhodesia are members of the Christian Church. If they went to thanksgiving services this morning and thanked God for their independence from Britain, and for the power which this minority holds over the majority of the citizens, keeping them in subjection, extracting from them taxes without representation, and promising to hold them and rejection. And if they thank them for this power, which they have and this wealth which they have, if they thank God for this, we are encouraged to believe from this passage that it is a God who is neither looking nor listening, a God who is not there. And who says, "Correct oppression, seek justice." Back in the days, 150 years ago in the United States when we had slaves and great plantations, and

great holdings by slaveholders. Many of plantation owner went to church, and offered thanks not only on Thanksgiving day, but every Sunday for the bounty, which he enjoyed and said, "Thanks to God for this." Now we begin to see why this is such a dangerous thing and why God would hide his eyes. It is a subtle way of saying publicly before the world, God is responsible for this wicked system. He is the one who gives me this wealth. It is he who extracts it from these other people and gives it to me. And so who am I not to enjoy it since God has given it to me? And so by means of this prayer of thanksgiving, you're seeking to paper over the cracks in the moral character of the person who's doing the praying and to say what I have I have by the act of God and so of course I will thank him for it. A prayer of thanksgiving was the main instrument for the affirmation of the divine right of kings back when this theory of the divine right of kings was so prevalent in the world. Kings thanked God because of the safety of their thrones. Kings thanked God for all the bounty which they extracted from their subjects. And their prayers of thanksgiving, were the seemingly harmless way they had of propounding the doctrine of the divine right of kings. So we begin to see something of why God says he will hide his eyes and stop his ears when we begin to offer prayers that are reflecting injustice and making him responsible for that injustice. We need to be very very careful when we start thanking God for ill gotten gain, for possessions we have that we did not get rightly. I read the report of a trial that was held in which it was established that the defendant had been guilty of murder. That the defendant had been guilty of deliberate, premeditated murder, but because of a legal flaw in the trial, the man was set free. And when he heard that he was not going to have to pay for his crime he said, "Thank God." God didn't want any thanks for that. He did not wanna be blamed for that. God is not in the business of saying. "Whatsoever a man sows that shall he not reap." I am sure that whenever people carelessly and sinfully offer a prayer of thanks to God, which by implication blames him for a heinous evil, he is not at all pleased by that prayer. Well secondly, we run a great risk when we thank God for things that he has said are not his business, for things which he does not take a hand in, for things that he does not want gratitude for. Even though there is no evil involved, we sometimes put God in a compromising position so far as his reputation is concerned, by thanking him for things when thanks should go elsewhere. For instance, the matter of rain, weather, the seasons God says in his word that he sends the rain on the just and on the unjust. Alike, in spite of that, very clear teaching and scripture, there are people who thank God if their neighbors do not have any rain on their crops, but rain comes on the crops of the person praying the prayer of thanks. Now it is one thing to be glad, it is one thing to feel gratitude, but it is another thing to attach that prayer of gratitude to Almighty God, because you have to ask what it is you're saying when you thank God for rain on your place, when there is no rain on someone's else. What you have to ask is does this mean that God is more interested in you than he is in others? And conversely, if the other man has rain on his crops and you have none on yours, does this mean that God is more interested in the others than he is in you? This is not the way God works. And he does not want any prayers of thanks for rain. Now to be sure, it is right that we recognize God is the ultimate provider of all the seasons, and of rain and of sunshine and everything else in the natural world. But in the sense of his making immediate delineation of these blessings this week rain on yours, this week rain on mine, God does not want that kind of thanks. And there are far more spiritual and theological problems created when we get in the business of thanking God for the rain then are solved by any such prayers as that. And then also let's think about our athletic contests. Yesterday afternoon I was sitting in the stands on the west side in the Duke stadium, thoroughly enjoyed seeing the Blue Devils defeat, the University of North Carolina in football. And not only did I enjoy that victory, but I was extremely grateful, but I did not express my gratitude to God for the Duke victory over Carolina, my gratitude went to coach Murray, and to 35 Duke

University students who were football players. My gratitude goes to them and to them alone, not to God. Now I thank God for the virtues of courage, for the virtues of discipline, and of unselfishness, and all the other things that sometimes go into the making of athletic victory, but in the sense that I think God gave us the victory yesterday, I don't think he did, I think the players and the coaches did. And I don't believe God wants any thanks for that because I have a feeling that he is just as much interested in the boys on the Carolina team as he is in the boys, on the Duke team. Also, if we begin to thank God for a victory like that, this raises serious problems about where God was last year when we lost to Carolina. (congregation laughs) And there is another thing that I think needs to be straightened out in this connection too. I want you to know that the scripture passages this morning was selected three weeks ago. And the sentence in there, "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams" has no reference to what happened this week. (congregation laughs) The ram was not barbecued. He was returned intact yesterday afternoon to the Carolina people. We need to be careful that we do not offer thanks to God for blessings which he did not confer, because this creates serious problems with which we have to deal. And I believe at this point, we need to get our thinking straight about the nature and the definition of what it is that God is intending to do for us. Chester Carlson, who is the inventor of Xerox was down here on the Duke campus about a year and a half ago, and he made a talk to a small group of people on the campus. And I had the privilege of being present. He told a story about a college student whose father had a lot of money. His father wanted to do something that would help his son and make him happy. And so having plenty of money and knowing that his son was a sports car enthusiast, he decided to buy him the very finest sports car that he could buy. So he bought him an Italian Ferrari. The son was delighted beyond all expectation, and he wanted to take care of this sports car, and he talked with some of his fellow students about what he might do to take care of it. One of them suggested to him, being someone of a superstitious nature, that he ought to take it to a religious official and have him put a blessing on it. So he took it first as the Catholic priest. He said, "Father, I've just bought a new Ferrari, and I want you to put a blessing on it." The priest said, "Well now son, we don't bless just anything that comes along. we'll have to think this over. And you tell me, first of all, what is a Ferrari?" The boy was very downcast and he said, "Oh father, if you don't know what a Ferrari is, a blessing by you wouldn't help it any." So he went next to the Jewish rabbi, "The rabbi I've just bought a new Ferrari. And I wonder if you'd put a blessing on it for me." He said, "Sure son I'd be glad to put a blessing on it for you, but first tell me what a Ferrari is?" "Rabbi," he said, "If you don't even know what a Ferrari is, a blessing by you wouldn't help it." So next to we went to a low church, Unitarian minister. He said, "Reverend I've just bought a new Ferrari, and I wonder if you'd put a blessing on it. "Ah, a new Ferrari," he said, "what's the RPM and what's the torque? And tell me about the takeoff speed and the top speed. And by the way, what is a blessing?" (congregation laughs) I think that the Unitarian minister asked the right question. We need to ask very seriously because it has to do with the nature of God. What is a blessing? When has God blessed us? When should we thank him? And when should we not? There are times we get God in trouble when we thank him. And I take this out of the realm of rain and sunshine and Carolina games, and put it on the very serious point of whether or not when two boys from the same street go off to war, and one of them comes back safe and the other one is killed. Should the boy who came back safe, thank God for his safety? If so, what are we saying about that? That God was interested in him. God was not interested in the other boy. That God was looking out for him and protecting him. And God was careless about the other boy. What are we saying by our thanksgivings? Now the last point that I want to mention, where I think we run a serious risk in giving thanks is in thanking God for our small blessings when really what we're thanking God for was something

we did ourselves. And by implication, we therefore blame him for the blessing not being greater. How many times have I heard students say when they received a grade on a course that was just barely passing, "Well, thank God I did pass. I didn't make an A, but thank God I passed." Why thank God? Why thank God? The implication is here that God gave you the D, but if he had really been interested in you, he would have given you an A. It wasn't you who earned the D it was God, and so thank him. If it wasn't God who earned the D, then why thank him. No, many times we try to shift our laziness over on God. We say, "I know that God hasn't fixed the leaky roof yet, but we thank God that at least there is something roof up there." And thus shift our own lazy slovenly ways onto God. I believe it is irreverent to thank God for the minimal things we have as though he was responsible. And by implication responsible that we did not have greater affluence than we did when it was simply a lack of our own effort that put us in such poor circumstances. The theology of Karl Barth, the great European theologian has gone far to correct some of the inadequacies in American theology in this past generation. But there are a great many people who without knowing Barthian theology in great detail, have read some of it and have been led far astray. And we need to be careful as we read Barthian theology, that we do not go astray at this point, and say that well since God takes the initiative, since God is the great actor spelled with a capital A in history, it is only for us to sit and wait for God to act. If the church needs to be renewed, we can't renew it, God has to renew it, and so we wait for him to act to renew it. If righteousness needs to be established, it will be established only by God. And so we will wait for God to initiate the action. This is a distortion perhaps of Barthian theology. And we need to be very careful that we not only distort Barthian theology, but outrage Almighty God when we do it. Because we do not have to wait for God to act to do the things that he has already acted in us and stimulated us to do, which only waits for us to do it. Yes, there is danger in thanksgiving. There's great peril in it, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be thankful and express our thanks, but it means that our thanks must be thoughtful thanks. It must be a serious kind of thanks, where we raise questions about it, and ask ourselves what we're saying when we say, "Thank God." What are the implications? Remembering that if we thank God unworthily, he will hide his eyes and stop his ears, he will not listen Almighty God, our heavenly father, who has called us to thy house to give thee thanks and praise thy name. We pray onto thee for grace and discernment, that will enable us to thank thee worthily and that we may live in fellowship with thee, and with all thy children through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the father and the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, rest upon you and abide with you now and evermore. ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪