

Good News: This Is the Top Priority for Thanksgiving

For Americans, Thanksgiving is about faith and family, and not much else.

More than half (56 percent) tell LifeWay Research the most important part of the annual holiday is “being thankful to God for my blessings.” Almost 4 in 10 (39 percent) say “time with family and friends” tops their Thanksgiving priorities.

Times of prayer and thanking God for the harvest stretch back to the Protestant Reformation in Europe and continued as Pilgrims and Puritans settled in America. While Abraham Lincoln tried to establish a settled day for the holiday, Thanksgiving was not set as the fourth Thursday of November until 1941.

Since then, the holiday has developed several other traditions like the extravagant meal, football games, and the start of Christmas shopping. But as it turns out, we don’t place much importance on those. Eating, football, and shopping each garnered only 1 percent of Americans who say it is the most important aspect of Thanksgiving.

“In a nation that prides itself on personal independence, Thanksgiving priorities are a noticeable contradiction,” said Scott McConnell, vice president LifeWay Research. “Rather than focusing on a feast or football, most Americans relish the holiday to acknowledge the hand of God in their success and many others cherish the time with loved ones.”

Unsurprisingly, Christians are more likely to value thanking God above the other parts of Thanksgiving than anyone else. More than 2 in 3 Christians (68 percent) point to thankfulness to God.

They aren't the only ones thanking God, however. Close to half of adherents of other religions (46 percent) and more than a quarter of the nonreligious (28 percent) say the same.

Among Christians, Protestants are more likely than Catholics to choose thanking God over time with family and friends as the most important part of Thanksgiving – 71 percent to 56 percent. At 75 percent, self-identified evangelical Protestants are the religious group most likely to place the emphasis on being thankful for blessings.

The more frequently someone attends church the more likely they are to say thanking God is the most important part of Thanksgiving. That's selected by more than 3 in 4 of those who attend about once a week (77 percent) compared to 57 percent of those who attend once or twice a month.

Along with religion, gender, geographic region, and age play a role in deciding the most important aspect of Thanksgiving.

Women are twice as likely to say being thankful to God (64 percent) than spending time with family and friends (32 percent). Men, meanwhile, are evenly split. Forty-eight percent say thankfulness, while 45 percent say family and friends.

Southerners are the most likely to value thanking God (65 percent) and least likely to say spending time with family and friends (32 percent). Those in the Northeast (45 percent) and the West (44 percent) are most likely to choose spending time with family and friends as the most important.

This question also exposed a clear divide between millennials and other generations. The majority of young adults chose spending time with friends and family over thanking God. Older millennials (25-34) select fellowship instead of faith 53 percent to 44 percent. Younger millennials (18-24) are even more likely to say the time with others versus being thankful – 57 percent to 39 percent.

“A generation starving for relationships sees Thanksgiving as a relational respite,” said McConnell. “To many millennials, reserving a whole day to thank God on Thanksgiving is as backward as mailing a thank you card instead of instant messaging ‘thx’ and a praying hands emoji. But following the busiest travel day of the year with an upward focused pause may be a tradition some warm up to with age.”

The tendency of millennials to choose time with friends and family is not simply because the youngest adult generation is the least religious. Even among Christians, 44 percent of millennials chose spending time with friends and family as the most important part of Thanksgiving. Only a quarter (25 percent) of non-millennial Christians do the same.