

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Giving Thanks in Everything

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Code: 52-29

The text this morning is 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul writes, "In everything give thanks for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Paul simply says very directly, "In everything give thanks." No exceptions, no excuses, nothing is outside those parameters, in everything give thanks. That little phrase, *en panti*, in the Greek means in connection with everything that occurs. In connection with everything in life give thanks, no matter what it might be.

With obvious exceptions of personal sin, he is saying no matter what happens to you in life, be thankful. No matter what lot, no matter what circumstance, no matter what struggle, vicissitude, trial, testing, be thankful, give thanks. No matter what the situation we are to find reason to thank God. This is not some nebulous thanks fired off into space; it is a thanks given directly to God.

By the way, we should remind ourselves that thanksgiving is the essence of Christian living and attitude. And being unthankful is the very essence of the unregenerate heart. The apostle Paul, in Romans chapter 1, identifies the ungodly with some very direct words. In verse 21 he says, "They knew God," that is through conscience and creation, God was visibly manifest to them and experientially manifest to them. But even though they knew God through creation and conscience, he says, "They did not honor Him as God or give thanks."

There is the indictment on unregenerate man. There is the indictment on the non-Christian. He refuses to do what is basic and that is to thank God for everything, God who created everything, God who gives him life and breath in whom he lives and moves and has his being, God who has revealed himself to him in conscience and therefore given him a standard of right and wrong, God who gives every good and perfect gift is the one and the only one to whom all thanks is to be rendered.

And it is the lot and the character of unregenerate, unsaved man that he will not give God thanks. He may without meaning and witlessly parrot phrases like "Thank God for that," or he may in some quasi-religious activity offer some prayer of thanks to a God he does not know, but such does not qualify as true thanks. If you look at unsaved people in the world, they sort of fall in to several categories which will give some larger scenario to their thanklessness.

First of all, there are those people who go through life thinking that things happen as a result of luck. They think it's just a fortuitous concourse of events over which nothing has control. It just happens to happen that way. And if it doesn't happen the way it ought to happen for them, they become bitter and

complaining and angry and hostile, and life takes on a sour dour kind of meaning. And even though they may try to manipulate the lucky factors of life, they are unsuccessful and so they have no thankfulness at all. Who is to thank? You can't thank luck; luck doesn't even have control over itself. There is no thanks in their heart. What little good may come to them they attribute to luck and the rest of it they don't like.

And then there are those fatalists in the world who don't necessarily think that luck is in charge, they think there is some exorable force out there. There is some certain inevitability that is preset, maybe by the stars or some other aberration in their own thinking, and somehow it's all forced down a track and they fatalistically and reluctantly accept what is utterly inevitable and unchangeable. And that's the way it will be. It is destiny; don't argue with it. Who's to thank for whatever good comes in that? There's no one to thank. It's a nameless force, an unidentifiable movement that has no personhood and so there's no one to thank for anything, good or bad.

And then there are those people in the third category who believe that somehow they can control their life. They're the positive thinkers. They're the usually successful people, who having been successful and they're not sure why at first, and then they eventually attribute it to their own skill. But everything good that happens to them, they've done it, they've arranged it, they've orchestrated it, they've made it happen, they dreamed it, schemed it, planned it, made it happen, pulled it off. And all the credit goes to them. None for God. After all, what did He have to do with anything?

And so, the world is made up of these kinds of thankless people. Some are thankless because it's just a matter of luck and who's to thank. And some are thankless because it's just destiny and there's no one really there. And some are thankless toward God because if there's anything good, they're to be thanked. After all, they pulled it off and God gets no credit. He gets a bone thrown at Him once in a while in some kind of token religious expression that is really more of a blasphemy than anything else because it betrays a false and hypocritical heart.

You find the same kind of character in all the unregenerate. It may take different forms than the three I suggested to you, but they are by character unthankful. They do not thank God. But when a person becomes a Christian, it is characteristic of that believer, that Christian, to thank God for everything. All of a sudden there is a new heart and a new soul and a new inner life, and there's something different about the inner man. And built into that newness is a heart of thanksgiving that cries out in gratitude to God. It's so hard to find someone more thankful than a brand new Christian. Thanksgiving becomes a part of the fabric of our new life. It's the fruit of the grace of the work of the Spirit within us.

But isn't it interesting how even Christians can become unthankful? For an unregenerate person to be unthankful is normal. For a Christian to be unthankful is abnormal. That's the cut across the grain of your new life, your new nature, your new person, the new I, the new you. And so, because we can fall to the sin of ingratitude, the New Testament repeatedly calls us to thankfulness. I don't have the time

to go through all of the texts of the New Testament that enjoin us to be thankful. I'll just share a few with you that I hope will build a little bit of a theology of thankfulness that may help to encourage you.

And the overarching principle that sets it all in place is Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." That's really the overarching umbrella that covers every issue of life. No matter what happens, it all falls under the umbrella of Romans 8:28. And it will be by God working together for our good. It may in itself not be good but God will take a bad thing and turn it to a good purpose for our good and our eternal glory. If you live believing that God is at work, sovereignly controlling all of the contingencies of life, blending them all together, each component to lead to a sovereignly designed goal for your good and glory, then you can handle anything in life and be thankful because you know it fits in to the ultimate plan.

I can be thankful for the pain that I go through in a surgery if I know that that there's healing coming because of it. I can be thankful for the difficulty I go through in preparation if I know that the product of that preparation is going to change lives. I can be thankful for the process of pain that I might inflict on my body if I know that in the end I'm going to be healthier because I exercise. There are many things in life that involve that. As long as you look at the end result you can be thankful, even for a process that's less than happy, joyful. When we see the end result of what God is doing, blending everything in our lives for ultimate good and glory, then we can in everything give thanks.

But isn't it interesting how we somehow fail to be thankful. The early church was characterized by thanksgiving. I'm often reminded of 1 Corinthians 14 because it has so much to say about tongues. But very often some beautiful little nuggets of truth get lost in there because we don't see them. One of them is in 1 Corinthians 14:16 where the Apostle Paul is talking about the Corinthian church speaking in these ecstatic languages which were a perversion of true languages. And he's talking there in verse 16. He says, "If you bless in the Spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the amen at your giving of thanks, since he doesn't know what you're saying? For you are giving thanks well enough but the other man is not edified." If you're talking languages nobody understands, how is anybody going to know you're giving thanks?

Well the little insight you get there is that when the early church met together and they gathered, they gathered with the purpose of giving thanks. That was a part and parcel of their worship. Somebody had a psalm, and somebody had a prayer, and somebody had a word from the Lord and a lot of folks had an opportunity to say thanks. When you have fellowship with believers on occasion in smaller groups than this one, it is well for you to open that up to a time of giving thanks. That was characteristic of the early church. And that stimulated in the hearts of the believers the need to be thankful as they met together.

We live in a day, today, where it's very difficult for us to rise above the creeping encroaching powerful culture that surrounds us, and we live in a thankless age. This has got to be the most thankless age there ever was. On the one hand you have people who have more than they've ever had, but you also have people who know there's more yet that they don't have. And so no matter what they have they don't have everything they could have and so they don't have everything they want, and so it breeds a terrible kind of thanklessness. Consequently the New Testament injunctions for us to be thankful in this culture need to be reminded over and over again to the people of God so that we don't fall into the patterns of those around us.

Second Corinthians 4:15 says, "All things are for your sake that the grace which you're spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God." What he means there is that as people receive the grace of God in salvation, it leads to redounding thanksgiving. It should be normal. It should be characteristic. It should be the pattern of every Christian's life that we are endlessly giving God thanks. In 2 Corinthians 9:11, he is simply saying, "Having been enriched with everything, it produces thanksgiving to God." Not only do you have salvation but you have everything. God has poured out everything. God has given bread for your food, He'll supply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness, and the result of all that He's doing in your life should be unending thanksgiving.

In Ephesians chapter 5 the apostle Paul, writing at the beginning of the chapter in verse 3, says, "Don't let immorality or impurity or greed be named among you," and he's talking there about deeds. Then in verse 4 he says, "There shouldn't be filthiness, silly talk, coarse jesting but rather giving of thanks." And there he's talking about speech. He's saying when you open your mouth nothing dirty ought to come out. What ought to come out is thanksgiving. Christians ought to be known by their thanksgiving. It's just constant. When they open their mouth they're expressing gratitude to God.

Over in chapter 5 verse 18, same chapter, Ephesians verse 18, listen to this. He says, "Don't be drunk with wine," that is dissipation, "be filled with the Spirit." And what will happen? "Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." That's joy, rejoicing, prayer, praise will happen. Then verse 20, "Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God even the Father." A Spirit-filled believer is a normal believer, is a thankful believer, is a joyful believer, is a praying believer. That's what he's saying. If you're filled with the Spirit, you're going to be giving thanks for everything. It's just going to gush out of you.

You should be giving thanks because of your salvation. You should be giving thanks because of God's outpouring of all the necessities of your spiritual life. And you will be giving thanks if you're filled with the Spirit. Even in the times of trouble, Paul says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with" – what? – "thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Even in the times of great anxiety, in the times of great fear and worry and stress, you're to be

characterized as thankful.

Colossians chapter 2 and verse 6, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him, established in your faith just as you were instructed and overflowing with gratitude." Wow. He says you're to talk the right way, and here's how to walk, walk overflowing with gratitude, just gushing with gratitude because of all you have in Christ. You ought to be characterized by overflowing gratitude. It ought to be said of every Christian, "That is a thankful person. My what a thankful person. Every time that person opens his or her mouth, out comes thanksgiving, out comes gratitude to God, overflowing."

Colossians chapter 3 verse 15 says, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts to which indeed you were called in one body and be thankful." Verse 17, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks in everything." In absolutely everything. In verse 2 of chapter 4 he says, "Devote your life to it. Devote your life to praying with an attitude of thanksgiving. Devote your life to it." Now this is the third component, by the way, in our text.

Go back to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. This is the third component here in the attitude of the sheep to the Great Shepherd. First one was joy. Second one was prayer. Third one is thanks, verses 16, 17, and 18. Here we find the responsibility of the believer before the Lord in terms of his heart attitude. He is to have inward incessant joy, continual unceasing prayer, constant daily thanks. I mean, that's to be the character and the pattern of our life. And by the way, these three commands, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, these three commands penetrate the innermost recesses of the redeemed heart. They penetrate the innermost recesses of the redeemed heart.

You say, "What do you mean by that?" They're the best gauge on a person's spiritual condition. Did you get that? They are the best gauge on a person's spiritual condition. Don't judge your spirituality by church attendance. Don't judge your spirituality by ministry activity. Don't judge your spirituality by the fact that you do your duty as a Christian, you give your money, you show up at your Bible study, whatever it might be. Don't judge your spirituality by the fact that you haven't raped anybody, you haven't robbed anybody, you haven't murdered anybody, you haven't committed adultery, you haven't committed fornication, you haven't lied and cheated on your Income Tax, you haven't abused your wife, you don't abuse your children. Don't judge your spirituality on that. Get deeper than that.

There are a lot of folks who can carry out the functions on the outside in a hypocritical way. If you want to get in touch with the reality of your spiritual condition, if you want to know whether you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then all you need to do is ask yourself, "Do I rejoice always? Do I constantly pray? And am I increasingly thankful?" Because that's the spring from within. That's what's coming out from the inside. It will lead to a right attitude in all the duties that you do, in all the responsibilities and ministries. But the innermost recesses of the redeemed heart are touched when there is constant joy, constant prayer, and constant thanksgiving. If you're not a joyful, prayerful, thankful person,

you're struggling with the flesh. When you're controlled by the Spirit, those things fall into place.

Then he says in verse 18, "For this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. By the way, that attaches to all three of those commands, not just to the last one. God's will in Christ Jesus is that you would have constant joy, constant prayer, and constant thanks. That's His will. Now what does it mean when it says "this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"? The "in Christ Jesus" modifies you, you who are Christians, you who are in Christ Jesus. For you this is God's will. There's no point in God willing it for the world. They can't be truly and constantly joyful. They cannot be in constant communion with the Lord. They don't even have a relationship and they're certainly not going to be thankful. But for you who are in Christ Jesus, you who are in the body of Christ, you who have been joined to Him, this will of God is placed on you as a mandate.

You say, "Do I have to drum it up myself?" No. It is not only God's will to will it; it is God's will to work it. Philippians 2:13, "It is God's pleasure to will and to do of His own good will in you," right? So He wills it and He works it by His Holy Spirit. That's why I say, if you're filled with the Spirit, you're going to speak to yourselves in psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs. Why? That's rejoicing. And you're going to offer that to the Lord. Why? That's prayer. And you're going to be giving thanks because that's the essence of the flow out from the inward spiritual control. Those who are members of the body of Christ then are to be characterized by unceasing joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. That's common. That's normal. That's routine because we should be filled with the Spirit as a matter of the course of life.

Now we look at our life and we say, "Now wait a minute. I wish that were true. I wish I just went around all the time gushing, singing songs of praise, and offering prayer to the Lord and thanking Him for everything no matter what it was, but I, I don't always do that." Well that's because you're sinful and because the flesh is still there. But we need to get a little bit better grip on that. How are we going to deal with it? What is it that corrupts those inner springs so that I'm not always joyful, prayerful, and thankful? What corrupts that? I'm going to give you a list, seven of them. Seven things that'll corrupt the spring of your innermost heart and hinder joy, prayer, and thanks.

Number one is doubt, doubt. What do you mean by that? I mean doubt about God, doubt about the character of God. You're not sure, first of all, that God's Word can be trusted. When He says that all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose, when He says that His heart and desire for us is for our good and not evil, when He says that He wills the benefits of His love upon us, "Yeah, I'm not sure we can trust Him." When He says that He is faithful and His mercies are new every morning, He may not be telling us the truth. If you doubt God's truthfulness, if you doubt God's character, you're going to have trouble being thankful, because you're not going to be necessarily sure that He's really going to keep His promise to make it work for your good.

Or if you doubt His sovereign power. Maybe you think He means well He just can't pull it off. You can sure trust His Word. He's got good intentions. He just doesn't have the power to deal with it. It's beyond Him, too complex, too difficult. He can't work this one out. He's not going to pull this off. So you doubt His sovereign power. Or maybe you doubt His wisdom. You say, "I'll tell you what. He wants to keep His Word. He's got the ability to keep His Word. He's just not too smart so when He works it all out it isn't really very good. If He would just consult me, I could clear some things up for Him, because I've got this deal laid out and if it works my way, it will be perfect. And you can see by the way it's working that God's plan is certainly not up to the standard of mine." So you're questioning His wisdom.

And then some might even question His love and say, "Well, God would never let this happen if He really loved me; certainly can't love me and be letting this go on." Any of those kinds of doubts that attach themselves to the character, the Word, the love, the wisdom, the power or character of God are going to take away your thankfulness. Those are going to poison the springs of your redeemed heart that should be gushing forth in overflowing gratitude.

Secondly, selfishness. You can add to doubt selfishness. This will really poison the springs of gratitude. This is the attitude that says, "Look, I don't want it the way it is. I want it the way I want it. I am not content with the way God is working out my life. I am not content with the circumstances in which I find myself presently. I am not content with the things that are going on in my little world. I do not want it this way. It's not what I desire."

That's selfishness. And selfishness basically says, "God, get off the throne and put me on it. I want to be in charge, I want to run my life, I want to call the shots." Self-will is more important than God's will, my plan is more important than God's plan. Selfishness. I want my life this way. I want my job this way. I want my church this way. I want my spouse this way. I want my kids this way. I want my career this way. I want, I want, I want, I want. And if God doesn't come in and fit the picture perfectly, then self-will begins to run roughshod over the plan of God and a thankless spirit is the result.

Third. The third hindrance to a thankful heart would be worldliness, worldliness, the love of the world. You say, "What do you mean by that?" Well, someone whose vision is filled with trivial things. Someone whose vision is filled with pleasure, prominence, popularity, prestige, people, places, possessions, pursuits. I can't think of any more *Ps* off hand. Somebody whose vision is all filled up with the trivia of the world, the stuff that is passing away. And they're so consumed with all that stuff that if that all doesn't work out the way they want it, they're not going to be thankful.

I mean, they had their eye on a relationship with a person. They had their eye on a certain pleasurable achievement, accomplishment, or experience. They had their eye on a place they wanted to be or a certain possession they wanted to have or a certain pursuit they wanted to accomplish.

They had their eye on some kind of prestige they wanted to gain or some popularity they wanted to achieve, and it didn't happen. And because it didn't happen their whole life is in the dumps. And you and I know people like that.

There are people in our world who because they didn't get somewhere along the line what they wanted, they took their ball spiritually and went home. And they spend the rest of their life with a thankless attitude. They never ever see the blessing of God because they're not looking at it. You know that great old hymn "Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart." That's the heart of the Christian's vision. Be Thou my vision, Lord of my heart. It's You I see. It's You I want. It's You I long for. And as long as that's your vision, you're going to see the blessing of God pouring into your life. But if your vision is the material world, then you miss all of that, and so you have no cause for thanksgiving because everything that you've attached your affection to that doesn't work out causes you to be thankless and ungrateful.

Number four, a critical spirit. A critical spirit. Here again is something that will steal thankfulness blind. A critical spirit, a person who is bitter, a person who is negative, who has a sour life attitude. It can be produced by a number of things but if it is running unchecked, it will destroy a thankful heart. It will blind your vision. It will warp your understanding. It will make you useless to God and a pain in the proverbial neck to everybody around you. It'll corrode your spirituality; it'll corrode your love, this critical spirit. This over-analysis of everything, this need to criticize everything that isn't exactly the way it ought to be. A critical spirit makes a bitter negative thankless person. And that, again, rises from pride. It rises from an enlarged ego that says, "I deserve better than this. I'm worthy of better than this." Or it says, "I want people to think I'm better than I really am so I want stuff around me to make me look good. And it's not making me look as good as I want to look and so I get sour and bitter." Or "I've been hurt," or "I've been wounded by somebody, and I'm just going to take the pain and I'm going to run it through the course of the rest of my life." That kind of critical attitude destroys thankfulness.

Number five, impatience. Impatience. Some people don't give thanks simply because they're discontent over the perception that God doesn't move on their daytimer. God doesn't operate according to their schedule. God isn't working by their clock. They just can't take process. You know people like that, they want instant gratification, instant gratification. They can't deal with process. They can't say, "Thank you, Lord. I can see Your hand at work. The process is slow, I see it. I thank You for it. I praise You for it." They say, "God," it's like the child with a tantrum, "I want it. I want it now. No process. My time, not Yours." They want everything fixed in their world and they want it fixed immediately. They cannot patiently wait. They cannot patiently thank God for an unfinished process. They want God to work for them to accomplish all their goals in their own timeframe. Impatience will just destroy thankfulness. Learn to thank God for the process. And learn, if you're looking at your partner in life or your children or whatever it is, for the little signals of process for which you can thank God that He's accomplishing His great purpose. Don't be in a hurry to see the things happen that are

happening perfectly on time in His economy.

What robs gratitude? Doubt, selfishness, worldliness, critical spirit, impatience. Two more. Coldness, spiritual coldness. You could call it apathy. You could call it lethargy. I use the word coldness in thinking about the lukewarm heart of the Laodiceans or thinking about the Ephesian church in Revelation also that had left its first love. There's a lack of zeal for Christian service. There's a lack of love for Christ. There's a lack of diligence in the study of Scripture. There's a lack of passion in worship. There's a neglect of the Bible and a neglect of prayer. There's a waste of time on the trivia of life. And it leaves people empty. They just become spiritually indifferent, lethargic, apathetic.

Somebody came to me the other day and said, "How are we going to address the spiritual apathy all around us when we have our elders' time together this week?" People are very aware that there is an apathy that exists among many Christian people, and it is the kind of coldness that steals thanksgiving. They're not even looking at things for which to be thankful. They've lost that intimacy with the Lord. They've lost that intense joy in the study of the Word. And consequently their hearts have no gratitude.

And lastly is rebellion. And by this I simply mean just downright, outright, flat-out rebellion. "I'm not thankful because I'm angry with God. I'm not thankful because I don't like what He's doing in my life. I'm, I'm, I'm mad and I'm unthankful. And I know I'm unthankful and I'm going to stay unthankful." Just plain rebellious. There are people like that. It's amazing. Their lot in life isn't what they want and they purposely withhold thanks because they're just flat out unthankful.

In any form, any of these seven, you have gross sin. You're defying the command of God in everything to give thanks. You're defying the instruction of the New Testament that you ought to be always thankful for your salvation, for the unending blessings of God. You ought to be thankful for the unspeakable gift of Christ. You ought to be thankful for salvation, thankful for victory over sin and death. You ought to be thankful for divine guidance, for complete provision for all your needs. You ought to be thankful for the hope of glory. You ought to be thankful for the power of the word, the power of prayer, the goodness of God, the mercy of God, the holiness of God that never errs. You ought to be thankful for life and breath, thankful for heaven, thankful for everything. And if you're not thankful, that's sin. If you're not thankful because you're rebellious, because you're cold and indifferent, because you're impatient, because you're critical, because you're worldly, because you're selfish or because you're doubting God, that's sin. In everything give thanks.

It's the result of the Spirit-filled life. As I said in Philippians 2, you can't drum it up yourself. That's why God works to will and to do of His own good pleasure in you. He's working to make you thankful and it's happening through the power of the Spirit of God. If you're filled with the Spirit, He produces it. What happens when you're thankful? God is glorified, you're blessed, the church is built up, and the lost are reached. Tremendous impact, tremendous impact when you are thankful.

What does God ask in a growing flock? What does He ask of the sheep in terms of being related to Him? He asks that they rejoice all the time, pray all the time, and give thanks all the time. That's their spiritual duty and that's a duty that is energized by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. And as we yield to the Spirit, God produces that.

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