

## Give Thanks in All Circumstances

1 Thess. 5:18

This past Thursday some 271 million Americans sat down with family and loved ones supposedly to give thanks. We ate 46 million Turkeys and consumed 4,500 calories in one sitting. 50 million of us traveled more than miles to give thanks. 136 million of us went shopping on Friday and spent 4 and ½ billion dollars, because nothing says giving thanks like wanton gluttony and mass consumerism.

But this morning I want to take you back to an earlier call to give thanks. No, we're going back much further than the Plymouth colony where English settlers shared a thanksgiving with the native Wampanoag tribe, feasting on duck, swan, and goose as well as turkey. I want to take you back 2,000 years to the city of Thessalonica where Paul wrote in his first letter to a small church struggling in a big city, "*Give thanks in all circumstances.*"

Thessalonica was the provincial capital of Macedonia in what is today northern Greece. In the book of Acts, the good Doctor Luke records Paul's first visit to there during his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey. It was here that Paul, along with Timothy and Silas found a ready audience for the good news of Jesus. Several in Thessalonica became followers of Jesus including some Jews, some Gentiles who already believed in God, as well as several leading Gentile women.

However, it was also in Thessalonica that Paul found serious opposition. The Jewish leaders in the city incited a mob against the Christians. The City leaders knew this fledgling church had committed no crime, yet they still had to pacify an angry mob. They tried to appease the unruly crowd by forcing a number of the believers to pay a fine.

Paul himself was forced to leave the city under the cover of darkness where he continued his missionary journey on to Berea. Luke specifically says that the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians. They eagerly received the word and a large number believed. When Paul's Thessalonian opponents heard about his success in Berea, they followed him there and attempted to incite a riot against him. The new church in Thessalonica continued to endure hardship and persecution for years to come.

It is in this environment, and to this group of Christians that Paul says in 1 Thes. 5:18, "*Give thanks in all circumstances.*" Even when you face opposition, give thanks. Even when others are trying to bring you down, give thanks. Even when you're surrounded by an immoral,

pagan culture, give thanks. If Paul, facing everything he faced in Thessalonica, tells the Thessalonians to give thanks in all circumstances, even the circumstances they had in their city, what do you think he would tell you, in your circumstances?

Give thanks in all circumstances. It's a short command. It's a simple command, but boy, is it ever hard. This morning I want to break down this little verse into its different parts so we can better apply it to our lives, so that thanksgiving is more than just a holiday, more than just an excuse to stuff ourselves silly, but a description of who we are in Jesus.

## I. **Give THANKS**

First, let's focus on the word thanks. We are to give THANKS. There is nothing lost here in the Greek translation. There is nothing confusing in the grammar. My Greek/English lexicon defines it as "to express gratitude for benefits or blessings." It's to acknowledge that you didn't do it all yourself. You didn't get here on your own. It's a simple call to give thanks. We are to be a grateful people. Faith in Jesus and thanksgiving go hand in hand.

There is no greater contradiction than an ungrateful Christian. That goes against the new life we have in Jesus. We have received the greatest gift imaginable, an eternal grace that far exceeds the temporary troubles life may throw at us. How can a people who have received such a marvelous gift and are empowered to give thanks in all circumstances be ungrateful?

But our hearts get stuck in ungratefulness, don't they? I know mine does. I can get so focused on my problems that I forget how God has been faithful in the past, and I don't even think about what He has promised to do in my future. I get so dissatisfied because of what I don't have, that I am unable to count the blessings I do have. It's easy to do. It's easy to get so buried in homework, or dirty diapers, doctor's visits, chores to be done, or bills that need to be paid, that we develop spiritual blinders to God's blessings. Then we begin to grumble and complain. We become a source of discontent, and before you know it our heart is far from God.

We become like the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness. God had set them free from captivity. He guided them. He protected them. He fed them every day. They saw the most amazing miracles with their own eyes, and yet all they could do is grumble and complain, and find all the things they didn't like. That's why we must hear this call to give thanks.

Faith and gratitude go hand in hand, so when we are ungrateful it's a warning sign that something in our life isn't in sync with Jesus. Something in our heart needs attention. Something in our lives needs realigned. We need to give THANKS. An attitude of gratitude isn't just a part of the personality you're born with. It isn't something that some people have while others don't like blond hair. No, Thanksgiving doesn't come to us by nature. It must be pursued. An attitude of gratitude must be built, bit by bit, piece by piece, sometimes with great difficulty and effort. This is why Paul urges us to give THANKS.

## II. GIVE thanks.

Secondly, we need to consider the word GIVE. We are to GIVE thanks. Giving, first of all, implies an act on our part. Yes, it comes from heart. It's an attitude we must have, but it's still something we must do. Thanks must be given. It is an action we perform. We can do it; we can obey this call, even when our heart isn't completely in it. In fact, sometimes we need to learn to GIVE thanks when we're not feeling it all. Because thanksgiving is more than just a feeling that we have. It is an act. I'm not saying fake it. I'm saying sometimes we have to humbly obey and give thanks from our lips until our hearts are willing to follow— not to hide an ungrateful heart, but to guide it.

We do thanks in several ways. We express it in prayer, thanking God directly. Paul offered prayers of thanksgiving in nearly all of his letters. Paul wrote to the Ephesian Church, *"I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers (1:16)."* And these prayers of thanksgiving are more than just spiritual "Thank You" cards to God. Through our prayers of thanksgiving God works back in this direction taking that which we are thankful for and making it holy, making it his own. Paul wrote to the young minister, Timothy saying, "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated (or made holy, that is it is set apart to God) by the word of God and prayer. When we pray and give thanks, God somehow inhabits that thanks touches whatever it is we are thankful for. I can't explain it. I can only marvel.

We also give thanks through songs of praise. Time and time again, God's word connects thanksgiving with singing praise to God. In 1st Chronicles 16, after the Ark of the Covenant is brought back to Jerusalem from its captivity by the Philistines, David leads Israel in a song of

Thanksgiving. In verse 34 he extols all of us, *“Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.”* Psalm 95:2 calls us to, *“come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.”* Of course, these prayers and songs of thanksgiving aren’t all done in private. They are to be shared with others. We not only lift up God with our Thanksgiving we lift each other up. This is why Paul always shared his prayers of thanksgiving with those he was thankful for. Ephesians 5:19 likewise urges us to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Giving thanks isn’t just an act on our part. That we GIVE thanks also implies that there is someone to receive our thanks. We are thanking a specific someone for something. I hear a lot of people who have no real faith in God, but then they say they are thankful, and I have to wonder who they are thanking. They thank the universe? They thank the planet earth as if some chunk of floating rock in space loves them and has a plan for their life? Maybe they are simply thankful to good fortune? Yes, let’s sing songs of praise to random chance, because life is nothing more than a roll of the dice in the casino of the cosmos. If they don’t believe in God and the blessings he gives, who is there to be thankful to, and what is there to be thankful for, especially when circumstances are bad.

Let me tell you something. The universe doesn’t care about you. The sun and the planet and the moon don’t have a plan your life. They are inanimate, impersonal objects that operate according the natural laws God created. They are a blessing from God, but they are not what blesses you. But since our culture is so intent on denying the power and nature of God, they can’t help but ascribe some of his divine qualities to nature, to life, to the cosmos. We need a God in our world, and if we deny the real one, we have to pretend there’s another.

I find it interesting how many people who achieve the top levels of their chosen endeavor, whether it’s athletes who win championships, or musicians who sell millions of records and fill stadiums with fans, or actors who garner awards and accolades who demonstrate gratitude and humility. How often do we stars who come out for their trophy, their award, their encore and they something like this, “First, I’d like to thank God.” Often these are people who demonstrate absolutely no belief in God in any aspect of their life, but there

they are thanking God. It's as if we instinctively know that there has to be some personal force at work in the universe that is way bigger than us that allows us to act, sing, write, play, or compete.

As followers of Jesus Christ, you and I know who that is, and we give thanks to him.

### III. Give thanks in ALL Circumstances

The next word we want to zero in on is the word ALL as in ALL circumstances. The word "circumstances" here has been added by the translators to make it more readable. It's literally rendered, "give thanks in ALL." It's universal. It's not all good things. It's not all pleasant things. It's not all things that make sense to you. It's simply, "Give thanks in all."

To really understand the universal call of this verse, we have to back up and include verses 16 and 17. 1 Thess. 5:18 is a part of a longer sentence. Together, they form a trio of concise commands that should characterize the life of every Christian, "*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*"

What makes these imperatives so challenging are the universals— be joyful ALWAYS; pray CONTINUALLY; give thanks in ALL circumstances." I can be joyful sometimes. I can pray often. I can even give thanks in many situations, but always? Continually? All circumstances? That's on a whole other level.

Even if we focus only on the last command of this threesome, "Give thanks in all circumstances," how do I wrap my head around that? All circumstances— that's no exceptions, no excuses, and no, "well, maybes." The Greek *en pas* means in everything. In everything that happens in life, we need to learn how to give thanks. No matter what lot, no matter what occasion, what trial, what test, what struggle, give thanks to God.

How can we do this? Is this some sort of stoic acceptance? Is it a form of spiritual masochism? No, not at all.

### IV. Thanks IN all things, not FOR all things

To fully understand how we can give thanks in all things, we need to focus on one more word. It's the word IN. We give thanks IN all circumstances, not FOR all circumstances. Paul is not saying that we have to feel thankful for being laid off, thankful for a relationship torn to

shreds, thankful for the bad diagnosis. What he's saying is that we still have abundant reasons to be thankful even in the face of these things.

What's amazing though is that many times, we find out later that these bad circumstances actually were blessings in disguise. The reason we can give thanks in all circumstances is that circumstance aren't what ultimately control our lives. God is. We can give thanks in all circumstances, because we know God is still in control and He's still good, even when times are bad.

Circumstances are those things in life that happen to you and around you that affect you, but they are things beyond your control. The economy goes up, or there is a recession. You get a cost of living raise at work, or your company downsizes and slashes budgets. You win a raffle for a free vacation or you hit a deer on the way home from work. Your favorite team wins the championship or you fall and break your leg. You get the exact schedule you want at school or your girlfriend breaks up with you right before prom. Circumstances. No matter what happens in life, you can still find a reason to give thanks to God. There is always blessing. God's grace is always moving, God is still bringing about his purpose in your life.

Sometimes, though, our circumstances make it hard to see. We get discouraged. We get disappointed, and we forget that God is still there, that God still loves us, and He is still working in our lives. This command reminds to keep looking. He's still there. He's still God. He still rules the universe and He still has a plan.

Let me share with you a bit of theology of thanksgiving. Rom. 8:28 is the umbrella of truth that covers all this and enables us to give thanks in all circumstances. *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* You see even when circumstances are beyond your control, and even when they are not a part of your game plan. They are never beyond God's control, and they never throw off his game plan. He can take any bad circumstance and still use it for his good purpose. His wisdom has already taken into account all these things. He's not surprised by any of it. That's why we can still give thanks.

Learning to give thanks in all circumstances forces to remember that God is sovereign. There are some who think that our lives are just a matter of luck. You either win the lottery of

life or you lose. Our lives are not just good fortune or bad luck. It's not the universe against us. It's not how the stars and the planets are aligned. The call to give thanks in all circumstances challenges us search for God's wisdom in all that happens. How is he testing me? How does He want me to grow from this? What can I learn from this? How can God use this for his glory?

Giving thanks in all circumstances also reminds us that we are not in complete control of our own lives. We are not the masters of our domain. There are some, often they are the go-getters, the positive thinkers, the high achievers who believe their success is purely the result of their own effort. They've done it, they dreamed it. They worked for it. They made it happen, and all the credit goes to themselves. There's no gratitude for those that have helped them along the way. They don't give glory to God for his blessing. Here's the thing— no amount of skill, talent, or hard work, as important as those things are, are the sole reason for where you are in life. He's the one who created you with those abilities. He gave you those talents. He's enabled you to work hard. This is why we give thanks in all circumstances.

Dr. Garland Bare grew up in Tibet, the son of a missionary doctor. He recalls a time when Tibet was a war with China. The borders were closed and supplies could not get through. Soon the missionary family had used up all their reserves. The only food they had to eat was a local staple called tsumba. Tsumba was made of barley meal ground into flour and mixed with tea and yak butter and then formed into doughy balls. Day after day, all they had to eat was tsumba. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, nothing but tsumba.

Thanksgiving day arrived and there was no turkey, no mashed potatoes; no pumpkin pie. Garland's mom prayed they might have something to eat besides those doughy balls on just this one day. A short time later a servant arrived from the governor's house holding a can at arm's length in one hand and holding his nose with the other. He explained the governor had received this gift from India, but after opening it, he couldn't stand the smell. However, he thought the Americans might like it. The offending, odiferous gift was a can of sardines. So that day they enjoyed a can of sardines with their dough balls and it was the greatest treat ever.

For the many years that followed, a staple on the Bare family Thanksgiving table along with the turkey and all the trimmings was a can of sardines. A reminder that God is always faithful, and we always have something to be thankful for.