

"Being Thankful When It's Hard To Be Thankful"

Thanksgiving Day is fast approaching, and even though for some it may just mean Turkey Day or football, still for many it's a time when we're more prone to be grateful. The Bible says a lot about being thankful. There are *tons of* Scriptures that instruct us to be grateful. Here are just a few. Psalm 92:1 says, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord." Psalm 107:1 instructs us: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." In Psalm 100 the ancient Hebrews are told to "enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise" (Psalm 100:4). Giving thanks to God individually, and together, has always been a part of worship for God's people.

The cornucopia is a traditional Thanksgiving decoration. It represents the bounty of the earth, and how God has filled our lives with good things. Are you feeling that today? That your life is just overflowing with all kinds of good things! Maybe you are – and if so, praise the Lord! But maybe your life is less of a cornucopia and more like an empty basket. Life can feel that way sometimes, can't it? I recently heard someone say, "I'm livin' the dream! Every time I get out of bed to start the day it seems like a nightmare."

A lot of things can rob us of the "cornucopia feeling". We've lost someone we love, and life feels sad and empty. The high cost of everything and the condition of the country has us feeling depressed (and maybe worried). There are people who've lost their jobs, lost their marriage, lost their self-respect, lost their hope. The basket seems empty. Maybe our basket does seem pretty full - but it's full of *bad things*: Credit card bills, health issues, family problems, annoying neighbors, needed home repairs.

Our Scripture text for today tells us to be thankful not just when life is good and things are going our way, but when the bad comes too! 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." One translation has it: "Give thanks in every situation."

People vary greatly in the level of gratitude we show. ***Some people are not very thankful at all.*** They hardly ever go out of their way to say thanks to someone. They hardly ever make that phone call or send that email or text to say, "I'm so thankful for what you did." Hardly ever say to their spouse or parent or child or neighbor or coworker, or the people in their lives day in and day out, "You know, I appreciate you so much!"

Often these ungrateful people are miserable grumblers and complainers. A man always complained about how his wife cooked breakfast. One day he said, "I want one egg over easy and one egg scrambled." Well, okay, she gave in and did the stupid thing he asked, and when she put the plate in front of him he said, "You scrambled the wrong egg!"

A farmer had the reputation of being a constant grumbler. He could never find anything for which he could be grateful. He was well off moneywise, but he had few friends because of his sour attitude and ungrateful approach to life. His pastor tried to get him to look more on the bright side of things, but to no avail. One day around the time of the potato harvest, the disgruntled farmer enjoyed a bumper crop. Wanting to strike a more cheerful note, the pastor

said, "Jake, I understand you had a tremendous season with potatoes this year. That should make you happy and thankful!" The chronic complainer never smiled and replied, "Yeah, that's true. The harvest wasn't too bad. But now I don't have any bad potatoes to feed the pigs."

Maybe it's not so much that we complain all the time. It's just that we are short on making that extra effort to express thanks when it's appropriate. A man named Winston Pierce tells of a high school class reunion. A group of old classmates were reminiscing about things and persons they were grateful for. One man mentioned that he was particularly thankful for Mrs. Wendt, for she more than anyone had introduced him to Tennyson and the beauty of poetry. Acting on a suggestion, Mr. Pierce wrote a letter of appreciation to Mrs. Wendt and addressed it to the high school. The note was forwarded and eventually was given to the now retired teacher. About a month later he received a response – a letter written in a feeble longhand. The letter read, "My dear Willie, I can't tell you how much your letter meant to me. I am now in my nineties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely, and like the last leaf of fall lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for forty years and yours is the first letter of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has for years. Willie, you have made my day." *Some people hardly ever express gratitude.*

Then, there are people who give thanks for the good things of life, the obvious blessings.

The accident that almost happened, and didn't. The surgery that went well and brought healing. The bad storm that never came, or did less damage than anticipated. The good friends who stick by us (even when we're not pleasant to be around). These are the people who really do appreciate the good things God gives us.

It's kind of like a Charley Brown Peanuts cartoon strip. Lucy comes up to Charlie Brown before a baseball game starts and says, "Don't you think we ought to pray before the game starts?" Charlie says, "Would that be fair, to pray to win?" Lucy replies, "When I'm in right field, I always pray." "What do you pray for?" Charlie asks. "I pray they won't hit the ball to me." About that time Peppermint Patty comes up, "Yeah, I pray they won't hit the ball to me too. I don't want to make a mistake and lose the game." Linus jumps into the picture and says he prays the same thing. In fact, the whole team prayed the same thing – that the ball wouldn't be hit to them! Charlie doesn't pray. He's pitching. So he winds up, throws the ball to the batter, and the ball is smashed back at him so fast that it knocks him down. As he lay there he hears a chorus of his teammates saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

*A lot of us are among the people who thank God for the good things in life that come our way (or in the case of Charlie Brown's team, that **don't** come our way!) But our Scripture text nudges us further. It says we are to "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you"*

God wants us to give thanks in all the situations of life!

Notice, this is not just a *suggestion!* Be thankful even when bad things happen *if you feel like it,*

or *if you can bring yourself around to doing that*. It's a command. Also notice, *it is God's will* that we do that! Sometimes we say, "Oh, it's so hard to know what God's will is in this situation." But this is very plain: God wants us to be thankful no matter what. Period.

Aren't we inspired by people who are able to give thanks even when things go bad? Matthew Henry was a noted Bible scholar. He wrote a classic commentary on the Bible. One day he was robbed. After that he wrote in his diary: "Let me be thankful...first, because I was never robbed before...second, because although they took my wallet they did not take my life...third, because although they took my all, it was not much...fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed."

Not long ago Nancy and I visited the Flight 93 Memorial. We were reminded of the heroes on that flight who overcame the hijackers, and crashed the jet into a field in rural Pennsylvania. It was a plane that was headed towards the Capitol Building or the White House. Todd Beamer was one of the passengers on that plane, and became well known for his words, "Let's Roll" as some of the passengers rushed towards the hijackers. Todd was a Christian. His wife Lisa was pregnant at the time. Soon afterwards, Lisa spoke at a Women of Faith Conference. I saw her being interviewed around that time. Even in grief, she expressed thanks for her husband's life, and what he was able to do for his country.

Someone has said, "In every tragedy you can look at what you have lost and be hateful, or you can look at what you have and be grateful." I came across this piece of writing: "*I am thankful*: for the wife who says it's hot dogs tonight because she is home with me, not with someone else. For the teenager who is complaining about doing dishes, because that means she is at home and not on the streets. For the taxes that I pay, because it means that I am employed. For the mess to clean after a party, because it means that I have been surrounded by friends. For the clothes that fit a little too snug, because it means I have enough to eat. For a lawn that needs mowing, windows that need cleaning, and gutters that need fixing, because it means I have a home. For all the complaining I hear about the government, because it means that we have freedom of speech. For my heating bill, because it means I am warm. For the lady behind me in church who sings off key, because it means that I can hear. For weariness and aching muscles at the end of the day, because it means I have been capable of working hard. For the alarm that goes off in the early morning hours, because it means that I am alive."

"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

How can we become more the kind of person who not only gives thanks when the basket is full, but when it's empty, or filled with ugly things? *One practical point: Work at developing a more positive attitude.* It's so easy to fall into the pattern of being negative, grumbling, complaining. I do at times – and I don't like it. Work at being more positive, more thankful.

A second point is perhaps more deep and profound: Have an up-to-date experience of God, and God's faithful love. Working at being more positive and grateful is good, but it can only carry us

so far. When things are really tough, often we need resources beyond our own – we need God's strength to carry us through and fill our hearts with gratitude. Do we know God? Do we experience God's presence throughout the day? We can, by trusting Christ and committing each day to Him.

It was the early 1600's, during the Thirty Years War in Germany. The town of Eilenburg in Saxony was a walled town, so it became a haven for refugees seeking safety from the war's fighting. But soon, the city became too crowded and food was in short supply. Then a famine hit and a terrible plague and the town became a giant morgue. The Lutheran pastor in town, Martin Rinkart, in one year alone conducted funerals for 4500 people (including his own wife). The war dragged on and suffering continued, yet during that horrible time Martin was able to write a hymn of thanks that we continue to sing today:

"Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom the world rejoices....

"(So) keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills, in this world and the next."

When Christ is in our life and we have committed ourselves totally to Him, we *can be* thankful even in the worst of circumstances. Because we know God is still in control (no matter how bad things seem). God will never leave us nor forsake us (not even after we die). God can take the worst of human situations and even bring good out of it.

"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

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November 20, 2022