

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
Pastor Stephen Felker
Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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I Thessalonians 5:18 “Being Thankful in Every Circumstance”

Intro. Rudyard Kipling, author of *The Jungle Book*, was a great British author in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was very famous and made a great deal of money at his trade. A newspaper reporter came up to him once and said, “Mr. Kipling, I just read that somebody calculated that the money you make from your writings amounts to over \$100 a word.” Mr. Kipling raised his eyebrows and said, “Really, I certainly wasn't aware of that.” The reporter cynically reached into his pocket and pulled out a \$100 bill and gave it to Kipling and said, “Here's a \$100 bill Mr. Kipling. Now give me one of your \$100 words.” Rudyard Kipling looked at that \$100 bill for a moment, took it and folded it up and put it in his pocket and said, “Thanks.” Well the word “thanks” is certainly a \$100 word. In fact, I would say it is worth more than that. That is one word that is too seldom heard, too rarely spoken, and too often forgotten.¹

Yet once a year we are especially reminded to give thanks to God. Our annual Thanksgiving holiday was observed just a few days ago. If any nation ought to be thankful to God and grateful for His goodness, it ought to be America. However, too often Thanksgiving Day has not been a day of giving thanks for too many people. For them it is hardly more than an excuse to be off from work, a day to indulge in eating too much, and an opportunity to watch a few more football games or go Christmas shopping. On a positive note, most people use the Thanksgiving holiday as an opportunity to get together with their family. But too often very little of the holiday is genuinely given over to giving heart-felt thanks to God. I commend those of you who have gathered here today. You have taken time out of your weekend to worship God, and give thanks to Him. Thanksgiving is not complete without such worship.

So today, I want us to fulfill the true purpose of Thanksgiving, and meditate upon the importance of giving thanks to God. I hope to show you that the regular practice of giving thanks to God is very important. So let's consider our text together. The first main point I want to make is this:

I. GIVING THANKS IS AN IMPORTANT PRACTICE

I believe everyone here knows what it means to give thanks. It is to be mindful of the favors and blessings that we have received, and express appreciation to God for them. I say that giving thanks is an important practice because of what Paul said in v.18. Here he is giving a series of important, brief commands to the Thessalonian believers. He says that we as believers should “give thanks.” Now that is excellent advice because a grateful person will be a happier person. A grateful person will also be a healthier person. Being thankful reduces stress. Stress is one of the main contributors to illness. An attitude of gratitude will also protect you from pessimism. So learning to be a thankful, grateful person is indeed excellent advice. But this is more than just good advice. Giving thanks is important because it is a clear command of the Word of God. Gratitude is not an option; it is an obligation.

¹ Told by James Merritt.

Now the fact that giving thanks is commanded is emphasized in two ways. First, the words “give thanks” are from an imperative verb in Greek. Paul *commands* us to give thanks. Likewise, Psa. 105:1 says, “Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name...” The obligation to gratitude, often neglected by us, is earnestly and frequently encouraged in the New Testament by command, instruction, or by way of example. In fact words of thankfulness are found about 130 times in the Bible. Secondly, he reinforces the command by saying, “for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus unto you.” He gives the command the highest possible authority by specifically saying that giving thanks is the will of God for your life. Thus, God’s will regarding thankfulness is not limited to a fortunate few. It is an obligation for *all*. Paul was writing to the whole church. So I hope you agree that it is so important that we learn to be thankful.

Since being thankful is the will of God, that means that ingratitude is a sin. Too often, instead of giving thanks, we grumble and complain. When we do so, we are living outside of the will of God, and we are committing sin. Not only that, but ingratitude is the mark of an unbeliever. Beginning in Rom. 1:19 Paul sets out to prove the sinful nature of man. And one of the first sins that he mentions is found in Rom. 1:21, “nor were [they] thankful.” Our sinful, selfish nature is not naturally grateful. Have you noticed that you have to *teach* a child to be grateful? At times you have to almost force children to say “thank you.” If you have no gratitude in your heart to God today, then you probably need to be saved. You need to be born again.

Have you thought about why we are not thankful? Besides our sinful nature, it is partly because we think we deserve all the good that happens to us, and don’t deserve all the bad that happens to us. But that’s not true. We have all sinned, and we deserve death & hell. Anything better than that is cause of thanksgiving to God for His grace, and for His provision.

So I want you to understand the importance of giving thanks to God. It is God’s will that you give thanks. You are commanded to give thanks. It is good for you to give thanks. I hope you are motivated to make a commitment to become a more thankful person. So in v.18 we see that giving thanks is an important practice. But we also see from this verse that:

II. GIVING THANKS SHOULD BE A REGULAR PRACTICE

Notice that Paul begins with those difficult words, “In everything give thanks.” In every situation and at all times we are to give thanks. We are to be thankful at all times, not just once a year. Of course, this means:

A. We Should Be Grateful for the Blessings of Life - Psalm 103:2 says, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.” Have you recently thanked God for saving your soul? Have you thanked God for providing for your daily needs? Most of us have been *well* provided for! It is an unbelievable thing to me to see people who sit down to a meal in a restaurant and begin eating like pigs and dogs, never thanking God for their food. Do you realize your daily bread comes from the good hand of your Heavenly Father? You should never sit down to a meal without bowing your head and humbly thanking God for the food He has provided for you. Aren’t you grateful that the air that we breathe is free; that we don’t have to pay an admission to see a sunset or to hear a bird sing or to smell a rose? Oh, there are so many blessings to thank God for each and every day.

Have you ever thanked God for the benefits of just living in America? In Russia, a man has to work one hour to earn a loaf of bread. In America he works only six minutes. For a new suit of clothes the Russian must work 583 hours; the American works 38 hours or less. We have it so much better than the vast majority of people in our world today.

What about the people in your life? Have you ever thanked your mother and father for loving you and giving you a good home? Men, have you ever thanked your wife for fulfilling her important role in your marriage, and in the home? Have you thanked God for your wife? Prov. 18:22 says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD." Ladies, have you ever thanked your husband for all that he does? Think of your friends. Think of people at church who have blessed you. Have you ever thanked that Sunday School teacher who has so faithfully taught you the Word of God? We ought to be thankful for the people in our lives.

So have you taken the time to thank God for the many blessings in your life? Have you thanked the people that God has used to bring these blessings into your life?

However, Paul doesn't limit the obligation of thanksgiving to the good things that come our way. He says, "In everything give thanks." In every situation, and at all times, we are to give thanks. In fact, Eph. 5:20 says it even stronger, "giving thanks always for (*huper*) all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." And notice the context of v.16, "Rejoice always." So this command means that we are not only to be thankful for the blessings of life, but also:

B. We Ought To Be Grateful for the Burdens of Life – Yes, if we are to give thanks "in everything," then that includes those times of trial and difficulty.

Now some may object that such a command is impossible to obey, and even unreasonable. Most people live their life on the roller coaster of ups and downs. When things are going well, they are happy. And many do not give thanks because they credit themselves for the good things they are enjoying. But when things are not going well, they are unhappy. At such times they may even blame God, and gripe and complain. So it just seems so contrary to human nature and human experience to give thanks *in everything!*

But what Paul was commanding was not impossible, for he practiced it in his own life. Keep in mind that Paul had been beaten, whipped, imprisoned, shipwrecked, stoned, and left for dead. Yet he said, "In everything give thanks." Furthermore, the Thessalonians were suffering persecution at this time. Yet, in spite of such trials, Paul said, "In everything give thanks."

So how can we give thanks in everything? I am going to share with you 4 practical ways you can give thanks in every situation. Most of what I'm about to share requires the right kind of thinking. It has often been pointed out that thinking precedes thanking. One's perspective can make all the difference in the world. Let me show you how your perspective & outlook on life will enable you to give thanks in all circumstances. First of all, you can thank God in every situation:

1. When You Realize that God Is in Control, Working for Your Good - He knows that your difficulty is not an end, but a means to a greater good. You see, we can give thanks in everything when we believe Rom. 8:28, "All things work together for good, to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God is sovereign over all, and He has pledged to work all things for good. Everything that happens *to* you also happens *for* you. God will use that trial to make you stronger, or more patient. He may use it to redirect your path. I believe that we can all look back on a bad experience of the past, and see how God worked it out for our good. We can look back and see more clearly the loving purpose God had in mind when He allowed the difficulties to come our way. And so, looking back, we can see that our losses were actually gains, and that our sorrows were preludes to joy.

So the next time you face a difficulty, just thank God that He is going to work some good out of that difficult situation. Furthermore, we can be thankful in all things:

2. When You Remember that God Is Always with Us - In fact, we can experience the presence of God in our trials more profoundly than in the so-called good times. Trials tend to

drive us to seek God in prayer more than at other times. In times of trial we experience His strength or His comfort. Isa. 41:10 says, "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." That's something to thank God for as you go through a time of trial and difficulty.

So the next time you go through a trial, thank God for the opportunity to experience His strength and His comfort. You will experience the presence of God in a unique way.

Furthermore, we can give thanks at all times:

3. When We Look for the Good in the midst of the Bad - Missionary Benjamin Weir was held hostage in Lebanon and imprisoned under miserable conditions for 16 months. In his first interview after his release, he was asked how he spent his time and how he dealt with the boredom and despair. His answer stunned the reporters. He simply said, "Counting my blessings." "Blessings?" they responded. "Yes," he explained. "Some days I got to take a shower. Sometimes there were some vegetables in my food. And I could always be thankful for the love of my family." May we learn from Benjamin Weir to see & count our blessings no matter what our circumstances.

Let me give 2 others examples of seeing the good in the midst of what others see as bad. After those big Thanksgiving dinners, you probably had a big pile of dishes in the sink. Well let me share a little poem with you:

Thank God for dirty dishes
They have a tale to tell;
While others may go hungry
We've eaten very well.
With home, health, and happiness
I shouldn't want to fuss;
By the stack of evidence
God's been very good to us!²

Yes, look for the good in the midst of the bad, and you will find something to thank God for.

Dr. Alexander Whyte of Edinburgh was famous for his pulpit prayers. He always found something to thank God for, even in bad times. One stormy morning a member of his congregation thought to himself. "The preacher will have nothing to thank God for on a wretched morning like this." But Whyte began his prayer, "We thank Thee, O God that it is not always like this." Even if you can't see any good coming out of a difficulty, you can at least thank God that you do not have to face that difficulty all the time. Furthermore, it is never so bad with us but it might be worse.

So the next time you face a difficult circumstance, why not try to see the positive side of the experience, and thank God for it.

Finally, we are more likely to give thanks in everything, and at all times:

4. When You Pray without Ceasing - That's the command of v.17, which says, "Pray without ceasing." No prayer is complete without thanksgiving. So if you pray without ceasing, you will thank God often, and in every situation. Praying often will help you obey this important command.

Conclusion: So do not despair when the cross gets heavy; do not despair when the burden is oppressive, for it may be at that moment that God is perfecting the greatest blessing of heaven to place into your life.

² Told by James Merritt.

I heard Homer Lindsay tell the secret of the success of First Baptist of Jacksonville, FL. The people responded well to their pastor. They have given in such a way that every building they have built has been paid for with cash. Many come out for visitation each week, or serve faithfully in some other way. Homer Lindsay said that the secret of success in his church is that he has taught the people to be thankful. He has emphasized that over and over again. And I hope that I have driven home to your heart the importance of giving thanks to God, and the fact that we should give thanks every day, and in every situation. Gratitude to God is a great motivator for sacrificial giving and for selfless service. God bestows blessings by His grace. He even works good out of the trials of life. All we have to do is respond to the goodness of God with thanksgiving. Let's make a renewed commitment to give thanks in everything!

Sources: James T. Draper, Jr., *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of a Waiting Church* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1979); Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1964); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: I-II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (accessed from *Online Bible* [CD-ROM], 1706-1721); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); James Merritt (notes from his sermon on this text); Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 2004); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures, Vol. 4* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).