

Discipline of Thanksgiving

Ephesians 5:20

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2018-11-18

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Text

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Introduction

The dubious theologian, Erma Bombeck, once said, “Thanksgiving dinners take eighteen hours to prepare. They are consumed in twelve minutes. Halftimes take twelve minutes. This is not coincidence.” I don’t know what you will be doing on this Thanksgiving Day. But whether watching football, playing games with the family, or doing something else, I hope at least part of the day will be given to thanksgiving. I rarely preach on Halmark Holidays. In fact, I don’t tend to follow any calendar, thinking such is an invention of man. But thanksgiving is such an important part of the Christian life, that it deserves to be preached on often. For sure thanksgiving should so characterize our lives that we don’t need a Halmark Holiday to remind ourselves to do so.

I preached on thanksgiving down in Conroe last week, and this Wednesday I developed a new sermon on the subject. It has a strange title - “The Discipline of Thanksgiving.” It’s not one of the disciplines mentioned in Whitney’s excellent book, but it should be. Like prayer, exercise, journaling, or any other discipline, it takes discipline to fulfill Paul’s command - “...giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

Of course, like with other disciplines, there are also benefits to doing so. For example, Psalm 50 says, “He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God” (v. 23 NIV). Thanksgiving is an action of faith that receives God’s deliverance and provision. And when you count the number of times that God came through in saving His people from despair, disaster, disease, and other things immediately after they offered up thanksgiving, you realize that Psalm 50 is not the only passage in the Bible that shows a connection. Jehoshaphat gave thanks to God and sang praises in the face of what looked like certain death, and God honored his thanks and immediately destroyed the vast army of Moab and Ammon. Jonah thanked God by faith in the belly of the fish, and the verse 10 says, “then” or as some render it, “upon that the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” Paul and Silas are in jail facing

death, and upon singing hymns to God, He sends an earthquake and releases them. I have found thanksgiving to deliver me from anxiety, bitterness, and other negative emotions. There are many benefits to this discipline.

I. Thanks does not come naturally and is something we don't do enough of (the command)

And the reason I call it a discipline is that thanksgiving is hard. It is called a sacrifice in the Bible, and it does not come naturally. That's why it is commanded over and over and over in the Bible. Instead of taking for granted that people will be naturally thankful, Paul assumes the opposite, and he gives the command, "giving thanks always for all things..." He is not simply saying that we should have a grateful heart. That's wonderful. But we should also express that grateful heart in verbal thanks. William Arthur Ward said, "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." Husbands may be grateful for their wives, but how many times do they express it? And vice versa

Leslie Weatherhead told about visiting a couple in northern England after World War II. Food was scarce, yet the wife had managed to prepare a great meal of fresh trout from a nearby stream and some fresh vegetables cooked in a delightful way. He was blown away with the hospitality and profusely thanked the wife. She was obviously embarrassed by the thanks and shyly insisted that he didn't need to give thanks, saying, "Oh sir, my husband never thanks me when I prepare a fine meal for him." And rather than agreeing that the wife didn't need praise, Weatherhead actually felt embarrassed for the husband. But the husband was not embarrassed at all. Weatherford said that he could still see the man sitting there, saying, "Hey, Love. I would have told you if I didn't like it." That was his way of saying that he liked everything she did, and if he didn't, he would say so. His claim was that he always felt grateful, even if he didn't say it. But William Arthur Ward is correct when he says, "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." God wants us expressing our gratefulness to each other and our gratefulness to God. And the focus here is on thanksgiving to God.

And to see how important this is for defining a regenerate Christian, I want you to turn with me to 2 Timothy 3. This chapter describes the downhill nature of evil during the last days of the Old Covenant. Verse 1 begins by saying, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come." What is it that makes things so perilous in the last times? Is it nuclear weapons? murder in the streets? War? You might expect Paul to give as his reasons for

perilous times a list of the front headlines from our newspapers: war in Iraq; bank robberies; gang slayings; Mafia control. But he doesn't. He goes to heart problems which plague even Christians. Look at his explanation in verse 2: "For" [here comes the reasons why times will be perilous.] "For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving," etc.

Now, I know people who are described by every word that I have just read. And Paul would say that shows a perilous condition. But especially notice the word "unthankful." Unthankfulness was one of the signs of the last times; a time of apostasy.

In contrast, a truly thankful heart is a heart that is no longer wrapped up in self. That is not natural. It is a discipline of grace. It requires discipline to put off unthankfulness by grace and it takes discipline to daily appropriate grace so that you can put on the thinking and inward dispositions that will make thankfulness easier and easier. So first, thankfulness is not something that comes naturally. We can't just assume we will say the right thing when needed. We need to think and plan and discipline ourselves to be more thankful.

II. Thanks is a debt we owe (εὐχαριστέω - "giving thanks")

But secondly, thanks is a debt we owe. That is the meaning of the word for "giving thanks." The Greek word εὐχαριστέω is defined by one dictionary as, "to show that one is under obligation, be thankful, feel obligated to thank." (BDAG). Another dictionary says, "to be thankful on the basis of some received benefit." (Louw&Nida) In other words, God has blessed us so richly that we owe Him thanks. In fact, that word 'owe' is added to thanks in 2 Thessalonians. Paul expresses this debt in these words, "We are bound to give thanks to God always..." The word "bound" is the Greek word *opheilo* which means to owe something or to be indebted to someone. Romans 13 uses the same word when it says, "Give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue." But the very word for giving thanks shows that we owe God big time.

But most people are oblivious to the incredible blessings that God has blessed us with. They don't sense this debt and in the process they insult God, and I believe that in the process they make God feel bad; they grieve the Spirit who feels bad on the Father's behalf.

Imagine saving up \$5000 over the course of three years in order to buy a special ring for your wife. You take her out for a special meal, tell her you love her, and present the ring to her. She complains about the food, takes the ring without thanks, and changes the subject by saying that we really need to get home so that we don't miss the basketball game. You would feel bad, wouldn't you? You were hoping to please her, and the lack of thanks indicates that you have likely failed.

But that word picture pales into insignificance when compared to what God has done for us. That means that our unthankfulness is millions of times worse than that unthankfulness in the word picture. God says that you were on a train headed toward hell where you would burn in anguish under His wrath, but He sent His Son to experience hell in our place, took us off the train to hell, put us on another train to heaven, built a mansion for us in heaven, filled a bank account in heaven that we can write checks on any day that we want to, gives us a job on the train, feeds us three square meals, plus vacation time, plus sick days, plus a bunch of other benefits while we wait for our mansion and the absolute pleasures of heaven. And yet, 365 days a year can go by on this train with very few thanks being given - other than the perfunctory thanks for the meals. And even then, we complain about the food we have just thanked God for, complain about the long hours at work, we complain about the noise of the other passengers on the train, we complain about the boring Sabbath, and complain about other things that are inconsequential compared to hell. That is some of our old sin nature of unthankfulness that needs to be put off and the new disciplines of thankfulness needing to replace it. It is a debt we owe. God has done so much for us that we owe Him thanks. It's the least we can do. We owe thanks to God much more than that wife owed thanks to her husband for the special night out and the \$5000 ring.

III. We can thank God in every circumstance ("always")

Well, Paul goes on to say that we should be able to thank God in every circumstance, not just when we get special rings. Verse 20 says, "giving thanks always..." In my dictionary "always" strangely means always - yesterday, today, tomorrow, this minute, one hour from now, etc. It is literally "always." It includes when you accidentally dropped the turkey on the floor on route to the table. It includes when you stubbed your toe. Can you do that? Not on your own you can't. But God can adjust your thinking so that your eyes are opened to the silver lining around every dark cloud.

When Robinson Crusoe was shipwrecked on a lonely island he thought of both the good and the bad. He did not ignore the bad. He chronicled it. He was not a Pollyanna that painted life better than it really was. But he was very disciplined in chronicling the good in order to make himself thankful.

1. He was cast onto a desolate island, but on the other hand, he was still alive, not drowned like the rest of the ship's people had been. So he was thankful for the positive. 2. He was separated from the rest of mankind, but it appeared that there were no cannibals on the island. He was thankful to be separated from them. 3. He had no clothes, but he was in a hot climate where he didn't need them. So he was thankful for that. 4. He was without means of defense, but he saw no wild animals. 5. He had nothing to speak of, but God had sent the shipwreck so near to the shore that he could go out to the ship and get all the things necessary for his survival.

So his conclusion was that there was not any condition in the world so miserable but that there was something positive for which to be thankful. Crusoe was learning to thank God in all situations; to thank God always.

If your tendency is to pout over what you don't have, I would encourage you to start thinking of all the incredible things that God has already enabled you to have. Don't make Him have to take those away before you appreciate them. I read about an immigrant who came to the US with virtually nothing in his pocket, but he managed to scrimp and save and to get his kids situated in good jobs. One of his children, the C.P.A., had passed the C.P.A. exams with flying colors and was rather proud of himself and rather embarrassed by the primitive and non-Kosher ways that his dad engaged in accounting. He began to criticize his father's way of keeping books. He said, "Dad, you don't even know how much profit you've made. Over here in this drawer are your accounts receivable. Over there are your receipts and you keep all your money in the cash register. You don't have any idea how much you've made."

The father answered, "Son, when I came to this country the only thing I owned was a pair of pants. Now, your brother is a doctor, your sister is an art teacher, and you are a C.P.A. Your mother and I own our home. We have a car and we own this little business. Now add that up, subtract the pants, and all the rest is profit."

That was his simple way of saying, given our circumstances, we have a lot to be thankful for. Yes, there was a lot that he did by the seat of my pants because he hadn't had training. Yes there was a lot that he wished he knew. Yes, there is a lot he knew he could do better. But he was thankful for what

we had. I read a poem that illustrates this so well. It is called, “Forgive Me When I Whine.”

Today upon a bus, I saw a lovely maid with golden hair; I envied her – she seemed so gay, and how, I wished I were so fair; When suddenly she rose to leave, I saw her hobble down the aisle; she had one foot and wore a crutch, but as she passed, a smile. Oh God, forgive me when I whine, I have two feet – the world is mine.

And when I stopped to buy some sweets, the lad who served me had such charm; he seemed to radiate good cheer, his manner was so kind and warm; I said, “It’s nice to deal with you, such courtesy I seldom find”; he turned and said, “Oh, thank you sir.” And then I saw that he was blind. Oh, God, forgive me when I whine, I have two eyes, the world is mine.

Then, when walking down the street, I saw a child with eyes of blue; he stood and watched the others play, it seemed he knew not what to do; I stopped a moment, then I said, “Why don’t you join the others, dear?” He looked ahead without a word, and then I knew he could not hear. Oh God, forgive me when I whine, I have two ears, the world is mine.

With feet to take me where I’d go; with eyes to see the sunsets glow, with ears to hear what I would know. I am blessed indeed. The world is mine; oh, God, forgive me when I whine. (Source Unknown)

So that is looking for the good in every circumstance. No matter how bad you have it, it could be worse. But no matter how bad you have it, God has blessed you in many ways that you tend to forget. We tend to forget that clear pure water to drink is a blessing that most people in the world don’t have. Even in China you don’t dare drink the tap water. You will get sick. The same is true throughout the Middle East, Africa, and even in some South American countries.

IV. We can thank God for every circumstance (“for all things”)

But the next phrase in our verse is the one that most people stumble over. Paul didn’t just tell us to thank God in every circumstance (the word “always”) but to thank God for every circumstance. He says, “giving thanks always for all things.” Now, I hope you see something of a problem. How can you thank God for evil things? Since we are not to delight in evil, and since we are not to agree with evil, or ascribe evil to God, thanking God for evil circumstances can only mean that God is at work above, in, under, and around the evil circumstance to turn that very circumstance into an occasion for God’s grace, glory, and goodness. It is really God’s presence in that circumstance that is thankworthy, not the evil itself. But His providence overrules and uses that evil for good. So, though Joseph (in the book of Genesis) strongly disagreed with his brothers attempt to murder him and their treachery in selling him into Egypt, he said, “You meant evil against

me [so he calls a spade a spade - “You meant evil against me”]; but God meant it [what’s the “it”? The same circumstance - “God meant it”] for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

Thus, in order to be able to thank God for all things (even while disagreeing with some of those things), we would have to be guaranteed that all things work together for our good. And we do have that guarantee - in Romans 8:28. In order to thank God for all things, we would have to see God as sovereign over all things, that His goodness is present in all His providence, that His wisdom guides His providence so as to keep Him from ever making a mistake, and that He is doing all things to His glory. And of course, the Scripture guarantees all of those things.

Let’s try to get a little perspective of how a bad thing in itself can be something we thank God for. If God offered you two choices - to burn in hell for eternity or to allow your hand to be burned and be painful for a few weeks, we wouldn’t say that the burning of the hand is good in itself. It’s not. But compared to your whole being burning in hell for eternity, a burned hand might seem like a wonderful choice. You might even say “Thank you. Yes, I will take that second choice.” But let’s go further - let’s say that God orchestrated it so that your burned hand also came as a result of saving three of your children from the upper story of a burning building, it would give even more reason to thank God. Yes, you would come out with a burned hand (not good in itself), but you would be thankful to have been able to exchange a burned hand for the rescue of your three children. But let’s say the purpose expanded - you received an interview from the local TV station afterwards and were able to joyfully recount why your burned hand was totally worth it and that you would do so again in an instant to glorify God and to save your children. And as a result of seeing that TV broadcast there were people who got saved. And one of the viewers was so impressed with your testimony that he got to know you and ended up marrying you. Obviously this is all fictional, but it illustrates that the more of the purposes for the burned hand that you see, the more eagerly you would embrace that burned hand. You are still not going to like a burned hand or see it as being good in itself, but it is good because of God’s purposes. It’s sort of like when a surgeon cuts your abdomen open with a knife and removes a tumor. Most cuts of knives to the abdomen would be considered bad, but that cut of the surgeon, as painful as it is, has a good purpose, and you are thankful for that cut. Well, God is the master surgeon who turns all evils and all situations into scalpels and surgeries that cause us to grow and bring glory to His name. But here is where faith comes in. Faith thanks God before we see any

reason or purpose. That's what makes it a sacrifice of praise.

Joseph may not have understood why his brothers resented him, why his father sent him on a seemingly useless hunt, why he got stripped of his robe, was cast in the pit, sold into slavery, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, cast into jail, forgotten by the chief butler, etc., but it seems that Joseph was able to thank God for those things in faith anyway. And in hindsight he could see that even the most meaningless of those painful events had great meaning and purpose and they resulted not only in the salvation of his family, but the preservation of many countries. Faith calls us to thank God for those things before we see what the purpose is. When I get a flat tire, I don't have to know why I got the flat tire in order to thank God for that flat tire and have expectant eyes for what God is doing. Romans 8:28 gives me a theology that necessitates thanks. And when we thank God by faith before we know His purpose, Psalm 50 says that the thanksgiving delivers us. It no doubt delivers us from bitterness and frustration and gives us hope for the future. But I think it delivers us in many other ways.

V. We can give thanks because our goal is to glorify God ("to God the Father")

But ultimately, we should give thanks because our goal is to glorify God. Verse 20 says, "giving thanks always for all things to God the Father..." There are times when there is no human to thank and other times when it would not be appropriate to thank the humans for the evil they did - we might prosecute them. But while doing so, God can still overturn their efforts and work things together for our good, so God is the ultimate focus of our thanks.

And it should be our goal to please our Father. Shakespeare wrote in the play, King Lear, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!" It is painful to parents when they pour their lives out for their children and receive nothing but complaint. But imagine the pain we bring to our Heavenly Father for our thanklessness after He has done so much for us. And imagine the delight it brings to God when we finally get it and begin to realize how good we have it, and we begin to thank Him.

When Max Lucado lived in Brazil, he taught at a university that he would walk to every day. On the way to class he felt a tug on his pants leg. Turning around he saw a little boy about 5 or 6 years old who immediately looked up and said, "Bread, sir." Lucado said,

There are always little beggar boys in the streets of Brazil. Usually I turn away from them

because there are so many and you can't feed them all. But there was something so compelling about this little boy that I couldn't turn away. So, taking his hand, I said, 'Come with me' and I took him into a coffee shop.

Lucado then told the owner, "I'll have a cup of coffee and give the boy a piece of pastry...whatever he wants." Since the coffee counter was at the other end of the store, he walked away to get the coffee, forgetting about the boy because beggar boys usually ran into the street and disappeared as soon as they got what they wanted.

But this boy didn't. After getting his pastry, the beggar boy went over to Lucado and stood quietly until Lucado noticed him. Lucado said,

I turned and looked at him. Standing up, his eyes just about hit my belt buckle. Then slowly his eyes came up until they met mine. The little boy, holding his pastry in one hand, looked up and said, 'Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.'

Lucado said,

I was so touched by the boy's thanks that I would have bought him the store. I sat there for another 30 minutes, late for my class, just thinking about a little beggar boy who came back and said, 'Thank you.'"

If that "Thank you" brought such joy to Max Lucado, I wonder if it might bring joy to God in a similar way. That little beggar had very little to be thankful for in life when looked at from circumstances, yet he stuck around to say "Thank you."

Luke 17 records the story of ten lepers who begged Jesus to heal them from afar. They didn't even dare to come near to Jesus. Jesus healed them with a word and they went running to the priests to be examined and freed from their exile. But verses 15 and following say that one of them returned to glorify God and to give thanks. He was so overwhelmed with gratitude that he fell on his face at Christ's feet and gave thanks. Christ's words of response could be said of many people in modern churches.

Luke 17:17 So Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? 18 Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?"

Unthankfulness is the natural state of a sinful heart. It is thankfulness that shows God's grace. May 100% of DCC be like that one leper - ever eager to give God thanks.

VI. We can thank God because of our union with Jesus

And each one of can do so because of our union with Jesus. Verse 20 says, "giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." Because we are united to Jesus, we can use His name.

That alone is an incredible privilege and worthy of thanks. But other Scriptures indicate that anything done in His name in faith receives all that is needed from our bank account in heaven. If Christ has authorized us to use His name, we have an incredible privilege. And since Colossians commands us to do everything in the name of Christ, there is a reason in every circumstance to give thanks. We approach that circumstance through our union with Jesus. When we are persecuted, Jesus is persecuted. He takes it personally, and for that love and empathy we can give thanks.

VII. We can thank God because the whole Trinity has generously poured out everything for us (vv. 18-21)

But there is more. This paragraph actually gives us a Trinitarian foundation for thanksgiving. We have focused on all that God the Father has done. We have seen the incredible privilege of using Christ's name and all that Christ's name represents. But two verses earlier we have the beginning of the sentence. Verse 20 is just the middle of the sentence. Verse 18 says, "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit..." and the rest of the sentence gives evidences of what those filled with the Spirit are driven to do.

Pagans are not filled with Spirit, so they cannot give thanks always for all things. Many Christians are not filled with the Holy Spirit, so they cannot give thanks always for all things. But every Christian has the privilege of daily asking for the fullness of the Holy Spirit if they ask in Christ's name. And commentators point out that constant thanksgiving is one of the evidences that we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In conclusion let me say that it takes disciplined thinking to be more and more consistently a thankful people. It has often been pointed out that thinking always precedes thanking. You can't really feel thankful until you understand the significance of what has been done for you. That's why studying theology is so important. It provides those reasons for thanksgiving.

And the more unworthy we see ourselves or the more significant the gift, or the more loved the giver, the more deeply we feel the thanksgiving. If we are not aware of how much sin we have been saved from, we will not be as thankful as the person who has been overwhelmed with the sense of his own unworthiness. In Luke 7:47 Jesus explained why the prostitute loved him more than the Pharisee. He said, to whom little is forgiven, the same loves

little. We have been forgiven of an enormous debt, but we don't all realize it. The more enormous we realize that debt really is, the more our hearts will want to thank Him, and thank Him, and thank Him in every circumstance and for every circumstance that He trusts us with. He gives us some work and we say, "Thank you Lord. It is my privilege to serve You." He allows us to endure some pain, and we say, "Thank you Lord. It is a privilege to share in Christ's afflictions and to receive persecution for Your name."

There is a sense in which all of the disciplines that Whitney talks about are a prelude to the discipline of thankfulness. And what is humbling is that even the ability to be thankful to God was planned by the Father, purchased by the Son, and applied supernaturally by the Spirit. We can't do it on our own, and owe Him thanks that we can even thank Him. It's humbling. But it is my prayer that we would not see thanksgiving as something we only do at meals or once a year at Thanksgiving, but that we would embrace it as a discipline for always. May it be so Lord Jesus. Amen.