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Giving Thanks Even When You Don't Feel Like It

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

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Probably the earliest of all the writings in the New Testament—perhaps being written in the early 50's—is Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica, now known as Thessaloniki, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. The opening thanksgiving of the letter highlights the need of the church to **live by faith, be known in love, and be a voice of hope**. Faith, hope and love are the foundational pillars of Christian discipleship as taught by the Apostle Paul in the first century. Throughout *1 Thessalonians*, Paul encourages the church to love (3:12, 4:9-10), encourage (4:18, 5:11), and do good (5:15) to one another. Toward the close of the letter Paul writes, **"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."**

These are good words for us to remember and live by. Giving thanks helps us to remain grateful and prevents us from taking our blessings for granted. How is our world looking to you this Thanksgiving week? Are you rejoicing and giving thanks? Many of us are not. Many of us are grieving, stressed, frightened, worried, angry, or perplexed. People in our church have lost loved ones, have marriages or other important relationships that are strained, some folks are stretched in many directions, others are lonely and depressed, and there is much that's deeply troubling as we ponder the condition of our nation and the world. How are we supposed to give thanks with so much to despair and the future so uncertain? Let's look more closely at Paul's words in *1 Thessalonians 5* to see how we can give thanks even when we don't feel like it.

The first thing Paul says is Rejoice always. It's easy to rejoice when we have reason to rejoice, like when we're in love, at the birth of a child or grandchild, when our health is good, when we achieve an accomplishment at school or work, or win a competition, at times like these it's easy to rejoice. However, Paul tells us to "rejoice always," not just when it's easy. How is that even possible? Yet we're called to rejoice in times of trial and difficulty because even when life stinks, God knows focusing on what we still have that's good is beneficial. God also can deepen and strengthen our reliance upon the Lord when we are going through trials and hardships. Mike Dowdy, a truck driver from Hartselle, Alabama tells this story of an experience he had in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"While in route to New Jersey, I was stopped in traffic on Interstate 81 just below the Virginia state line by an accident involving a tanker truck hauling a hazardous load that developed a leak, which meant that we weren't going anywhere for several hours. Sitting right beside me in the left lane were two older people, close to 70, I guess, in a Silverado pickup truck which was loaded quite well. Soon we were all talking with this couple. I mentioned that if I had

known we were going to be stuck in traffic, I would have bought something to drink because I was becoming thirsty.

"The lady, Anna, said that they had plenty of water and sodas in the cooler in the bed of the truck and offered everyone something. While she was back there, she said that she had plenty of tuna salad made up and asked if we would be interested in a sandwich. After some urging from her husband Joe, we agreed to a sandwich. While Anna was making the sandwiches on the tailgate of the truck, she was singing like a songbird.

"When she finished making the sandwiches, and putting everything up, Joe raised the tailgate of the truck to close it. I noticed a Mississippi license plate on it. I asked what part of Mississippi they were from. Joe said Biloxi. Knowing that Biloxi had been ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, I asked if they sustained any damage. Joe said that they lost everything except what they had on and in the pickup.

"All of us drivers tried unsuccessfully to pay them for our drinks and the sandwiches. They would have nothing to do with it. Joe said that their son was living around Harrisonburg, Va., and that they were going there. He was in the real estate business and that there was a home that became open and that they were going to start all over there. Starting over at their age would not be easy. Mike said, 'I will soon be 48 years old, and I have to say that I have never eaten a tuna sandwich with side orders of reality, humility and faith.' These people lost nearly everything. Joe had managed to get some pictures, a few important documents, some clothes and their antique heirloom grandfather clock into the bed of their truck. Anna got her china and silverware but that was all.

"These wonderful people lost practically everything and still would not accept any money for their food and drinks. Joe said that it was "better to give than to receive." When Katrina hit, they had sought refuge behind a block wall that he had built years ago, and they watched their belongings and their home disappear in the hurricane. Joe said that during all this he had one hand holding onto Anna and the other holding on to God. They and their truck came out of Katrina unscathed.

"As I stated before, Anna was singing while making the sandwiches. The song? *I Know Who Holds Tomorrow*, an old gospel song. The chorus of this song is: 'Many things about tomorrow, I don't seem to understand. But I know who holds tomorrow, and I know Who holds my hand.' There is no doubt in my mind who was holding both their hands, Mike concluded."

It is easier in many ways to blame our circumstances or other people for our failure to find anything still to rejoice about, but we still choose our attitude every day. As Pastor Chuck Swindoll wrote: "I believe the single most significant decision I can make on a day-to-day basis is my choice of attitude. It is more important than my past, my education, my bankroll,

my successes or failures, fame or pain, what other people think of me or say about me, my circumstances, or my position. Attitude keeps me going or cripples my progress. It alone fuels my fire or assaults my hope. When my attitudes are right, there's no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, no challenge too great for me." When we struggle in difficult circumstances to rejoice always, those hardships and trials can help motivate us to do the second thing Paul says to do: **Pray without ceasing.**

In his book, *Living Life on Purpose*, Greg Anderson shares the story of one man's journey to rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances. "His wife had left him, and he was completely depressed. He had lost faith in himself, in other people, in God—he found no joy in living. One rainy morning this man went to a small neighborhood restaurant for breakfast. Although several people were at the diner, no one was speaking to anyone else. He hunched over the counter, stirring his coffee with a spoon. In one of the small booths along the window was a young mother with a little girl. They had just been served their food when the little girl broke the sad silence by almost shouting, 'Momma, why don't we say our prayers here?'

"The waitress who had just served their breakfast turned around and said, 'Sure, honey, we pray here. Will you say the prayer for us?' The little girl turned and looked at the rest of the people in the restaurant and said, 'Bow your heads.' Surprisingly, one by one, the heads went down. The little girl then bowed her head, folded her hands, and said, 'God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food. Amen.' That prayer changed the entire atmosphere. People began to talk with one another. The waitress said, 'We should do that every morning.' 'All of a sudden,' said the man, 'my whole frame of mind started to improve. From that little girl's example, I started to thank God for all that I did have and stop majoring in all that I didn't have. I started to choose happiness.'"

One of the things praying does for us, even a simple prayer like that of the little girl, it reminds us of God's presence and God's character. God is great and God is good. With God, greatness without goodness would be scary, goodness without greatness would be ineffective.

It's more difficult to rejoice always if we are not praying without ceasing. How easy it is to go long periods of time without praying, without seeking that relationship with God that enables us even in the worst of moments to have some sense that we're not alone and we're not without help. **Praying without ceasing, not just every few years when we're really in need enables us to do the third thing Paul mentions: to "Give thanks in all circumstances;** for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

This Thanksgiving many people will find it hard to give thanks. Many families will gather this Thanksgiving with an empty chair where a father or mother, husband or wife, son or daughter used to sit. In many ways the heartache, grief or pain that we may feel individually or

collectively as a nation makes this Thanksgiving like the first Thanksgiving. If one goes to Plimouth Plantation, it's sobering to think about the experience of both the Pilgrims and the Indigenous people. Many of the native people in what is now southeastern Massachusetts had died because of infectious diseases brought by Europeans in the few years before the Mayflower arrived. The few who survived were trying to go on living even as their whole way of life was being threatened and their families and friends were dying in alarming numbers. Of the people who arrived on the Mayflower, nearly half didn't survive the first year. The nicest house in the community, even by 1627, was smaller and colder than our garage and would have accommodated, in some cases, as many as twelve people. Yet somehow their faith enabled them to gather during their personal and communal pain, to pray and give thanks for what they had and for who was left, and to ask for God's aid in becoming better people with Christ's help.

I want to give you a couple of suggestions as you think about putting this scripture into practice in your life.

To help you rejoice, sit down and take an inventory of just how much you have to be thankful for—be creative, you'll be amazed at how many reasons you have to rejoice. Begin by thinking about the people in your life. Then try to recall all the other reasons you have to give thanks, or take a trip to Plymouth and walk around the dirt-floored shacks at Plimouth Plantation where they had no electricity, no plumbing, and not much else not just for a few hours or even a couple days—that was life. For millions of people in the world today, it is still the way life is every day.

Pray without ceasing. Get to know God who longs for you as a loving parent who wants to be in relationship with a daughter or son. Most people who have a mobile phone, don't think of going anywhere without it so they can call or text someone anytime or so they can look at it while I'm preaching. Have you got God in your contact list? How frequently do you communicate? Every time you use your cell phone to send or receive a text message or to take a call, let it be a reminder to pray and ask yourself: When was the last time I talked to God? When was the last time I listened for or sent a message? Every single time you touch your phone, let it be a reminder of the opportunity we have to pray and communicate with God.

Give thanks in all circumstances. Take the time in the next 48 hours to write a note to someone who has touched you and your life in a way for which you are thankful. Writing a thank you note is a good way to get in the spirit of Thanksgiving.

Some of us will have an empty chair at our table on Thursday for the first time because of a loss. I wonder what it would be like if we all intentionally had an empty chair at our tables to remember our loved ones, but as we look at that empty chair, may we rejoice at the life or

lives that touched ours in special ways and may we look around the table to see those who are still present and sharing their love and life with us. I hope you'll be able to rejoice, share a prayer of blessing and remembrance, and perhaps take time to talk around the table about what we are giving thanks for, even during difficult circumstances.

Prayer: God, grant us thankful and grateful hearts so that we may always be appreciative and aware of the many blessings in our life and not take them for granted. We ask for peace of mind and heart as we reflect on the past to see the ways you have been with us. May we look with a clear, inner eye and become aware of how you have both comforted and challenged us on our journeys. We want to be able to rejoice at your companionship through the numerous twists and turns that have been ours. Speak to the pilgrim part of our hearts. Encourage us to find the many, many aspects of our lives that call us to give thanks and wonder. Remind us often that we are, indeed, pilgrims on the way home to you. We need not be afraid of the wilderness and the moments of feeling lost, for you are always there as a loving Guide and Companion. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Thanksgiving Blessing by Joyce Rupp

May an abundance of gratitude burst forth
As you reflect upon what you have received.
May thanksgiving overflow in your heart,
And often be proclaimed in your prayer.
May you gather around the table of your heart
The ardent faithfulness, kindness, and goodness
Of each person who is true to you.
May the harvest of your good actions
Bring forth plentiful fruit each day
May you discover a treasure of hidden wisdom
Among the people and events
That have brought you distress and sorrow
May your basket of blessings surprise you
With its rich diversity of gifts
And its opportunities for growth
May all that nourishes and resources your life
Bring you daily satisfaction and renewed hope
May you slow your hurried pace of life
So you can be aware of, and enjoy,
What you too easily take for granted
May you always be open, willing,
And ready to share your blessings with others
May you never forget the Generous God
Who loves you lavishly and unconditionally.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How easy or hard, possible or impossible, do you find Paul's instruction in *1 Thessalonians 5.16-18* to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."
2. Which of the three rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, or giving thanks in all circumstances do you find the easiest? Which is the hardest for you?
3. Where is the balance between not denying our feelings and yet not living by feelings, but by faith? For example, see *Psalms 44*.
4. Whatever one's personality, do you agree or disagree that every Christian can consistently experience God's joy?
5. What has most helped you to grow in prayer and thankfulness?
6. How will you apply this scripture in your life this coming week?