

“In All Things”

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Text: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16 – 24

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One of the people I most respected and appreciated was wife's grandmother. Her name – coincidentally enough – was Grace. She always seemed to me to have a positive outlook on life. The glass was always half full. But my opinion changed a few years ago when she fell and broke her hip. Her recovery was slow, not easy, and her physical ability became much more limited. She had to move into a residence that provided more regular care. Circumstances that might demoralize any of us. But for Grace she was grateful for the medical care and the love of her family. She was grateful to have many new companions to be a part of her day. If we phoned her, we came away from the conversation feeling uplifted by her gratitude for the call. I came to appreciate that it was not a positive attitude that she had towards life but rather a thankful attitude. She has learned through life's ups and downs – of which she has had her fair share – that there is much to be grateful for, even in the simple, mundane things of life. Her attitude of gratitude shaped her life and touched all those around her.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, *give thanks in all circumstances*, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16-17). It is the will of God for us to give thanks in all circumstances. What an idea! It sounds naïve, unrealistic. Given life experience we can ask, “Give thanks in **ALL** circumstances?” Yet Paul says it again to the Ephesians, “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20). One reason we find it hard to give thanks in all circumstances is because we link gratitude to our circumstances. We link gratitude to our preferences in life. We link it to the things that turn out right. If our son gets the promotion, we are thankful. If it means his family has to move, we aren't. If the difficult decision pays off, great! If not, bitterness can dog our days. Feelings of thankfulness too easily become for us a product of positive circumstances... and our circumstances can ebb and flow. What Paul is reminding us is that thankfulness is to be our bedrock attitude, and that this attitude can sustain us in the good and bad times.

In 1636, amid the darkness of the Thirty Years' War, a German pastor, Martin Rinkart, is said to have buried five thousand people in one year. That's an average of fifteen people a day. His parish was ravaged by war, death, and economic disaster. In the heart of that darkness, with the cries of fear outside his window, he sat down and wrote a table grace for his children. It goes 'Now thank we all our God / With heart and hands and voices;/ Who wondrous things had done,/ In whom His world rejoices. /Who, from our mother's arms,/Hath led us on our way/ With countless gifts of love/ And still is ours today." Sound familiar? It was the first hymn of our service. Here was a man who faced the most difficult of outward circumstances, and could face them, because of an inward bedrock gratitude stemming from all he had in Christ. His sense of what Christ had done for him put all else into perspective. It created in him an attitude of gratitude that could sustain him in the most desperate of times.

Gratitude can become more of our attitude if we work towards things that foster thankfulness in us. In Budapest, a man goes to the rabbi and complains, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?" The rabbi answers, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man was incredulous, but the rabbi insists. "Do as I say and come back in a week." A week later the man comes back looking more distraught than before. "We cannot stand it," he tells the rabbi. "The goat is filthy." The rabbi then tells him, "Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week." A radiant man returns to the rabbi a week later, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat. Now it's just the nine of us." The point of the story: do things that foster gratitude. Work towards things—have practices—that foster an attitude of gratitude. We heard a list of such things that we can do as practices in Paul's short “to do” list in First Thessalonians. Find joy in the things of life, for when you know joy you will be grateful. Pray to God. For example, the practice of saying grace before meals fosters gratitude. Know that God's Holy Spirit is always with you. Knowing God goes with us is comforting, and that fosters gratitude. Hold fast to what is good, Paul says, and don't focus on what isn't. Positive living in turn fosters more thankfulness.

An attitude of gratitude also comes when we acknowledge the small things that really make a difference in our lives. The broadcaster Paul Harvey for years and years was known for telling us about “the rest of the story”. This is one of his stories. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, a man would walk slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp to the end of a battered pier. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. Many years before, in October, 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17. Somewhere over the South Pacific they became lost beyond the reach of radio. Eventually they had to ditch their plane in the ocean. For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his crew mates would fight the water, the weather, and the scorching sun. But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie’s own words, “I dozed off one afternoon after prayers, and something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. The gull meant food...if I could catch it.” And the rest, as they say, is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull. Its flesh was eaten. Its organs were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because one lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice. “And now you know, the rest of the story”. And now you also know...that Eddie never forgot. Because every Friday evening, about sunset...on a lonely stretch of Florida coastline...you could see an old man walking slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp an act of remembrance for one seagull that on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle...like manna in the wilderness. The gulls couldn’t appreciate Eddie’s acts of gratitude. His neighbour’s never understood. But Eddie knew that a single gull the world would never miss changed the course of his life. He acknowledged the importance of that gift that made a difference, once a week on Friday nights, acknowledging that life-changing sacrifice again and again and again. It was for Eddie a ritual. Rituals regularly practiced remind us what we are grateful for. We know how true that is, for we do the same here Sunday by Sunday. We do the same at Thanksgiving annually. Taking a moment to pause in our life, to regularly remember what we are grateful for builds an attitude of gratitude.

Finally, we can build our own attitude of gratitude by making a habit of expressing gratitude to others. It is wonderful to feel like King David, who wrote in the 23rd Psalm, “My cup overflows”. But it is wonderful again to fill someone else’s cup. When you become aware that someone has done something on your behalf, go back and thank them. Fill their cup with your gratitude. In his memoirs the former US Surgeon General Everett Koop recalled his youngest patient: "One day at Children's Hospital I got a phone call from a nearby hospital about a dying newborn with a diaphragmatic hernia. I drove there at breakneck speed. I ran up to the ninth floor." By the time he got there the little boy was blue and lifeless. "With no time for sterile precautions, I opened up his chest and massaged his tiny heart with a finger until it began to beat. Then I finished the operation," he wrote. About 25 years later Koop's secretary ushered a 6-foot-4-inch young man into the office. The young man said, "My father thought you'd like to meet me. You operated on me when I was 55 minutes old." Clearly this family was grateful for Koop’s timely care, those many years ago. But on that unexpected day, 25 years later, Surgeon General Everett Koop was overwhelmed – overwhelmed with gratefulness himself. Grateful that the young man did stop by. Grateful that he was given the opportunity to save the baby’s life. Grateful that he was granted the opportunity to be a doctor, that allowed him to help so many people. Thankfulness expressed can build thankfulness in turn.

We all have so much that we are thankful for, don’t we? But we only appreciate this truth when we stop and reflect on these things. Let us do so more often, that we will indeed come to “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything”.