

Sermon for Zion - October 8, 2017 - Thanksgiving Sunday

Hymns: In Thanksgiving, Let Us Praise Him; Thank You Lord, On This Day;
802 – For the Fruits of All Creation; 425 – We Praise You O God

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7; Ephesians 5:15-20; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

Sermon: Thanks - No Matter What (Rev. Douglas Rollwage)

Philippians 4:4-7

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but **in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Ephesians 5:15-20

*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, **always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; **give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.***

You may have noticed that the word “Thank” appears in every one of our Scripture readings and hymns this morning. In fact, the word “Thank” occurs 30 times throughout the Bible. Thanking is there once, Thanked once as well, Thankfulness twice, Thankful 3 times, Thanksgiving 39 times, and Thanks 92. This is a total of 168 words of thanks. Mind you, that is in the Revised Standard Version. In the New International Version people are considerably less thankful, by about 12 percent, but it may comfort you to know that they are 50 percent more grateful.

When I shared this fact with the Session a few years ago, they were surprised to learn that nobody is described as thankful in Genesis or Exodus. A few people are thankful in Leviticus, nobody in Numbers, and only one lonely soul in Deuteronomy. In fact, until the Chronicles, hardly anybody at all expresses any thanks whatsoever. Maybe this is why, to rectify this situation, King David appointed professional givers of thanks, Heman and Jeduthun, whose only job was to give thanks to God, jobs for which, we presume, they were particularly thankful indeed.

There are times when I would find Heman and Jeduthun's jobs as professional thanksgivers easy work. There are times I feel particularly thankful, when the many good things of life I enjoy seem almost to overwhelm me, when my blessings seem to overflow. At such times I cannot seem to help but be thankful for all the things with which I have been blessed; life, health, a great wife, a wonderful daughter and son, a loving family, a fulfilling vocation, a roof over my head, each one of you. Well, most of you. No, all! Really!

There are other times in my life when I don't feel particularly thankful, times when, like King David, I could do with hiring a couple of thanksgivers, rather than have to work up the effort myself. Like in the midst of a miserable cold, or in the early hours of the morning after a sleepless night, or after the seemingly deliberate self-destruction of an appliance expensive to repair, or when receiving threat mail from a company after misplacing and forgetting the bill, or when another kidney stone comes knocking. At times like this, I am wont to say "Why me?", and feel deeply sorry for myself. After all, we all have a right to feel sorry for ourselves, every once in a while. Nobody can be thankful all the time.

And so it seems somewhat unfair when the Bible demands that we do feel thankful all the time. It seems unreasonable when the Bible commands us to *"encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances."*

All right, confession time. Sometimes, I don't feel particularly encouraging, or helpful, or patient, or kind, or joyful. And sometimes, as I said, I don't feel particularly thankful. But the important point here is that we are not being asked to necessarily *feel* that way, we are being commanded to *be* that way. To give thanks, no matter how we might feel. *"In all circumstances."* Old Heman and Jeduthun probably had the occasional bad days when the head pounded and the feet hurt and the wife was giving them grief, but to earn their daily bread they had to stand up there in front of the people and lead them in a rousing chorus of thanks. Like it or not, thankful or not, it was thanks these fellows gave.

Now this smacks of insincerity to us. In our age of psychological self-analysis, we are used to examining our motives behind what we do, and if our true feelings are not behind something we feel as though we are being two-faced or untrue to ourselves. However, as even the hiring of professional thanksgivers Heman and Jeduthun points out, we are commanded to give thanks to God, whether we happen to feel like it or not. It is our duty!

This is a difficult concept for us, but it is one that permeates our entire Christian responsibility. Whether or not we feel like doing something, we are instructed, urged, enjoined, encouraged, directed, ordered and commanded to do it, because it is the right thing to do. And whether we like it or not, we often need to be instructed, urged, enjoined, encouraged, and commanded to be thankful.

Let's be honest with ourselves and admit to an unhealthy plague of ingratitude. Let's be honest and admit that there is far more that we simply take for granted than there is that for which we are consciously thankful. Let's admit that we are blessed almost to the point of embarrassment, in spite of which the heavens are hardly ringing with our praise, that we thank God only when we are prodded, pushed and cajoled.

Certainly not, you may say. That may be true of the other guy, but not of me, you say. I return thanks at every meal and at my rising up and my going down, you say. And so I say, well done and congratulations. Keep it up!

But let's be honest and admit that being thankful in all things certainly runs against the grain of a lot of what happens to us. What about when things go bad? What about when the news is not so good, when the prognosis is grim, when things are falling apart? How are we to give thanks?

Well, I don't think the apostle intends us to be thankful for all things, for he says rather in all things. The verse doesn't say, "give thanks *for* all circumstances." It says "give thanks *in* all circumstances." In the midst of the most dire situation, Thanks. In the midst of the most difficult circumstances, Thanks. Thanks that in our sickness there is hope of healing. Thanks that in our grief there is hope of a reunion. Thanks that in our death there is resurrection. Thanks that in all things, good and bad, there is hope, because God is with us, and "his love endures forever."

In those times when I become too absorbed by the difficulties of the moment, and don't feel in the least bit thankful, it is the memories of what God has done in the past that can move me to sincere thanksgiving. It is when I make a point of trying to be thankful, despite my situation, that true thankfulness is given an opportunity to arise. And this is the purpose behind the command.

When we make a point of being thankful even in those times when we do not feel particularly so, then we allow ourselves the opportunity to develop a consistently thankful attitude. And that is an attitude which can make the difference between a positive outlook on life and an outlook overwhelmed by the aches and pains, by the trials and tribulations, by the ups and the downs of life.

You know people like this. You know people who are grateful for every little thing that comes their way. They open their eyes in the morning, and they are thankful for the day ahead. They sit down to breakfast, and are thankful for their morning coffee and oatmeal. They bump into you, and they seem genuinely thankful, genuinely delighted to see you. They hit adversity, and they are thankful for the friends, family and faith they have to help them through tough days. They lay their head on their pillow at night, and their last thought is a prayer of thanks for all the day had brought, and the promise of tomorrow. They are thankful. Thankfulness lives in their heart.

And you know the other kind too. People unhappy or grouching about every little thing that gets in their way. They open one eye in the morning, and swear at the alarm clock. They sit down for breakfast, and the coffee is giving them ulcers, they're sick and tired of oatmeal. They spot you from a distance and cross to the other side of the street, hoping to not have to say "Good Morning" to you. Or anybody. They hit adversity, and now their life is completely in the toilet, they have it worse than anyone they – or you – know. They lay their head on their pillow, and their last thought is, "Why me?" They dread tomorrow. They are not thankful. Ingratitude lives in their heart.

Which are you? Here's a better and more important question: Which would you rather be? How can we be thankful, even for the little things, even when life isn't going particularly well – or, in fact, is going quite badly indeed?

What you're looking for here is not a thankfulness dependent upon how things are going on the outside, or upon how wonderful we ourselves are or feel. The thankfulness we need is one which comes from somewhere else – one that comes from God. It is a thankfulness, in fact, directed towards God; not a thankfulness arising from and directed towards just what we might happen to get, or be enjoying right at this moment in time. It is a thankfulness arising from the awareness that everything in our lives, including the very gift of life itself, comes to us undeserved. Comes to us as a gift. Comes to us from the very hand, the very heart, of God. Not thankfulness which arises from over-abundance or selfishness. Not just when everything is grand. "Give thanks in all circumstances," Paul writes, "for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." And that's a different kind of thankfulness altogether.

I think this kind of thankfulness can come only with prayer. I think this kind of thankfulness can come to us only when we begin, and end, and intersperse each day, with prayers of thanksgiving to God. When things are going well, thank you God, for all you give us to enjoy. When things are just cruising along, thank you God, for enabling us to carry on. When things are going bad, when the cupboard is bare and the applecart is upset and the well is dry, thank you God, because you are there, you have been there, you will be there, and I don't have to go through this alone. Our forefathers and foremothers in the faith, as long as three thousand years ago, put it like this (Psalms 107:1-15) – and notice the circumstances in which thanks is given:

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress...
Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.
Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons,
for they had rebelled against the words of God,
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.
Their hearts were bowed down with hard labour;
they fell down, with no one to help.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
he brought them out of darkness and gloom,
and broke their bonds asunder.
Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.*

This Psalm is a wonderful story of people encouraged to be thankful to God “for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind,” despite their current circumstances – in trouble, wandering, hungry, thirsty, gloomy, miserable, tired, overworked – circumstances in which they found themselves more often than not. In the midst of our difficult circumstances – and some of our circumstances are difficult

indeed – we too, the Redeemed of the Lord, are called to “give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.”

Start every day thankful – for all God has done, for all God does, for all God will do – for all that comes to your life, thankfully aware for every breath you take, for every morsel of food you enjoy, for every sip of water, for everyone you love, for everything – start every day thankful, live every day thankful, end every day thankful, and before you know it, it will be to you as natural as breathing, your spirit thankful and at peace, no matter what might come.

How do you live every day thankful? Try this out: it works. Throughout the course of your day, whenever a situation arises for which you are thankful – a morning coffee, a phone call from a friend, a moment’s peace, the colours of the leaves, a bite of lunch, a glass of water, some needful medication, a bill that you can actually pay, a bit of affection, an afternoon nap, a roof over your head, a comfy chair, a loving pet or friend or child or spouse – anything at all – at that very moment when you are experiencing or enjoying or benefitting from that thing, say Thanks to God. It just takes a second – “thank you God for this cup of coffee, boy did I need it” – nothing fancy – and before you know it, if you keep that up, a switch is going to flip deep down inside you, and you will find yourself, thanks by thanks, slowly transformed into a person who is indeed, in all circumstances, thankful. Try it – what on earth have you got to lose? If it doesn’t work, I promise you all your misery and ingratitude back. Double.

The command to be thankful in all circumstances is not intended simply to make us insincere or to mouth empty words. The command is intended to ingrain within us a habit of thankfulness, an attitude of thankfulness which goes beyond one day a year, infusing our daily lives, and transforming our outlook on life from cynicism to optimism, from despair to hope, from misery to joy, from selfishness to thankfulness.

Maybe this thanksgiving, if we really try to be thankful, remembering the many things which God has done for us, does for us, and will continue to do, we can begin to develop an attitude of thankfulness which will last long after the taste of turkey is gone, will help us to be the people God would have us to be, people who reflect the love and care and concern which he has for each one of us, as he has proven in the gift of his Son. In all circumstances.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Then all the people said "Amen" and "Thank you LORD."