

## Giving Thanks in All Things©

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

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Here we are, already entering into Thanksgiving week! The Holidays are upon us, with Advent and Christmas right behind Thanksgiving. Time seems to go so fast, doesn't it?

I know I've shared with you every year how much I love the memories of Thanksgiving. Of course, I love the food. A traditional Thanksgiving feast – same food every year. Turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes AND sweet potatoes, corn, cranberry/orange sauce, but regular cranberry sauce for those silly people who don't like the other. Green bean casserole, hot rolls and butter and of course ... drum roll ... the pumpkin pie!

Every family has their own particular traditions – food that they expect each year. If we try to do something a little different, it rarely is a positive thing. What? You made sweet potato *casserole*? Where's the marshmallows? And that syrup? What? You used an *already made crust* for the pie? How could you? It has to be homemade!

But, for me – and I'm guessing for most of you – the best part of Thanksgiving, or any of the holidays, is family. Often times family comes from near and far to get together. There are jokes and stories of past gatherings; something funny that someone did growing up. There are hugs and sharing memories of grandparents and others.

When I was growing up, we always went to my grandmother's house. Nana was actually my step-grandmother but we never remembered that – she was so good to all four of us who she inherited when mom married my stepdad

We had a very large family, all at a long table. Other grandparents were there. All eight of us plus an aunt and uncle and three cousins. And usually a friend or two from church who didn't have family around anymore.

And the table was loaded with food. My brother, David and I were eying the turkey legs. But we had a tradition that had to be done before we could eat. Each person had a name card with a psalm of thanksgiving and we had to go around the room and read our psalm before we prayed and ate. I'll never forget my younger cousin reading psalm 100 and at the end he quoted pa-salm 100. He didn't realize the p was silent. I thought that was hilarious.

What I don't like though, is how things have changed. You know, kids grow up, start their own families and traditions, some move too far away. Grandparents – one by one – pass on to the heavenly banquet. Someone goes astray and ends up far away from the warmth of the family. Others have a disagreement and won't talk to each other anymore. Someone gets ill and passes away.

Each year we begin to experience loss and change and sometimes it's very lonely. And the wonderful memories – as wonderful as they are – can actually cause depression instead of making us joyful.

And what about those we've seen on the news? People in California who have lost their homes because of the devastating wildfires. People who have lost loved ones because of mass shootings or natural disasters or car accidents.

I'm just a bearer of all kinds of good news for Thanksgiving, aren't I? But you all know that it's true. As we grow older, we all experience loss and we become more aware, more mindful of those in the world who are not in a good place.

So, Paul tells the Thessalonians, in his letter to them, to always rejoice, to constantly pray and, in all circumstances give thanks. That seems like a tall order, doesn't it? How in the world can we give thanks when we are in that deep dark pit of grief? When we are living in fear for our lives or wondering where we are going to live.

How can we rejoice? Is it even possible?

But Paul is a living example of what he tells the early Christians to be. Paul wrote many letters to the churches in Asia Minor while he was in prison. Sometimes his prison was a house that he was confined to. Other times he was beaten and thrown into a dungeon that was a prison. Sometimes Paul had plenty to eat and other times he was hungry and wasn't sure when he would eat again.

Yet, he says rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. The Thessalonians – like so many of the early churches were in danger because of their faith in Christ. New Christians were being tortured and killed. They had much to worry about and yet, Paul tells them to rejoice, to pray constantly and to give thanks in every situation. For this, he says, is the will of God.

It is God's will that we do these things. God's will that we rejoice and pray and give thanks – no matter what. Why do you think it is God's will for us to do that?

I personally think the answer is much the same as what I was saying last week about giving generously. I believe the more we give, the more we trust God to provide. Likewise, the more we rejoice and pray and give thanks – the more we are demonstrating a deep trust in God to take care of us, to bless us and be with us regardless of the situation.

Trust grows more trust. Being mindful of what we are thankful for can grow our gratitude tremendously. We talked about keeping a gratitude journal in the women's bible study this past Wednesday night. Writing down, every day, in a journal or a notebook five things you are thankful for can create a transformation – from being negative, looking at all the problems and hardships we've suffered to seeing the good instead.

Counting our blessings each day causes a shift in our thinking and our attitude. We may not start off keeping the gratitude journal with much enthusiasm but if we will faithfully do it for a while, we begin to notice a difference in ourselves.

As I was writing this, I stopped and looked at my phone because I had a notification. This quote by William Arthur Ward was on my screen:

*Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings.*

So, writing down five things we're thankful for each day doesn't sound too difficult, does it? Of course, some days we might have to say the same thing we said yesterday but that's ok. You can be thankful for the same things more than once.

But how in the world are we supposed to pray without ceasing? Pray constantly? You might be thinking – Good grief. I say a prayer before each meal and I say a little prayer in the morning with my morning devotion. I pray at bedtime for other people and for myself and ask for forgiveness for anything I might have done.

But, goodness gracious, how does Paul – or God - expect me to pray all the live long day? I have other things to do – work, cook, do Facebook, clean, Tweet, read, play internet games, sleep ... my days are so full.  
How do we do it?

We discussed this in Bible Study and came to the conclusion that prayer is more than actually speaking to God. Prayer can be a state of mind. If we wake up every morning and the first thing we do is say something like:  
Good morning, Lord. Thank you for being with me all night long, watching over me, waking me up.

And then we ask God to make us mindful of God's constant presence with us through the day; to be guided in the decisions we make; to be led to other people He would have us go to; to have our ears and eyes open, discovering the beauty around us – God's creation.

If we become mindful of God with us, then perhaps it is by our very breathe that we are praying. Breathing in God's Spirit and love and grace and mercy. Breathing out whatever may be negative in us – fear, hatred, anger, uncertainty.

In other words, our entire life becomes a prayer. We live prayerfully, which leads to joy and thanksgiving flowing out from us regardless of what is happening around us.

Of course, there is another really good reason for living this way – besides the fact that we will grow closer and closer to God; and our faith grows stronger as we lean on Him more and more.

The other good reason is that we become living examples, as Paul did, of how people who trust in God live. Others see us not reacting in fear and anger but instead, remaining joyful and faithful, even giving thanks to God in the midst of pain and suffering, of grief and loss. Christians certainly have our share of pain – but people notice when our reaction is different.

It is in the hard times that we demonstrate our true faith in the One who has promised to always be with us; the One who is the great comforter. Our joy comes through even in our grief because we remember the Savior who gave everything so that we would have assurance of life, even life after death.

We are witnesses to God's power and strength as we faithfully lean on Him, trusting that He will help us through.

This Thanksgiving let us reflect on how much we do have to be thankful for – even as we are aware of change and loss and grief; of suffering and sickness – if not in our immediate family, for sure in our country and in the world.

Let us live by Paul's words – Rejoice always; pray unceasingly and give thanks in all things. We have good reason to do these things – The many blessings God has giving us, especially the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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