

# The Discipline of Thanksgiving

## Ephesians 5:20

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, April 7th 2024

“...giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Ephesians 5:20)

### I. Introduction - comparing thanksgiving to other disciplines

The reason Gary has been passing out our church’s Goals and our purpose statements every week is so that the whole church can be on board in praying through them at each of the prayer meetings. And you may have noticed that the main theme we wanted to emphasize this year is thanksgiving. We prayerfully considered that theme. Gary preached the first installment of our thanksgiving theme sermons in January. I am preaching the second one. And he will preach the third one later. And the reason we are focusing on this theme is that thanksgiving does not come naturally and there are profound negative consequences of being unthankful. We need to teach our children to be thankful. And it takes work and thought before thanksgiving becomes such a habit that we can call it a discipline.

It’s actually not one of the disciplines mentioned in Whitney’s excellent book on Spiritual Disciplines, but it should be. Like prayer, exercise, journaling, or any other discipline, it takes thought and effort to fulfill Paul’s command - “...giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” That’s the main verse I am going to focus on this morning.

Of course, just like with the 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 [or as some translate it, “the deliverance”] of God” (v. 23). 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, bitterness, 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.

For example, Jehoshaphat gave thanks to God and sang praises in the face of what looked like almost 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 (before he had been delivered), and 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 were 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 developing this discipline. And Gary and I want to preach on this theme at *least* four times this year.

## II. 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 sacrifices take sacrifice, right? They are difficult. Instead of taking for granted that our children will be *naturally* thankful, Paul assumes the exact *opposite* will be natural. Nor is he saying that a grateful *heart* is sufficient. 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 very 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 to see how important this is for defining a godly 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. But obviously if Paul is describing the natural course of sin nature when God withdraws His restraining grace, it reveals human nature at any time. The point of the passage is that it takes *grace* to give *supernatural* thanksgiving.

Anyway, 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? Was it the wars and rumors of wars that they faced? No. What is it that makes things so perilous today? Is it nuclear weapons? murder in the streets? You might expect Paul to give as his reasons for perilous times a list of the front headlines from our newspapers: The 34.6 trillion dollar debt, the proposed central bank digital currency (which could let a tyrannical government totally control your purchases), or the immigration crisis, a totally out of control civil government, war, bank failures, or international tensions. No. It's none of those things. 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, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despises of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than loves of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power." In other words they are outwardly Christians but they are not living in the realm of the

supernatural. And because they are lovers of themselves, proud, and haughty, they will tend to see these things in *others*, and be blind to the presence of the same things in *themselves*.

Now, I know people who are described by most of the words that I have just read. And Paul would say that shows a perilous condition - a very dangerous condition. But especially notice the word “unthankful.” Unthankfulness was one of the perilous things.

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*. 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. But to do that we need to appropriate God's supernatural grace.

### III. 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 the most-used Greek dictionary as, “to show that one is under obligation, be thankful, feel obligated to thank.” (BDAG). In other words, God has blessed us so richly that we owe Him thanks. In fact, a stronger word for “owe” is *added* to the word “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 the unthankfulness in that 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 that we are in the habit of giving at our

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 (and unthankfulness *is* a part of the sin nature 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.

#### IV. 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 (so to speak). Verse 20 says, “giving thanks always...” In my Greek 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 roast 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 as being better than it really was. No. But at the same time, he was very disciplined in chronicling the good in order to make himself thankful. And he lists the good things as, #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 passengers. 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 cannibal. #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 any 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. At the bachelor party I think it was Sam who mentioned the importance of expressing your thanks to your wife in this way. No matter how bad things are, you have a lot of things to thank God and thank your wife for. Don't make God 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 ignorant 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 his pants because he hadn't had the accounting training. Yes there was a lot that he wished he knew. Yes, there was 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. We tend to forget the incredible blessing of being able to drink clear pure water from the faucet. Even in China people told me not to dare drink water from the tap. They told me that I would get sick. The same is true throughout the Middle East, Africa, and even in some South American countries.

## V. 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. They think that this is really going way too far. Surely we can't take this literally, can we? Look at the text

again. Paul didn't just tell them 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 in that word "for." How can we thank God for evil things? Since we are *not* to delight in evil, and since we are *not* to agree with evil, and since we are *not* to 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. His providence overrules and uses that evil for good. Just to illustrate, though Joseph (in the book of Genesis) strongly disagreed with his brothers attempt to murder him (that was evil) and their treachery in selling him into Egypt (that too was evil), 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 superintending *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 (which is the option Jesus holds out), we wouldn't say that the burning of the hand is good in itself. It's *not*. But compared to your whole being having to burn 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 even before we see what that reason or purpose might be.* That's what makes it "a sacrifice of praise." It's hard.

Joseph may not have understood why his brothers resented him, why his father sent him on a seemingly useless hunt for them, 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 the lives of citizens from 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. Maybe He wants me to talk to the driver of a car that pulls over. Who knows? But 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 *at least* delivers us from bitterness and frustration and gives us hope for the future. But I think it delivers us in many other ways too.

## VI. 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. In fact, we might actually *prosecute* them in a human court instead. But *while opposing their evil in that courtroom*, 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. And by the way, I would encourage you parents to teach your children from a *very* early age to be grateful and to learn the discipline of thanksgiving. You will be happy you did. And eventually your *child* will be happy.

When Max Lucado lived in Brazil, he taught at a university that he could walk to every day. On the way to class one time 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. They were unthankful.

But this boy was different. 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 (at least when looked at from the perspective of his 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. So there was a degree of social respect that they had learned. Jesus healed them with a word and they went running to the priests to be examined and to be 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?"

The weird thing for Jesus was that the nine were so-called believers; citizens of Israel, and the thankful one was a foreigner who was *now truly* one of His sheep. Unthankfulness is the natural state of a sinful heart. It is *thankfulness* that shows God's grace at work. May 100% of the members of DCC be like that one leper - ever *eager* to give God thanks.

## VII. 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. It is saying that we should not be only living on this horizontal plane; we should be appropriating the grace stored up and the miracles purchased by Jesus in heaven.

And since Colossians commands us to do *everything* in the name of Jesus, this reason for thanks applies to all of our circumstances. We approach that circumstance through our union with Jesus. When we are persecuted, Jesus is persecuted. When we are blessed, Jesus is blessed. Jesus said, “inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40). When you thank your wife or your husband, Jesus takes it as if you are thanking Him. When you feed each other, Jesus says that He receives that as if you are feeding Him. He takes it personally, and for that love and empathy that He has for each of us we can give thanks.

## VIII. 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 who are 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* the Bible indicates that each and every time we are filled with the Spirit, we enter into the realm of the miraculous. Look up every verse related to the filling with the Spirit and you will see that. I don’t know of any exceptions in the New Testament. And don’t think of the miraculous as only what *typically* is seen as miracles. *Sure*, it can include *those*, but the entire Christian life is supposed to be lived in the realm of the miraculous. *To be thankful for every circumstance is truly a miracle.* And every Christian has the privilege of daily asking to be filled with the Spirit. And by the way, filling with the Spirit is a repeated thing, and fullness of the Spirit is the ongoing state of being filled. Anyone who is united to Christ can ask in His name and be filled with the Spirit. And commentators point out that *constant thanksgiving is one of the evidences that we are filled with the Holy Spirit.* There are many thankless people who *claim* to be filled with the Spirit, but I am skeptical. A thankful spirit accompanies such filling.

## IX. Conclusion

In conclusion let me say that it takes disciplined *thinking* to be able to *express* thanks more and more consistently. 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 did. He said, "to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Luke 7:47). Now, the Pharisee had plenty to be forgiven of; he was just blind to his sins. But as our eyes are progressively opened, we realize that we have been forgiven of an *enormous* debt. 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 painful persecution, 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 in his book, *Spiritual Disciplines* 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 Holy Spirit. We can't do it on our own, and that means *we owe Him thanks for even the ability to thank Him*. It's humbling. But it is the prayer of our session that we would more fully live out Paul's command in Ephesians 5:20. May it be so Lord Jesus. Amen.