

## **Introduction**

One letter in a word can matter greatly can't it? That's true in church bulletins. One church's bulletin, for instance, read, "**Pastor is on vacation. Messages can be given to the church secretary.**" Or another read, "**Potluck dinner at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday. Medication to follow.**" The "a" in place of the "e" in "messages" and the "c" in place of the "t" in "meditation" make quite a difference in the meaning.

Some of you may have thought we made a typo in the title of the message. It's "**Thanksgiving**" with an "l" not "**Thanksgiving**" with a "g." But that isn't a mistake. There's a significant difference between thanksgiving on the one hand and thanksgiving on the other and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **Give Thanks to God**

Verse 15 begins a line of thought that ends in 6:9. This line of thought is about how we "**walk**" or live. Paul gives a guiding principle for doing so in verses 15-16. Be wise and make the most of our "**time,**" which is better translated "**opportunity.**" Every day presents us with opportunities for good. We should spot and pursue those opportunities.

Paul identifies what several of those opportunities are in verses 18-21. One is not getting drunk, which is "**dissipation**" or wasteful, but being "**filled with the Spirit.**" Those who are do three things as a result: (1) Sing and praise God in various ways when they're with each other; (2) Always give thanks for all things; and (3) Subject ourselves to one another, knowing Jesus is displeased if they don't.

That's the meaning of our text and what I want us to focus on this Sunday before Thanksgiving is verse 20. In it, Paul writes about "**giving thanks.**" To give thanks means to be grateful to someone for bestowing benefit or blessing on us, and then to express that gratitude to him or her. The "**someone**" to whom we give thanks the most, according to verse 20, is God. God is good and unceasingly bestows benefits and

blessings upon us. So, we give thanks to Him for doing so. We express to Him how grateful we are for something He's given or done.

It's becoming or appropriate that we do. I saw Chuck E. Cheese give tickets to a small boy. The boy's father almost instantly asked him, **"What do you say?"** To which he replied, **"Thank you Chuck E."** Good parents try to instill common courtesy in their children. One of the first things they do in that regard is teach them to say **"Please"** and **"Thank you."** They do that because it's appropriate to say **"Thank you"** when someone gives us something or does something for us. It's inappropriate not to. That's especially so when the **"someone"** is God. Ultimately, all benefits and blessings comes from Him, which makes it appropriate to thank Him for them and inappropriate not to. So, we actually do that.

I'm deeply grateful for taste buds, for instance, which make food not only nourishing but pleasurable as well. What a blessing! So, I routinely thank God for this gift of His when I eat. I think the thought **"Thank you for my ability to taste"** or sometimes even say it out loud.

### Always

Paul not only teaches us what to do in verse 20, give thanks to God, but also how to do it. He reveals two vital insights here.

The first is found in the word **"always,"** a word that connotes **"habitual."** We should habitually give thanks to God.

Let's rework one of our culture's popular slogans and apply it to giving thanks, **"Practice random acts of thanksgiving."** That does accurately express how most people live. They practice random acts of thanksgiving. That means that giving thanks is an intermittent event for them. It's something they do here and there for one reason or another. They may do it when the benefit or blessing is big enough or when social convention requires it or when it's traditional or when it wins people's approval, and so on. Otherwise, they don't do it.

I knew a spoiled 16 year-old who rarely thanked her parents for anything. But she thanked them profusely when they gave her a new car

for her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was a random act of thanksgiving prompted by the largeness of the gift.

But the word **“always”** suggests something altogether different than that. The thanksgiving Paul has in mind here isn't random. It's habitual. It isn't an event here and there but a continual and unceasing practice of ours. We routinely give thanks to God from the moment we get up in the morning until the moment we go to bed at night.

When I take my glasses off, things get fuzzy, which reminds me how much they enhance my bodily life. So, taking them off routinely prompts me to thank God for this gift of His. Rarely does a day go by that I don't. But it isn't just glasses, it's countless other daily blessings, for which I continually give Him thanks. I thank my way through the day.

### **For Good Things**

Paul reveals a second vital insight about giving thanks to God. It's found in the words **“all things.”** Our thanksgiving should be not just habitual but pervasive as well. **“Pervasive”** means two things.

First, we give thanks to God for good things. This Thursday almost all of us will **“say grace”** before we overeat. We use the word **“grace”** because we believe the food we're about to eat is a gift of God's grace. It's appropriate, therefore, to thank Him for it.

But my question is this. Why do we restrict **“saying grace”** to meal times. That fact is that God fills all of our days with innumerable good things that are just as much gifts of His grace as food is. I think of hot showers, floss and toothpaste, eyeglasses, hearing aids, furnaces, eyes that see colors, tongues that taste, and on it goes. Those are only a few of the thousands of good things God gives to us. Why is it less appropriate or even less necessary to **“say grace”** for those things than it is for our food? The answer is **“It isn't.”** So let's **“say grace”** for those good things as we're able. Let's give thanks to God for them.

We do so of course because we're thankful for them, but that's precisely the problem for many of us. We aren't truly thankful for them.

There are several reasons for that, the primary of which is probably this. Familiarity breeds apathy. That's part of our psychological makeup isn't it? The pull of our personality is toward indifference. No matter how extraordinary something is, it becomes ordinary to us as we experience it over time. And the more ordinary it becomes to us, the less thankful we are for it. Compare, for example, the joy we felt the first time we drove our car with the joy we feel now. For most of us, the joy we have now is far less. Familiarity breeds apathy.

We need to overcome this pull of our personality toward indifference. We need to cultivate an attitude of gratitude for good things. We'll naturally express that gratitude by giving thanks if we do.

The best way I know of to be thankful is to be thankful. Those two things, thanking and thinking, are inseparable. In the old Anglo Saxon language in fact, that word "**thankfulness**" means "**thinkfulness**." It's a fact of life. We must think to thank. Thinking puts the blessings God gives us into perspective and awakens us to their value. That makes us grateful, which in turn compels us to give thanks.

You can develop your own methodologies for thinking but here are two that I use. First, I contemplate what my life would be like without a particular blessing. Take the ability to see colors for instance. I imagine what my life would be like if I saw everything as I see those old black and white Andy Griffith shows. Second, I contemplate that there's a last time for everything. I also imagine how I would experience or do something if I knew it were the last time. How would I experience hugging my wife or taking a step if I knew it were the last time? Doing those two things give me perspective on things and awakens me to their value. That makes me grateful, which compels me to give thanks.

You get what I'm saying. Thanking God for good things requires thinking. So let's do just that.

### **For Bad Things**

But the word **“all”** in verse 20 refers to more than just the good things. Verse 20 has a companion, 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Paul exhorts us there, **“in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** The words **“all”** and **“everything”** obviously encompass the bad things that happen to us as well as the good ones. We should give thanks for and in not just the good things but the bad ones as well.

We all know by hard experience what those bad things are. A businessman’s wife of 25 years leaves him on the same day his business files bankruptcy, a wife returns home from the store and finds her husband dead on the floor, a couple’s daughter is arrested for possession of heroin, a couple’s son is diagnosed with schizophrenia, a family’s car breaks down in the middle of nowhere on a cold snowy night, and on it goes. Those are all real life stories that illustrate the kinds of things that the words **“all”** and **“everything”** encompass. Paul exhorts us to give thanks in and for experiences and events like those.

There are few exhortations in the Bible that people consider more unrealistic and even absurd than this one. Who in their rights minds would do such a thing? The answer is disciples and friends of Jesus who are in their right minds. Let me explain.

Paul isn’t exhorting us to do something – to grit our teeth and give thanks even though it’s the last thing we feel like doing. He’s calling us to be something – the kind of person who feels like giving thanks even in the bad things. This exhortation is ludicrous to anyone who isn’t that kind of person. But it makes perfect sense to anyone who is. Giving thanks in the bad things is as natural to him or her as it is in the good.

But how do we become that kind of person? The answer is this. It’s by identifying our will completely with God’s. Verse 20 is about God’s will isn’t it, in this way. When bad things happen to us, it’s always because He, for one good reason or another, allows them to. Otherwise they wouldn’t happen. They are, therefore, always within His permissive will. But after they happen, His active will prevails for disciples and friends of Jesus. Romans 8:28 reveals what that will is. It’s to work the

bad things out for our good. You realize what that means. *Irredeemable harm never befalls those of us who are following Jesus.*

All of that, together, reveals that God's will is always done when bad things happen to us. If we're completely identified with it, therefore, we're grateful and thus thankful that it is. One of the persons I love most on this planet is mentally ill. I don't give thanks that he's mentally ill. But I truly am grateful that God's will is being done in and through it – that He's redeeming it – and I give Him thanks for that. Why? It's because my will is completely identified with His. Paul's exhortation in verse 20 makes perfect sense to me because it is. And I'm not fretting about my loved one as painful as it is to me.

But how do we identify our will with God's? It's by intending to will what He wills, beginning with what God has said He wills. We find what that is of course in the Bible. Think about all the things that you know God says there. Firmly decide that you will do those things and do the best that you can to carry out that decision. Doing so will lead you into the depths of spiritual transformation. The Holy Spirit will work profoundly in you until you become the kind of person who naturally gives thanks in all things – including the bad ones.

I've been doing what I've just explained in earnest for the past 15 years. Rejoice when others outshine you. Receive criticism with gratitude and joy. Guard people's reputations not destroy them with gossip. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Listen more than speak. Reject anger as a way of dealing with people. Be without deceit. Don't grumble about others, and more. I know God wills those things and have identified my will with His by trying my best to do them. The Holy Spirit has transformed me in the process so that I now want His will in all things, including the bad ones that happen to my loves ones and me. I know it by experience. If we identify our will completely with God's, we'll give thanks in all things, including the bad ones.

## **Conclusion**

That clarifies to what Paul is calling us in verse 20. It isn't thanksgiving but thanks-living. Giving thanks isn't an event. It's a way of life. We don't give thanks randomly here and there. Our gratitude is fervent and deep enough that we give it habitually instead.