

Southport Presbyterian Church

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An Attitude of Gratitude Ephesians 5:20; I Thessalonians 5:18

Journalist James Glassman in an article entitled, “Whine, the Beloved Country,” declares that “a culture of complaint” has infected American society. The grievances of Americans are many, but include a protest against the prevalence of outsourcing, as U. S. companies move jobs to countries like China and India. Some Americans file complaints against food companies, seeking to hold them responsible for making them fat. Others seek litigation against banks for lending them money even though they were a credit risk. There are complaints about the overcrowding of schools, low paying jobs, and cheap foreign labor. The truth is that some of these complaints are unfounded or else ignore offsetting blessings.

Compare the American way of life with the low quality of life people in other countries experience. Glassman writes, “Is it fair for Americans, with our rich infrastructure, our clean water, our incredible financial markets, to compete against poor Indians, who have to climb over sleeping beggars on their way to work? Who should be complaining here?”

According to Glassman, there are many reasons not to complain:

-In 1955 the ratio of students to teachers was 30 to 1. Today it is 19:1

-Adjusted for inflation, compensation has tripled since 1947, and the cost of necessities has plummeted.

-Food in 1950 represented about one third of a family’s total expenditures; today, it’s one seventh.

-The U. S. Gross Domestic Product is more than the total of the next five countries.

-The current U. S. unemployment rate of 5.7% is lower than the average rate over the last 30 years and lower than most countries, including industrialized countries.

-Americans work fewer hours, and have more cars, cultural institutions, and children in college than ever before.

Glassman goes on to say, “The U. S. may jeopardize her prosperity if too many Citizens demand and expect an easy road through life and complain about the smallest obstacles and setbacks.”

In thinking about the trend of complaining in America, listen to these words from John Henry Jowett, a British preacher of an earlier generation as he writes about gratitude: “Gratitude is a vaccine, an antitoxin, and an antiseptic.” John Yates explores what he means when he writes:

“He meant that gratitude, like a vaccine can prevent the invasion of a disgruntled, discouraged spirit. Like an antitoxin, gratitude can prevent the affects of the poisons of cynicism, criticalness, and grumbling. Like an antiseptic, a spirit of gratitude can soothe and heal the most troubled spirit.”

Today, I want to talk about the blessing of an attitude of gratitude. Not only is it a blessing to the person who possesses such an attitude, but it is a blessing to our Great Creator God as well as all who interact with that person.

Let's look together at two wonderful verses from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and his First Letter to the Thessalonians to explore this attitude of gratitude. Read- Ephesians 5:20 and I Thessalonians 5:18

We are to have an attitude of gratitude always.

Did you hear that word "always" when Paul writes to the Ephesians, "...always giving thanks to God..." As Paul writes to the Church of Ephesus, he has not had to deal with any major problems. His purpose is to expand and broaden their thinking in what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ and each of them as followers of Jesus should be and do as faithful participants within the fellowship of believers. He wants them to maximize their opportunities by knowing and doing God's will for them. They should be so filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit that their minds and voices are filled with praise to their Great and Awesome God. It is in this context that they are encouraged to be "always giving thanks the God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

If Paul was standing here, with us, right now and I pulled out an microphone to interview him, I might ask about that word "always." "Paul isn't that a bit idealistic to use the word 'always?' Don't you think there are times when we don't feel thankful? Aren't there times when like the Psalmist we are mired in the pits of despair and grief? Weren't you a little too enthusiastic when you used that word 'always?'"

With a smile and a look of genuine serenity, I believe Paul would offer a very thoughtful and emphatic answer. Maybe it would be something like this:

"Jim, you have asked a vexing question to be sure. Humanly speaking, it is impossible to be 'always giving thanks to God.' Yet, it has been my experience since I became a follower of Jesus on the road to Damascus several years ago, that it is possible to 'always give thanks to God.'

For the "always" to be consistent and realistic, my eyes must be on God and not myself. I must see Him in His wonder and might, and realize how small and puny I am. I must continually remember as I said wrote to the Romans in 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

When I am 'always giving thanks to God,' even in the most difficult moments, I have found contentment and peace. Likewise, I could write to those dear Philippians and say, in 4:11-12, '...for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.' I can have an attitude of gratitude always."

Thanks, Paul! Now what about you and me? Are we "always giving thanks to God?" If not, why not?

Could it be that the problem is centered upon where we focus our attention? If our attention is on ourselves and what we perceive to be our difficulties and not the God who is working out His purpose in our lives, then it is difficult to give thanks most of the time.

I am grateful for a mother who is an example of what Paul was talking about here. She has known a lot of pain and sorrow in her life time, yet she seems to be “always giving thanks to God.”

Almost 15 years ago now, my step-father had a difficult stroke from which he has never fully recovered. For the past 5 years he has been in a nursing home, leaving my mother living alone in a special “add-on” built for them behind my step-brother’s home. I have never heard my mother complain. Instead she talks about the good times they had together, how much she likes where she lives, and how good my sister-in-law is to her.

What is the secret of her attitude of gratitude? I believe it is centered on her relationship to God with whom she spends hours a day. She can’t get around very well, but she finds great meaning in her long prayer list for all 8 children, the grandchildren, the great grandchildren as well as all kinds of friends, missionaries, etc. Her daily prayer list is amazing.

What does she do when she goes to visit my step-father several times a week? They read the Bible, a devotional book, and pray. She and my step-father are favorites there because of their attitude of gratitude. They are setting a wonderful example for the rest of our family.

We are to have an attitude of gratitude in all circumstances.

Certainly, the “always” in Ephesians 5:20 and the “all circumstances” of I Thessalonians 5:18 are intricately intertwined. If we are “always giving thanks” which speaks about being grateful all the time, then it will be in all the situations of our lives, “all circumstances.”

I Thessalonians 5:18 comes at the end of Paul’s First Letter to the Church of Thessalonica as a part of list of final instructions. “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” These words are followed by some other staccato-like very practical advice: “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”

I was particularly fond of verses 16-18 when I was a kid learning memory verses to go to camp because they were short.

William Barclay, the great British Bible scholar and teacher, in a very poetic image says this last section of I Thessalonians is like “chain of jewels of good advice.”

While it makes for great teaching and preaching and is wonderful theory, it is not easy to “give thanks in all circumstances.” While it may be easy to give thanks for the good things that come our way, humanly speaking we are anything but thankful for pain, suffering, loss and grief.

It’s not easy to have an attitude of gratitude when the diagnosis is “cancer” or the company is downsizing or you are there when the person you love very much breathes her last breath. Yet, this is precisely where, when our lives have been offered up to God on a daily basis, we can rest in His sovereign plan. Please note that we may never

understand the meaning of those circumstances, but we can trust in the God who transcends all the happenings of life.

Sometimes we are privileged, in retrospect, to get a glimpse of God's purpose. Such was the circumstance of Corrie ten Boom which she writes about in her book *The Hiding Place*.

Accused of harboring Jewish people in WWII, Corrie and her sister, Betsey were arrested and sent to the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. The barracks there were extremely crowded and infested with fleas.

One morning Corrie and Betsey were reading from this passage in I Thessalonians. Betsey said, "Corrie, we've got to give thanks for this barracks and even for these fleas."

Corrie replied, "No way am I going to thank God for fleas." But Betsey was persuasive, and they did thank God even for fleas.

Corrie commented that during the months that followed, they found that their barracks were left relatively free, and they could do Bible study, talk openly, and even pray in the barracks. It was their only place of refuge. Several months later they learned that the reason that the guards never entered their barracks was because of those blasted fleas.

Are there some fleas in your life for which you are having a difficult time giving thanks?

An attitude of gratitude is God's will for us.

God desires for us to be grateful people. No matter what our circumstances of life might be God has wired us to be grateful. We are most satisfied and content with our lives when we are grateful. God is most blessed by us when we are grateful. The people in our lives are most blessed when we are giving thanks in all circumstances. Genuine joy naturally flows out of gratitude.

Brennan Manning captures this idea when he writes:

"I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, nor between Republicans and Democrats. The real difference is between the aware and the unaware.

When somebody is aware of that love—the same love that the Father has for Jesus—that person is just spontaneously grateful. Cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of the interior life, and the byproduct of gratitude is joy. We're not joyful and then become grateful—we're grateful and that makes us joyful."

Do you agree with Manning? In God's scheme of things, joy naturally flows from gratitude. If that is true, why are there so many of us who call ourselves Christians who look like they have just swallowed a lemon?

Theologian and author, Helmut Thielicke comments on this same phenomenon when he writes:

"The glum, sour faces of many Christians. ... They rather give the impression that, instead of coming from the Father's joyful banquet table, they have just come from the Sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now are sorry they can't get them back again."

Dear friends, if it is God's will for us to have an attitude of gratitude, why is it that we complain more than we give thanks? Maybe the answer is to be found in these two reasons given by Richard B. Douglass:

“One reason is that we are used to having so much. We simply assume that we will have all the good things of life. Another reason is that it hurts our pride to be grateful. We do not want to admit that God is the Provider of all good things. We are simply His stewards. Being thankful requires humility and faith in God. When we have these, we can be grateful.”

Application

As I conclude this last message in this series on the subject of blessings, dream with me for a moment about the blessing you would be to those you love the most if always you were giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in all circumstances, believing that this was God's will for you in Christ Jesus?

Do you think that this kind of attitude of gratitude would be a blessing to God?

Do you think your life would be filled with more joy if you were complaining and whining less and giving thanks more and more?

Could it be that God wants to help you make an attitude adjustment?

Maybe you could trade in your old attitude for the kind of attitude described by G. K. Chesterton:

“You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and the pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing, and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.”

Now we know why G. K. Chesterton is one of those most quoted and beloved writers—he had an attitude of gratitude.

When it is all said and done, what will people say about you? “She sure complained a lot.” “He was a whiner.” Or, will they say, “I was blessed by her attitude of gratitude.”

If you don't like the answer to that question, it's not too late. As long as we have life and breath, by the power of the Spirit of God living within us, we can change. We can be the people whom God created us to be. We can be a blessing to our Great Creator God. We can be a blessing to those around us. We can even be a blessing to ourselves.

Ask God, right now, to make you that kind of a blessing.