

First Friends Church
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In all Circumstances
1 Thessalonians 5:15-22

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New Revised Standard Version

¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets,^[a] ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

Message – In all Circumstances

I have missed having the opportunity bringing a message to the children each week. So today I thought we could start off with an object lesson.

What do you see? Is the glass half empty or is the glass half full? The answer is, “Yes” since both are true. But we sometimes use that expression to describe a person’s outlook on life. Are you a glass-half-full kind of person – the optimist, OR are you a glass-half-empty kind of person, the pessimist or what they would probably call themselves, the realist? While there might seem to be some people who seem to have a personality that is one or the other, I think that a lot of times our answer might be dependent upon the circumstances of our lives. You might answer one way if you had a really bad day at work or at school, or if you’re frustrated by or with someone or something, and you might answer another way if you just had a wonderful

conversation with a friend or family member, or you finished all your homework, or everything is right on schedule for Thanksgiving dinner. Yes, the circumstances of our lives can often affect our outlook – glass half full or glass half empty.

When we are mindful of God's goodness to us, we can't help but give thanks. This was what the Apostle Paul was telling this church in Greece, in the city of Thessalonica - He knew they had some concerns about the future and even some issues about what was going on - however he reminded them in this letter to have a proper perspective and to be intentional in the way they approached everything in life.

Paul certainly knew very well the ups and downs of life. The Apostle Paul seemed to have such a bright future as a young, Jewish religious scholar, highly respected by his fellow Pharisees. THEN he became a follower of Jesus. Suddenly he lost his status among his Jewish peers, he was forced to leave countless cities because of death threats, and he was arrested, stoned and left for dead, beaten multiple times and imprisoned, all for being a follower of Jesus. Yet, he closes this letter written to his fellow Christians by saying, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances" There might have been a few people who read those words and wondered if he had lost touch with reality.

How about you? Is there a part of you that feels that way when you hear those words, "Rejoice ALWAYS, pray continually, give thanks in ALL circumstances"? Maybe you're thinking, "Are you kidding, that's just crazy! Obviously, you don't know what my life is like!" And you'd be right. Maybe I don't know what you're going through. Maybe it's the first holiday without a loved one. There is the uncertainty of having a job in the near future. Perhaps you're at odds with a friend or family member. Not to mention that the Covid-19 pandemic has reaped havoc on the

lives of many and has affected everyone. Everyone has been touched by it in some way and yet I stand before you to remind you that we all have a reason to be thankful.

Not just because you may not have gotten the virus or because you did and recovered from it; not because you maintained your job or found a new one if you lost it due to the pandemic; not because we are still able to maintain our lives in some fashion despite everything that has happen. No, our being thankful goes deeper than just being thankful for overcoming difficult circumstances in our lives. What I am talking about is the gratitude and thankfulness that is reserved for God and God alone. Giving thanks to God comes from a place within us where we remember where we could be without God's love. Think about it, if we are walking in a place where we are grateful for what God has done for us, our being grateful is a state of thankfulness and it is our being thankful that causes us to want to spend time living and sharing the good that comes from the presence of God in our life.

"Rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." But how do we do this? The key is in the words "in Christ Jesus." We have to rely on the "Christ within, the seed, the light to show us and prompt us to be aware of all the blessings in our lives. The joy and thankfulness that we have doesn't just come from the circumstances of our lives, what we can see or feel, or what we do or do not have.

Our source of joy and strength is much deeper, much more secure and constant than any of those things. Maybe you can think of it like a buoy floating on the water. There are sometimes when that buoy is just rolling over the gentle waves, and then there are times when that buoy is being violently tossed back and forth between whitecaps and high winds. Still the buoy just keeps popping up in the same place, not going anywhere. Why is that? It's not because the

buoy is so strong. Rather, it's because of the anchor to which the buoy is tied, an anchor that you can't see, but that is solidly and securely tied to the buoy, keeping it from going anywhere.

Don Postema writes in the book "Space for God;"

"Not much in our society stimulates us to such appreciation. Instead of suggesting that we give thanks, TV advertising encourages us to be greedy for more gifts. Periodicals tell us of the many things we could own but don't. And our neighbors describe their latest purchases in detail. If we listen to all these voices, we won't feel much gratitude. Instead we'll start thinking that we have practically nothing and need to get more ... and more.

It's that attitude that makes us anxious, protective and aggressive - that leads us to guard what we have from others. We need special locks and alarms on our windows and doors. And fences to keep others away from what we view as ours.

We are afraid to share our personal or national resources because much of what we hear says we don't have enough. It looks past what we have to what we do not have and urges us to grab for more.

We have so much that we fail to appreciate what we have already been given.

The power is shut off, and suddenly we become thankful for electricity. The garbage is not picked up, and suddenly we become thankful for the garbage collector's weekly stop. A good friend dies, and suddenly we discover how much he/she meant to us. Our water becomes too polluted to drink and suddenly we appreciate having good water."

Taking our blessings for granted is something that we all are guilty of!

Instead of taking our blessings for granted, we should take them with gratitude!

Tons of gratitude! Never-ceasing gratitude!

Greed grabs. Thankfulness receives. That's why expressing gratitude often seems like a radical reaction to life. Gratitude takes nothing for granted. When you are truly thankful, you recognize not only the dinner someone prepared as a gift, but also become aware of the person who prepared it. You are cognizant of the concern it took for someone to call, to send a card, to give a compliment. You are aware of the love involved in a routine offer to do the dishes, wash the car, or take out the garbage. You may get a glimpse at the wonder of friends and family.

In her book *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass writes

"Gratitude is bound up with giving and receiving gifts. Gifts are the nature of the universe itself, those things we have received from God or the natural order or what-have-you. Grace reminds us that every good thing is a gift – that somehow the sun rising and to be alive is an indiscriminant daily offering to us. All that we have was gifted to every one of us."

What gifts might you take for granted? Are there gifts that come in unexpected ways, from unexpected sources, or even from negative experiences?

Luke 17 tells us the story of Jesus and Ten Healed of Leprosy.

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

When he saw them, he said, "Go, and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him--and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

The one leper completes the loop and returns to Thank Jesus – he is the one who understands what a gift life is, he is the one for whom life will give its greatest rewards.

In another quote from the book Grateful, Diana Butler Bass goes on to say that "Gratitude is more than emotion. It is also a disposition that can be chosen and cultivated, an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions. Gratitude involves not just what we feel but what we do.

Thanks is both a noun and a verb."

In a couple of weeks we will celebrate Thanksgiving, I once heard Thanksgiving described as a time "when millions of Americans get together to drink, talk, eat, and go home again. It's known as the four G's: giggle, gabble, gobble, and git!"

While I expect our celebrations may be different this year I would hope that a 4th G would be added to this description to include Gratitude. Gratitude is something we feel and something we do. Being thankful gives us a sense of personal well being and promotes the common good. It helps us to be resilient in crisis and strengthens us to resist injustice. Have you ever considered that gratitude and thankfulness opens us toward personal and social transformation?

Thanks-Living goes hand in hand with Thanks-giving, 365 days a year.