

Giving Thanks in Everything

By John MacArthur • November 15, 2018

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We live in a thankless age, and it is very difficult for us to rise above the creeping, encroaching, powerful culture that surrounds us.

There are people now who have more than they've ever had, but because they don't have everything they want, they breed a terrible kind of thanklessness.

If we're to avoid falling into this pattern, we need to be reminded over and over again of the New Testament injunctions to be thankful.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, the Apostle Paul writes, "*In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" Paul simply says very directly: No exceptions, no excuses, nothing is outside this parameter—in everything give thanks. No matter the situation, we are to find a reason to thank God.

Gratitude Is Normal

How does this thankfulness happen? Second Corinthians 4:15 says, "*All things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.*" Paul is explaining that **as people receive the grace of God in salvation, it leads to abounding thanksgiving.** The pattern of every Christian's life should be that we endlessly give God thanks.

But we not only have salvation, we have everything. In 2 Corinthians 9:11, Paul says, "*You are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God.*" Unending thanksgiving is the result of all that God is doing in our lives.

Ephesians 5:4 says, "*Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather [the] giving of thanks*" should come from our mouths. Paul is saying that when we open our mouths, what ought to come out is thanksgiving. When a person becomes a Christian, there is something different about the inner man. Built into that newness is a heart of thanksgiving that cries out in gratitude to God. It's hard to find someone more thankful than a brand-new Christian. Thanksgiving becomes the fruit of the work of the Spirit within us. But how quickly Christians can become unthankful!

A thankless attitude is abnormal for a Christian. It cuts across the grain of the new life, the new nature, the new person. Because we can so

easily fall to the sin of ingratitude, the New Testament repeatedly calls us to thankfulness.

The overarching umbrella that covers every issue of life is Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” The circumstance in itself may not be good, but God will take a bad thing and turn it to a good purpose. If we believe that God is at work, controlling all of the contingencies of life, blending each component together to lead to a sovereignly-designed goal, then we can be thankful. We can be thankful for the pain of surgery if we know that healing will come because of it. As long as we look at the end result, we can be thankful even for a process that is less than joyful.

Holy Spirit-Inspired Thanksgiving

When the early church gathered, their purpose was to give thanks. It was a part and parcel of their worship. Someone had a psalm, someone had a prayer, someone had a word from the Lord, and a lot of people had an opportunity to say thanks. When we have fellowship with believers in smaller groups, it is good to have a time of giving thanks.

In Ephesians 5:18, Paul cautions us to be filled with the Spirit. And what will happen? “Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Joy, rejoicing, prayer and praise will happen. In verse 20, he says, “Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

According to Paul, a Spirit-filled believer is a thankful believer, a joyful believer, a praying believer. If you are filled with the Spirit, thanks will gush out of you for everything.

Even in times of trouble, Paul says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” In times of great anxiety, fear, worry and stress, be thankful. “Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. ... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3:15, 17).

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, the responsibility of the believer to the Lord is described in terms of his heart attitude. He is to have inward incessant joy, continual unceasing prayer, constant daily thanks. And these three commands—rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks—penetrate the innermost recesses of the redeemed heart. They are the best gauge of a person’s spiritual condition.

A lot of people can carry out religious functions, but **if you want to know whether you are truly filled with the Holy Spirit, ask yourself, “Do I rejoice always? Do I constantly pray? Am I increasingly thankful?”** Because that is the spring from within. It will lead to a right attitude in all your duties, responsibilities and ministries. If you’re not a joyful, prayerful, thankful person, you’re struggling with the flesh. When the Spirit controls you, those things fall into place.

Then Paul says in verse 18, *“For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* This is attached to all three of those commands, not just the last one. God’s will in Christ Jesus is that you would have constant joy, constant prayer and constant thanks.

You may be thinking, Do I have to drum these up myself? No. It is not only God’s will to will it; it is God’s will to work it. Philippians 2:13 explains, *“It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”* God wills it and He works it by His Holy Spirit. That’s why I say, if you’re filled with the Spirit, you’ll speak to yourself in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. That’s rejoicing. And you’ll offer that to the Lord, because that’s prayer. You’ll give thanks because it’s the essence of the outflow from the inward spiritual control. It is routine because we should be filled with the Spirit as a matter of the course of life.

Why Aren’t We Grateful?

Now we look at ourselves and say, **“I wish that were true. I wish I went around all the time singing songs of praise and offering prayers to the Lord, thanking Him for everything, but I don’t.”** What is it that corrupts those inner springs so that we’re not always joyful, prayerful and thankful? **Here are seven attitudes that form in the innermost parts of our hearts and hinder thanksgiving.**

First is **doubt**. We doubt God’s character. We’re not sure that His Word can be trusted. If we doubt God’s truthfulness and character, we’ll have trouble being thankful because we’re not sure that He will keep His promise to make all things work for our good. Or we trust that He has good intentions, but we doubt He has the power to deal with our issues. Some of us even question God’s love. We say: “God would never let this happen if He really loved me.” These doubts poison the springs of a redeemed heart that should be overflowing with gratitude.

- Second is **selfishness**. This is the attitude that says, “I am not content with the way God is working out my life. It’s not what I desire.” If God doesn’t come in and fit the picture perfectly, then a person’s self-will begins to run roughshod over the plan of God, and a thankless spirit results.

The third hindrance is **the love of the world**. This is someone whose vision is filled with pleasure, prominence and possessions. Do you know the hymn that says, "Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart"? That is the heart of the Christian's vision. We say to God, "It's You I see. It's You I long for." As long as that is our vision, we will see God's blessing pour into our lives. But if our vision is the material world, we will have no cause for thanksgiving. When everything we've attached our affection to doesn't fulfill us, it causes us to be thankless and ungrateful.

Fourth, a **critical spirit** will steal our thankfulness. A critical spirit criticizes everything that isn't exactly the way it ought to be. It rises from an enlarged ego that says, "I deserve better than this." It says "I've been hurt," or "I've been wounded by someone, and I'm going to take the pain and let it run through the rest of my life."

The fifth hindrance is **impatience**. Some of us don't give thanks simply because God doesn't move on our schedule. We don't say, "Thank you, Lord. I can see Your hand at work. The process is slow, but I see it." We are like the child who throws a tantrum and says, "I want it! I want it now!" We should learn to thank God for the process. We should not try to rush what is happening perfectly on time in God's economy.

Sixth is something I think a lot of people sense in the church today. You could call it apathy or lethargy. I use the word **coldness**, and I think about the lukewarm heart of the Laodiceans or the Ephesians in Revelation. There is a lack of love for Christ. We lack passion in worship. We neglect the Bible and prayer. We waste time on the trivia of life, and it leaves us empty and spiritually indifferent. Consequently, our hearts have no gratitude.

Finally, there is **rebellion**. We feel that our lot in life isn't what we wanted so we purposely withhold thanks because we're just flat out unthankful. We say, "I'm mad and I'm unthankful and I know it. And I'm going to stay unthankful!"

If any of these seven attitudes invades our hearts, we have gross sin. We are defying the command of God to give thanks in everything. We're defying the instruction of the New Testament that we ought to be always thankful for our salvation, for the unending blessings of God.

But, as I said before, **we can't drum up an attitude of thankfulness on our own.** That is why God works to will and to do of His own good pleasure in us. He's working to make us thankful through the power of the Spirit of God. If we're filled with the Spirit, He produces a grateful heart. And what happens when we're grateful? God is glorified, we are blessed, the church is built up and the lost are reached. We can have a tremendous impact on the world if we will only practice thanksgiving.