

“How Do We Give Thanks in All Circumstances?”

Theme: Grateful Hearts

Sermon Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Philippians 4:6-7; Matthew 26:27-28

Family Activity for the Week: Gather as a family and bring paper, markers, magazines, glue, pens, scissors and envelopes. Together list at least seven people you would like to thank in some way. Consider family members or friends, firefighters, teachers, church staff or volunteers or police officers. Spend time creating thank you notes for each person. Older family members might write notes. Younger ones might draw pictures or cut pictures out of magazines. Have everyone in your family sign their name to each card. Place each card in an envelope, then address and stamp them. Pray over each one, giving thanks to God for each person. Pile in the car, head to the post office to mail the cards and stop for ice cream or hot chocolate along the way! Continue to pray for those receiving your thank you notes!

Monday, November 19 – Read 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18. We often think gratitude is purely a feeling, a reaction to something outside of us. That makes “give thanks in every situation” puzzling—some situations do not trigger positive feelings. But psychology researcher Robert Emmons wrote, “It is vital to make a distinction between feeling grateful and being grateful...being grateful is a choice, a prevailing attitude that endures and is relatively immune to the gains and losses that flow in and out of our lives.”

- A recurring theme in gratitude research is that choosing to be a grateful person does not mean you become blind to the bad things in life, or the sad or angry feelings you may have about them. It does mean, however, that we also choose not to let the bad things blind us to the things for which we are grateful. What way(s) have you found to remember the things for which you are grateful when your life takes a difficult turn?
- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “There is always something for which to give thanks; even on the darkest day there are blessings to count. We must remember that if we face the sun, the shadows will fall behind us but if we turn our backs on the sun, all the shadows will be in front.” As this series focuses on gratitude’s benefits, are you finding yourself more inclined to resist changing the direction your life faces, or to seek to increasingly “face the sun”?

Prayer: *O God, you are like the sun, always shining your love and mercy into my life, whatever may happen in my family, my workplace or my health. Help me learn how to keep my focus on you every day. Amen.*

Tuesday, November 20 – Read Psalm 42:1 – 43:5. “Psalms 42 and 43 belong together. Psalm 43 lacks a title; and more importantly, the shared refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5) indicates a literary unity. The refrain also divides the prayer for help into three sections, all of which include the psalmist’s deep desire to experience God’s presence.” This profound, honest prayer gives us a model for carrying our hurts to God while maintaining an intentional stance of gratitude and praise.

- Psychologist Robert Emmons’ research would support this psalm’s approach: “Telling people simply to buck up, count their blessings, and remember how much they still have to be grateful for can certainly do much harm. Processing a life experience through a grateful lens does not mean denying negativity. It is not a form of superficial happiology.” How can you keep your choice to maintain a stance of gratitude from turning into “superficial happiology,” for yourself or for others?
- For the ancient Hebrews, the waves of the ocean (42:7) symbolized the frightening, disorderly forces of chaos in life. What breakers are sweeping over your life today? Do they tend to drive you away from gratitude and trust in God, or make you want to cling more tightly than ever to God’s presence with you in all circumstances?

Prayer: *God, some days are so difficult I find it hard to believe you are loving, which doesn't take away any of life's tough stuff; it just leaves me with no one in whom I can trust. I choose to hope in you, to give thanks in all things, and to hold onto you, even with my fingertips! I do give thanks for you and your unfailing love. Amen.*

Wednesday, November 20 – Read Mark 14:22-26, Psalm 118:5-6, 28-29. Psalm 118 praised God's steadfast love. It was the last *hallel* (hymn of praise) Hebrews sang at Passover as they recalled God freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt. Mark 14:26 strongly suggested that Jesus, just before his arrest and crucifixion, sang from the Psalms: "The Lord is for me—I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" and "Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever."

- The Psalmist asked the simple yet profound question, "The Lord is for me...What can anyone do to me?" To what extent are you able to trust that God is indeed "for" you? How much stronger is that level of trust for you on a beautiful, sunny morning when all is going well than on a cold, gray day when you've received troubling news that made you sad?
- A summary of researcher Robert Emmons' findings notes, "Cultivating an attitude of gratitude is tough. It is, according to Emmons, a 'chosen attitude'...People must give up a "victim mentality" and overcome a sense of entitlement and deservedness." To what extent does your inner narrative build on the "you deserve it" idea we hear in so many commercials? How can you cultivate gratitude for even basic gifts like shelter, loving relationships—and life itself?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, sometimes in anger we'll think or say, "I didn't ask to be born." But that's also true when loved ones gather, when warm homes shelter us from the cold or when health lets us play games or pursue hobbies we enjoy. Thank you for the gifts of my life. Amen.*

Thursday, November 21 – Read Ephesians 5:15-21. We hope you find much for which you can be grateful this Thanksgiving Day! In the ancient world, as today, some people tried to numb themselves against life's pains with alcohol (as well, of course, as with other escape mechanisms). That can be the downside of holidays like Thanksgiving. To Christians in Ephesus, Paul wrote that psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and always giving thanks to God were a much better alternative, with better life results.

- The Message paraphrased Paul's counsel in verses 18-19 this way: "Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him. Sing hymns instead of drinking songs!" Can gratitude to God be in any way "intoxicating," even habit-forming? Have you ever been in that condition, and if so, what was the experience like? What are some of the life benefits of a "gratitude habit"?
- Robert Emmons wrote, "I asked people with debilitating physical illnesses to compose a narrative concerning a time when they felt a deep sense of gratitude...It was evident from reading these narrative accounts that (1) gratitude can be an overwhelmingly intense feeling." What can help you look beyond whatever challenges you face in order to experience the power of gratitude on this day?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, as most of us pause in our pursuit of more to offer thanks for what is already ours, guide my heart into a more determined choice to make every day you give me a day of thanksgiving. Amen.*

Friday, November 22 – Read Luke 4:16-21, Isaiah 61:1-3. Israel's law included a provision (perhaps honored more as an ideal than in actual practice) that every fiftieth year was a "Jubilee" year in which people forgave debts, returned property and restored hope to all citizens (cf. Leviticus 25:8-10). Isaiah 61 evoked that idea as a model for what God would do for God's people. Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 to define his mission—he would do good things for us that we were incapable of doing for ourselves.

- God is the ultimate source of our "mantle of praise." Or as researcher Robert Emmons put it, "We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received. This doesn't mean that life is perfect; it doesn't ignore complaints, burdens, and hassles...We recognize the sources of this goodness as being outside of ourselves." How easy or hard do you find it to thank God for the good things in your life?
- After Jesus spoke, the people of his hometown tried to kill him (cf. Luke 4:28-30). Why? Scholar N. T. Wright said Jesus "speaks of Israel being called to be the light of the nations...The servant Messiah has not come to inflict punishment, but to bring the nations God's love and mercy. That was a central theme in Israel's own scriptures, yet... Jesus' claim to be reaching out with healing to all people...was not what most first-century Jews wanted or expected." Are you inspired or frustrated that the same love and mercy Jesus extends to you is also for all other people?

Prayer: *Lord, thank you that even as I seek you, you have been seeking me. Help me respond by setting aside anything that might get in the way of loving and serving you. Amen.*

Saturday, November 23 – Read Philippians 4:6-7, 10-13. Many Bible students call Philippians Paul's, "letter of joy." From a prison cell (cf. Philippians 1:13), he wrote a letter known for its emphasis on joy. Believers have this gladness because we know even when there are problems, harassment or hardship, it doesn't mean God has deserted us. But observe that Paul didn't say his joy grew from a naturally grateful, upbeat disposition. Quite the contrary, in verse 12 he wrote, "I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance."

- Robert Emmons' research bears out Paul's testimony: "Emotional venting without accompanying insight does not produce change. No amount of writing about the event will help unless you are able to take a fresh, redemptive perspective on it. This is an advantage that grateful people have— and it is a skill that anyone can learn." What life experiences and choices have already helped you learn to live life from a more grateful point of view? What additional steps do you want to take to learn this important spiritual and life skill?

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, if the aggressive, angry Pharisee Saul could learn to be the apostle who wrote an epistle of joy from prison, then I can learn, too. Guide and teach me in the ways of gratitude. Amen.*