

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, November 20, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**PSALM 92:1**

“It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord.”

**THE GRACE OF GRATITUDE**

Some men were talking about causes for gratitude. One said, “Well, I, for one, am grateful to Mrs. Wendt, an old school teacher who, thirty-five years ago, went out of her way to introduce me to Tennyson.” A listener asked, “Does this Mrs. Wendt know that she made such a contribution to your life?” “I’m afraid not. I’ve never taken the trouble to tell her,” came the reply. “Then why don’t you write her?” He did. The letter was forwarded. Then this note came in return, written in the feeble scrawl of an old woman. It began;

“My dear Willie.”

That in itself was enough to warm his heart. Here was a man of fifty, fat and bald, addressed as “Willie.” He read on:

I can’t tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my eighties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, and like the last leaf of autumn lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for fifty years, and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning, and it cheered me as nothing has in years.

The grace of gratitude! -- gratitude to our fellow human beings, and above all, gratitude -- to God. Ingratitude is a hateful assassin of the soul; and remember -- disappointment, frustration, and bitterness are the children of ingratitude. On this Thanksgiving Sunday morning, I can think of no more relevant passage of Holy Scripture to bring to your attention than this, from Psalm 92:1 - “It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord!”

Let me say four simple things in the light of our text.

**1. Don’t think of what you haven’t got, but thank God for what you have.** “Familiarity breeds contempt” we say, and this is certainly true with regard to what we call “the common mercies of life.” We take them for granted, and yet what priceless gifts they are!

Take a “common mercy” like water. I well remember a pleasant conversation with a soldier who had returned home after six years of service in the army during World War II. Three years had been spent in the Middle East, and not once in that time had he dared to drink a can of water without first dropping into it a germ-killing tablet. And he said to me, “Do you know that one of the greatest thrills I experience now that I’m home is to go to the kitchen sink, turn on the cold-water tap, and enjoy the cold, clean sparkling water? I say ‘Thank You, God’ every time I

take a drink of water!” And yet we sometimes grumble if it isn’t ice cold!

Or consider the gift of health. How often this is just taken for granted, and even abused. When I was an assistant minister, we had a man in the congregation, forty-five years of age, who, ten years before, with the world at his feet, had been stricken with polio, and almost completely paralyzed. He was an earnest and courageous Christian, and many a fine conversation we had as I visited in his home. One day the talk turned to money and material things, and I shall never forget how he looked at me and said, “Graham, you are rich; you can walk!”

Have you ever heard this haunting little poem?

Most every day a little boy comes driving past our house  
With the nicest little pony — just the color of a mouse —  
And a groom rides close behind him, so he won’t get hurt, you see,  
And I used to wish the pony and the cart belonged to me!  
I used to watch him from our porch and wish that I could own  
His pony and his little cart and drive out all alone,  
And once when I knelt down at night I prayed the Lord that He  
Would fix it so the pony and the cart belonged to me!  
But yesterday I saw him where he lives, and now I know  
Why he never goes out walkin’ — ‘cause his legs are withered so;  
And last night when I was kneelin’ with my head on Mother’s knee  
I was glad he had the pony and the cart instead of me.

Add to these blessings those other priceless gifts of sight, speech, hearing, country, friends, opportunities --

“Count your blessings, name them one by one,” and allow a loving Father to wipe away every cobweb of discontent. Don’t think about what you haven’t got; just thank God for what you have got.

**2. Remember that happiness does not consist in having “things.”** I suppose the Rich Young Ruler of whom we read this morning (Mark 10:17-22) had everything that life could offer — health, wealth, social standing, and as one commentator says, “He wore the white flower of a blameless life.” But he came to our Lord restless, dissatisfied, and intensely eager and in earnest to find the real secret of a happy, useful, meaningful life. But “he went away sorrowful.” You see, the tragedy of his life was that he had nothing but things.

The folk who spend their days  
In buying cars and clothes and rings  
Don’t seem to know that empty lives  
Are just as empty filled with things.

Look at those two young men, the Ruler and Jesus, as they are presented to us in the Gospel record. There’s something almost ludicrous in the scene. To all intents and purposes, and from the human standpoint, the Rich Ruler has everything. And yet in his heart he knows that he

has nothing that's really worth having. And two thousand years later, we know that his estimate of himself was quite correct: he had precisely nothing. Jesus, on the other hand, has nothing that this world counts worth having. He was poor from the day of His birth. During His public ministry, He had "nowhere to lay His head." And yet we know that in reality He had everything that's worth having.

My Master was so very poor  
A manger was His cradling place;  
So very rich my Master was  
Kings came from far to gain His grace.  
My Master was so very poor  
They nailed Him naked to a Cross;  
So very rich my Master was  
He gave His all and knew no loss.

Happiness does not depend on having things. Success and sorrow often walk hand in hand. Wealth and woe are often next-door neighbors.

**3. Remember that you are rich not in what you have, but in what you cannot lose.** An old lady in her seventies was prevailed upon to sing a solo one Sunday morning in her Women's Bible Class. As she stood before her audience she said, with a wry smile, "I'll have to sing something I know pretty well, because I've come without my glasses!" And then, after a pause and a blush, she exclaimed, "And I'm sorry I won't be able to sing as good as usual, because I've come without my teeth..." And then she sang three verses of "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!"

Life can strip you of many things -- precious things like health and home, and work and loved ones; necessary things like glasses and teeth. But remember — you're never beaten so long as you can sing, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!" The forgiveness of your sins through the blood of the Cross, the gift of inner peace through the gracious indwelling of the living Christ, the assurance that your life has meaning and purpose, and that a glorious destiny awaits you beyond the grave because you belong to Christ -- these are the priceless treasures which can never be snatched from you; and because you possess them, you are rich, fabulously and eternally rich!

**4. The last and greatest victory of the Christian is to be able to praise God for everything** — for clouds as well as sunshine, for darkness as well as the beauty of a summer morning.

The writers of the Bible stand at every crossroads, facing every sort of experience that can come to us, and they exclaim, "Praise ye the Lord!" They stand over our beds of sickness and pain and say, "Praise ye the Lord!" They stand beside our worst disappointments and cry, "Praise ye the Lord!" They stand beside our open graves and whisper, "Praise ye the Lord!" That is Faith's victory.

There is one tremendous page of Scripture on which we are shown a saint of God visited by trouble, one terrible blow after another coming down on him until his whole life was reeling; and when the bitter day that had ruined him was closing, Job, with set face and clenched hands

and bent head, was sitting there, muttering something almost fiercely and desperately to himself: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." And to begin with, I imagine, he could not get beyond that, could not add another word, but only kept on repeating it in a stunned, dazed, uncertain way - "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." And then there was dead silence. And for a moment everything was in the balance, his attitude to God, his very life, everything in the balance. But then, suddenly, breaking the silence, half a sob and half a shout it came, "Blessed be the name of the Lord!" It was Faith's victory!

Three hundred years ago, old Alan Cameron, the Scottish Covenanter, was lying, a prisoner, in the Tolbooth jail in Edinburgh, when, suddenly, the door of his cell burst open and in came soldiers, carrying something. "Look!" they said, uncovering it. And Alan Cameron looked. It was the head of his own son, Richard, slain for Christ. And the old man staggered as if struck in the face with a whip. But then he lifted his head. "It is the Lord," he said, "Good is the will of the Lord." Faith's victory!

Dr. Francis Chavasse, who was Bishop of Liverpool, had a favorite sentence, which was a guiding light of his life, and he had suffered great sorrows: "Praise and service are great healers." That is a wonderful affirmation. It is a magnificent way of saying - when life leaves you torn and bleeding, and you find it extremely difficult to be brave, praise God! And if it is hard to do it, make yourself do it, and in the very act of praise, the wound will begin to heal. And then try helping someone else who is going through it too and see how that very act of service helps to heal your own wound. "Praise and service are great healers."

Christian praise is a contagious sort of thing. One person with praise to God in his soul will start others singing who would never have thought of raising the song themselves. It was said of that great missionary, St. Francis Xavier, by one who knew him, that if ever any of the brothers were sad, the way they took to be happy was just to go and look at him. That is how your praise can help. It is a troubled, distracted, terribly sad world in which we are living today; and God knows, there is enough darkness in it without our doing anything by depression or sullen cynicism to make that darkness deeper. The real servant of Christ today is the person whose life breathes praise and gratitude. Keep sounding that note throughout the days ahead, and even when you do not know it, others will be facing life more valiantly because of you, and thanking God that ever you were born.

"It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord!"

**AMEN.**