

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 20, 2018
Thanksgiving Service**

EVERYTHING?

Ephesians 5:15-20

I don't know if you've ever thought about it this way, but it occurs to me, generally speaking, that you may be less in need of a sermon on Thanksgiving than are most people. I don't say this to flatter you, to puff you up with pride, or to cause you to think more highly of yourself than you ought. The apostle Paul warns us explicitly against this in Romans 12:3, where he says: "By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

So, I'm not saying this to pat you on the back. There are lots of reasons why some people may not be able to be here this evening. But the fact is that you *are* here this evening, which suggests either that you *are* thankful or that you just know thanksgiving is important and, I trust, you *want* to be thankful.

You're right: Thanksgiving *is* important. Not the holiday. Or, more accurately, not *just* the holiday. Giving thanks itself is important. Essential, even. Giving thanks to God is both a privilege and a duty. Over and over, the Bible urges us, instructs us – *commands* us – to give thanks to the Lord.

It is a continual refrain in the Book of Psalms. But it is by no means limited to the Book of Psalms. Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with calls to give thanks to God, as well as examples of thankful people and, conversely, of people who were more often characterized as whiners, grumblers, and complainers. The people of Israel in their wilderness years were among the latter. Their grumbling spirit was one of their besetting sins. They were continually grumbling or murmuring against the Lord and against Moses. You and I are not to be like them.

The Bible has this to say about a grumbling spirit:

Philippians 2:14: "Do everything without complaining or arguing." You won't find grumbling and whining included among the fruit of the Spirit.

Jude 16 speaks of "grumblers and faultfinders" who "follow their own desires," who "boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage." Don't be like them.

As someone has said: "The easiest thing in the world is to be a critic." This is not to say that criticism is always wrong or bad. Some things need to be criticized. But a grumbling, complaining, fault-finding, critical spirit is not a God-thing.

An unlikely example of a thankful person in the Old Testament is Jonah. Jonah, you know, tried to run away from God when God commissioned him to go and preach God's word to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Jonah didn't want to do it, so he ran away and got on a ship headed in the opposite direction. You know what happened: The ship ran into a storm on the Mediterranean Sea and, at Jonah's urging, the ship's crew threw Jonah overboard. The storm ended, the sea became calm, and Jonah ended up in the belly of a great fish, where he finally came to his senses. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord. This is part of his prayer:

When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered You, LORD,
and my prayer rose to You,
to Your holy temple.
Those who cling to worthless idols
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.
But I, with a song of thanksgiving,
will sacrifice to You.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation comes from the LORD.
(Jonah 2:7-9)

Then, as the Scripture says, the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land (2:10) and Jonah went to Nineveh, as God instructed him. The point I want to emphasize here is that, in the most perilous circumstances – having been swallowed whole by a huge fish – Jonah had the good sense not only to pray but to give thanks to the Lord.

A much less unlikely example from the Old Testament is Daniel, one of God's faithful servants in the pagan kingdom of Babylon. In an attempt to catch Daniel in some wrongdoing and cause his fall from political power, other government leaders in Babylon, who were envious of Daniel's power and influence, persuaded the king to issue a decree forbidding prayers to any god or person other than the king for a period of 30 days. They knew it would not deter Daniel from his daily prayers to the Lord. And they were right.

Daniel 6:10 says: "Now Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before." The king's decree didn't stop him. He did what he always did. Not only did he keep on praying. The Scripture says that he continued "giving thanks to ... God." Thanksgiving was, for Daniel, a way of life.

Daniel's opponents in the government caught him in the act, and Daniel ended up in the lions' den as a result. But neither the threat of the lions' den nor the fulfillment of that threat caused him to stop praying and giving thanks to God.

In the New Testament, it is fair to say that Paul is the “apostle of thanksgiving,” though he is by no means alone in urging a life of gratitude to God. In addition to Ephesians 5:20, here are some examples from Paul’s letters:

Philippians 4:6: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God.” Interesting, isn’t it, that we are instructed to give thanks to God as we present our requests and petitions to Him? We are to give thanks even before we receive God’s answers to our prayers.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Be joyful always; pray continually; *give thanks in all circumstances*, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Always. Continually. In all circumstances. Both good and bad.

1 Timothy 4:4-5: “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with *thanksgiving*, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.” In the context here, Paul is speaking against false teachers who “forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with *thanksgiving* by those who believe and who know the truth” of God’s Word (4:3).

Colossians 4:2: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and *thankful*.” In other words, don’t neglect prayer. In your praying, keep your eyes open to see what God is doing, and give Him the thanks and praise that belong to Him.

Colossians 3:15-17: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And *be thankful*. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs *with gratitude in your hearts to God*. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* to God the Father through Him.”

(Italics added.)

Thankfulness is intended to be one of the distinguishing marks of a Christian. I am not a Shakespeare expert, but there is a line in *King Lear* that says: “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.” I have no experience with a serpent’s bite, and hope I never do. But it is true that ingratitude in children, or in anyone, can cause great pain and may do great harm. From a spiritual point of view, how much more grievous, how much more tragic and outrageous, is ingratitude in the lives of those who profess to be the children – sons and daughters – of the true and living God, who loves us with an everlasting love and has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

Giving thanks to God is meant to be a way of life. Spurgeon said that *thanks-living* is even better than thanksgiving. How is thanks-living to be done? Here is what Spurgeon says: “By a general cheerfulness of manner, by obedience to the command of Him by whose mercy we live, by a perpetual, constant delighting of ourselves in the Lord, and by a submission of our desires to His will.”

The American way of celebrating the Thanksgiving holiday, of course, is unique. The late, great Johnny Carson said this about Thanksgiving: “Thanksgiving is an emotional holiday. People travel thousands of miles to be with people they only see once a year. And then they discover once a year is way too often.” Regardless of how far you travel, or how far others travel to be with you, I hope your experience will be different from Carson’s take.

Then there is football. To paraphrase the late, great Erma Bombeck: “Thanksgiving dinners take 18 hours to prepare. They are consumed in 15 minutes. Half-times take 15 minutes. This is not coincidence.” If you enjoy football, enjoy it. It is one of God’s gifts to be received with thanksgiving. But do not let it consume your day. And do not let it or anything else replace thanksgiving in your life.

* * * * *

In these verses we read from Ephesians 5, Paul is giving counsel about wise and godly living in a world where darkness and evil seem to be ascendant (which is the case in our world today). He is talking here about how to live a life worthy of the calling we have received in Christ (going back to 4:1). He begins in verse 15 with the need for wisdom and care to live a life above reproach. The key to wisdom is found in Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him (God),
and He will direct your paths.

Just for good measure, verse 7 says:

Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.

Be careful how you live, says Paul. Do not be careless with your witness or rebellious in your conduct. In all your ways acknowledge Jesus as Lord. This is how you live a life worthy of your calling as a follower of the Lord Jesus.

Verse 16 speaks of the importance of “redeeming the time” or “making the most of every opportunity” the Lord gives you to serve His purposes in this generation.

Verse 17 speaks of the importance of knowing and understanding God’s will. “God’s will” is not just about those big life-decisions we sometimes obsess over. At a more foundational level, God’s will has to do with how He wants us to live our everyday lives and how He wants to involve us in what He is doing all around us. As an example of God’s will for our everyday life, listen again to 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Get it? God’s will for you and for me is to give thanks to Him in all the circumstances of this life.

Don't live like a fool, who has no sense of what God's will is, or doesn't care. Seek to understand God's will. Embrace God's will. Pursue God's will. Do God's will. Don't run ahead of God. But don't resist Him either. Ask, seek, and knock in prayer. Turn to the Scriptures. Seek godly counsel from other Christians. Trust the Lord with all your heart.

Next, in verse 18, Paul warns against intoxication with wine or adult beverages in general, but instead to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Alcoholic beverages aren't the only things you can be intoxicated with. Drugs can be intoxicating. Success can be intoxicating. Power can be intoxicating. Fame can be intoxicating. Pleasure of one kind or another can be intoxicating. In its own way, even food can be intoxicating. Gluttony is not a fruit of the Spirit. Statistics show that it is, unfortunately, a serious problem among church-goers in America.

Instead of being drunk with wine, Paul urges us, by contrast, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, who has sealed us for the day of redemption (4:30) and who gives us the power to live in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ. The filling of the Holy Spirit has to happen over and over and over again because, unfortunately, we have a tendency to leak.

Verse 19 speaks of worship and suggests that there are two audiences for the words and music we use in worship. One audience – our primary audience – is God, to whom we offer our praises. The other audience – our secondary audience – is one another. In the act of worship, we instruct and remind one another of who God is, what He has done for us, and how we are to respond to Him.

Then, in verse 20, Paul speaks of giving thanks. To whom? To God the Father. For what? For everything. For *everything*? *Are you serious?*

It is one thing to live a thankful life. It is something else to give thanks to God for literally everything that happens in life. In the sense that we know God is sovereign and that He is working out His good, gracious, redemptive purposes in and through all events and circumstances, yes, we can give God thanks for everything. But Paul does not mean that everything that happens in life is cause for giving thanks. No way.

Wildfires that have destroyed thousands of homes, hundreds of thousands of acres, and many lives in California: Not something for which to give thanks.

A chain reaction crash on an interstate highway this past week that killed a man and a woman on their way to their wedding in Pittsburgh: Not something for which to give thanks.

We do not and should not thank God for plane crashes, for mass shootings, for cancer or any other life-threatening illness, for the death of a child, for bullying or child abuse or sexual assault or adultery or divorce. We should not thank God for religious persecution or acts of terrorism. Or for the potential for the abuse of our immigration laws. Or when the quarterback of the hometown football team suffers a gruesome injury, breaking his leg.

These are not things for which to give thanks to God. John Stott says: "Although the text reads that we are to give thanks *always and for everything*, we must not press these words

literally.” Paul is using hyperbole. “For we cannot thank God for absolutely ‘everything,’ including blatant evil. The strange notion ... in some Christian circles (is) that the major secret of Christian freedom and victory is unconditional praise: that a husband should praise God for his wife’s adultery and a wife for her husband’s drunkenness (or vice versa); and that even the most appalling calamities of life should become subjects for thanksgiving and praise. Such a suggestion is at best a dangerous half-truth, and at worst ludicrous, even blasphemous. Of course God’s children learn not to argue with Him in their suffering, but to trust Him, and indeed to thank Him for His loving providence by which He can turn even evil to good purposes (e.g. Romans 8:28). But that is praising God for being God; it is not praising Him for evil.... God abominates evil, and we cannot praise or thank Him for what He abominates.

“So then the *everything* for which we are to give thanks to God must be qualified by its context, namely *to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Our thanksgiving is to be for everything which is consistent with the loving Fatherhood of God and the self-revelation He has given us in Jesus Christ” (Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 207).

In everything? You bet. *For everything?* No. Not for what is evil in the sight of God. Not for tragedies or disasters that bring death and/or destruction. Not for anything that violates God’s will or breaks God’s heart.

But we can always be thankful, no matter what evils come, that God is still God, that His grace abounds to sinners and is always sufficient, and that we are safe in His everlasting arms.

I wish you all not only a Happy Thanksgiving but a “Happy Thanks-Living.” Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.