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Thanksgiving

November 27, 2022

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TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Psalms 103:1-5 (NIV)

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

If you and I lose perspective on our lives, we might begin to act in childish ways. I know this has happened to me, and perhaps it's happened to you. And you can see it as you reflect on your life. I've had an opportunity with fresh eyes to look at more childlike behavior with the arrival of two new grandchildren and my wife, Chris, and my life. Our grandson now is in the age of two in that second year, and he's learning about this whole concept of attitude. Now, we might describe an attitude as a specific way of thinking about someone or something that will then typically reflect itself in one's countenance emotionally or in some sort of expressive behavior. And boy, is our grandson learning about attitude. He's fantastic at expressing an attitude of joy or delight or even astonishment at things. And just the most unique things astonish him and bring him joy. I was with him the first time he discovered an ant crawling across the concrete. He could not believe that little animal crawled and moved and was alive. He was so astonished in this attitude of joy and delight and astonishment. It was expressed through his countenance, his face, his behavior, his excitement. He's getting firmer at expressing an attitude of anger or dislike or disappointment in something. It's funny to watch

his brow furrow up and in dislike, disappointment, or anger. He's even sharpening his ability to express a sort of self-pity, "slumpy" attitude about things in a childish way – kind of a pouty attitude. But most delightful, I think, is when he gives expression to an attitude of gratefulness, of thankfulness to his mother or his father or someone around him who's provided something for him, and the expression of gratitude and love that flows out of him is just touching to our hearts. It's fun to watch. It gives us great delight.

And I can't help but think that this is the way a Heavenly Father must feel when his children express to him gratitude and thankfulness for all he's done for them. We do know this as important to God because of how many references He inspired in his Word to this cultivating of an attitude of gratitude. We know that attitude. Our attitude is very important to God. As we get older, we might be able to hide our attitudes or pretend we don't have them. But God knows, God knows the attitude of our heart. And the Scripture says he sees the unseen and he encourages us to develop an attitude that in one place, Philippians 2 says, an attitude like that of Christ. And there's specific instructions about encouragement in our attitude all through the Scriptures. And the text we read today, 1 Thessalonians 5:18, says that it's his will for us to give him thanks in all circumstances. I mean, that's a powerful statement. People wonder what God's will is for them. And Paul writes to those in Thessalonica and he says very clearly, "Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for us."

It seems that the pilgrims who settled this land and started what we know of as the Americas here today must have understood this instruction from God, this command, from Scripture, to give thanks. After three long months at sea aboard the Mayflower, and in a brutal winter that they lived through that first year they arrived here, they were malnourished and diseased and lost over half of their population there in that Plymouth area. They still, as they went through this challenge, lost loved ones, battled hunger, battled this disease, made homes that barely kept out the elements as they survived, the writings tell us that they thanked the Lord every day and petitioned him for rehabilitation. And miraculously, God sustained them enough to form a community and develop more and grow and expand even through two years of great hardship. And as they gave thanks to God, at one point, Governor William Bradford, he was their elected leader, declared a public day of Thanksgiving. And it was not an official holiday or anything. It was just the first Thanksgiving Day that they declared and they invited the Indians who had helped them and the Indians brought provision. And that's where the roots of this Thanksgiving holiday started. Even through the next winter, when their rations at one point were down to five kernels of corn apiece, they persisted in faith, being thankful to God for his even meager provisions at that time. And as they continued, God made a way and they

became sort of the founders, the first community of what we know of as the Americas today. Certainly we have a history that's tarnished with many different things. But God was there. We see it in the writings, and they were pursuing God and seeking him. And they took time for official Thanksgiving to God, even as their writing said they were thankful to God all along the way for the opportunity before them. And in their Thanksgiving, you can see that they were specific in their writings. And we see this in our nation's history. There's much specific writing about specifically giving thanks to God for unique things that he's done in our lives and in our history.

And the Bible encourages us to do just the same. When we look at Psalm 103, it says, "Praise the Lord, oh my soul. David – he's talking himself into and reminding himself of the goodness and the greatness of God, our provider, the one who gives us all things. "Praise the Lord, all my soul, all my inmost being. Praise His holy name. Praise the Lord all my soul and forget not all his benefits." The encouragement here is for us to remember again and again. "All" is the word here. The things that God does for us. It can take a lifetime to continually list these things, but we want to keep working at it because the mind channels the heart. And the heart is where the wellspring of life flows out of and why Thanksgiving is so important. Not because it just pleases the heart of God, but because of what it does for you and for me. And that's why I love that those that have gone before us, many who wrote things down, and even the proclamation of the first official day of Thanksgiving, national day of Thanksgiving, by George Washington, our first president in these United States, he was specific in his Thanksgiving, listing benefits that God had provided. He said, "We proclaim thanks to God and we unite and to him are our holy and sincere and humble thanks for his kind care in the protection of the people of the country, to them previously becoming a nation and now becoming a nation." They thanked him for his providence and the conclusion of the war that they had with Britain. They thanked him specifically for the great degree of tranquility and the union they knew at that point and the plenty that they were enjoying at that point. For the peaceable and rational manner in which they'd been enabled to establish the constitutions of the government and for the measure of happiness and safety that they'd known, and particularly they now as this lately instituted as a government the civil and religious liberty, which with they were blessed, they were thankful they didn't take these things for granted. They listed them specifically. They poured them out before God in a proclamation. And this is what the Scripture encourages, you and I to do again and again and again: forget not all his benefits.

And of course, then it became a national day of Thanksgiving and official holiday on April 3, 1863, when Lincoln himself, Abraham Lincoln, declared the fellow citizens of the United States and those who were at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands to set it apart and observe the last Thursday of November as a day of Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent father who dwells in the heavens. And he recommend, while offering up descriptions justly do him. They also with humble penance for pray for the national perseverance and sorrow, repentance for disobedience, and commend his tender care to the widows and orphans and mourners and all kinds of specific prayers.

Friend, I ask you today: how thankful are you and your heart this Thanksgiving weekend? Are you living out this will of God in whatever circumstance you're in? I want to encourage you, no matter what circumstance you find yourself in, there's always something to be thankful for. We may have to work through pain and grief and heartache at times, but in the end, we need to be reminded that God is good and he cares for us. And we need to remind ourselves that He's provided in some way, even in the midst of some of the harshest circumstances. It was Robinson Crusoe who was wrecked on an island alone, and he was cast there, a desolate island. And he made a list and he listed on one side the things that weren't good, what he called evil, and things that were good on the other. And his list included some specific things like certainly he's cast on this island, but he's still alive. He's divided from mankind. But he wasn't starving. He had no clothes. But he was in a hot climate that he didn't need much clothes. He was without any kind of defense to defend himself. But he didn't see any wild animals or beasts around that would be a threat to him. He had no one to speak to, but his ship was still accessible so he could go back and forth. There are some negative circumstances in all of our lives. But if we look, there's always something to be thankful for.

And as we look back, Thanksgiving's a good time to remind ourselves of God's benefits and renew our gratitude to him for them. And that's exactly what the psalmist does in Psalm 103 when he says, "Forget not all his benefits." And then he mentions the forgiveness of sins. Have you thanked God recently for his work on the cross through his son Christ, and not counting our history of violations against him, against us? Have you told God, "God, Thank you again for keeping no record of my past, for declaring me forgiven before you, for inviting me into your presence"? And have you even ever done this? Have you asked God to forgive your sins and opened your heart to Him and repented of your sin? He's clearly told us in his word that if we confess our sins to him, agree with him about our violations, he is faithful and just and will forgive us and cleanse us from all in righteousness.

"Praise the Lord, oh, my soul," the psalmist said, "all my inmost being. Praise his holy name. Forget not all his benefits." He forgives sin, He heals disease. Have you experienced some sort of healing in your life that you haven't thanked God for? You know, in Luke's gospel we read about ten lepers who were healed by Jesus and only one return to give thanks to Him for the healing. God is watching and he knows the condition of our heart. And I sat with a man this morning, a gentleman in a Bible study. He mentioned being through 12 bouts of cancer, and yet God has brought him through all 12 and he was thanking God for that. Have you looked back? And certainly he doesn't heal every disease of every person, but he does heal us and has promised to heal us in eternity for all diseases. But has he done some healing in your life in this present age, and have you thanked him for it? Are you thanking him for it? Some of the most grateful people are people who have been carried through challenging disease and brought into healing, and ultimately that comes from God's hands.

It mentions here that He redeems our life from the pit. Have you thanked God for lifting you up out of some maybe financial pit you were in or some sort of emotional pit that you were in, carrying you through some deep challenge that you walked through. And the psalmist says praising the Lord and forgetting not as benefits, who lifts us up out of pits and touches us with love? Have you experienced love through those around you, through him by his spirit in some way? And have you mentioned a thanks to God for bringing love into your life in some way, even if it's just a trickle of love or compassion or kindness or gentleness.

All this comes from the hand of God. "What do we have," the Scripture says, "that we have not received." Every good thing comes down from the father of heavenly lights, and we don't want to forget these as we train our minds around those things that are good and right and true and praiseworthy. It steers our heart and we become a people of praise and worship and honor of him. He satisfies our desires with good things. Is there something in the past year that he's brought to you that has satisfied you and brought joy and fullness into your life? And have you paused to thank God for that? Have you given gratitude, express gratitude to Him? The Psalmist list these categories. And of course, there's many other – "forget not all his benefits." There's so many things. Have you taken out a pen and paper ever and just sat down and started to list all of the good things God has brought into your life?

The psalmist here then says it does something for us, you know, expressing this gratitude, not only brings joy to the heart of God, but he says, you do these things and you forget not his benefits so that your youth is renewed, like the eagles. The psalmist here is correlating our obedience to the will of God in cultivating a heart of gratitude and expressing Thanksgiving

for specific things for all of His benefits. He's correlating that to the renewing of our own hearts and souls. He's saying that obedience to this part of the will of God brings a constant internal renewing so that our youth is renewed like the eagles.

When God invites us to do something, it's for our good. And Thanksgiving is hard because it expresses thanks to someone outside of us. And we're selfish and we're prideful. And Thanksgiving puts us in a state of humility and dependence. But this dependence is on the one who brings life to us and wants to stir in us the vitality of living and to be renewed outwardly. We might be wasting away, but the Scripture says inwardly we can be renewed day by day. And part of that is, as we obey God, he works miraculously. It's him working in us and through us to accomplish his good will, to do this miraculous transformation in our lives. And something as simple as cultivating a heart of gratitude can move us down the road of becoming more and more Christlike in our lives.

How are you doing on this, friend, in this Thanksgiving holiday? A time to look back and reflect. Are we grateful or do all we see as the challenges and the heartaches and the pains and the things we're facing in this world? Or do we see and we focusing on the goodness and the greatness of God and what he's done for us? Our forefathers have set a great example here in the United States for us of continuing to cultivate on a routine basis a heart of gratitude. And it's our responsibility to do this as well, because as we give thanks and glory to God, it helps us have the right perspective on life. And if we don't, we drift away into childish behaviors, even foolish behaviors. Romans 1 says.

I hope this is an encouragement to you today, friend, to fix your eyes on the goodness of God and continue to cultivate a heart of gratitude for specific ways that he's worked in your life. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you today for those that went before us and showed us the importance of Thanksgiving, cultivated a heart of Thanksgiving in our nation. We want to continue here in the United States to cultivate a heart of gratitude toward you. But all around the world, we can see who you are and acknowledge your goodness and your grace and your kindness to us. We can see specifically how you work in our lives. So help us, those of us that are listening now, help us become a people who are catching your good hand at work, your unseen hand, and giving you thanks for it. We pray this in the matchless name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.