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ALWAYS GIVING THANKS FOR ALL THINGS

Ephesians 5:20

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July 27, 2008
Ephesians Lesson 46

Always Giving Thanks for All Things
Ephesians 5:20

“Hello! My name is Steve and I’m a grumbler.” If there were a Grumblers Anonymous, I wonder how many would join? Would you be a member? I don’t endorse 12 Step programs, but I admit that I have a grumbling problem!

About a month ago, I was outside fixing the damage under the eaves of my house caused by last winter’s ice dams on my roof. When you scrape and sand flaking stain under the eaves, it falls in your face and on the rest of your body. When your body is hot and sweaty, it all sticks to your body. When you hit a nail or other protrusion with your brush, the stain drips onto your body. My neck was sore from looking up. My arms and shoulders were sore from working overhead. My back was sore from bending over and standing up countless times. My feet were sore from standing on the ladder all day. I was grumbling at that point. I was singing with Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof,” “If I were a rich man, I’d never ever paint my house again!”

Then the Spirit of God reminded me of this text that I would be preaching in a few weeks. (That’s one of the occupational hazards of being a preacher!) He also reminded me of the many families in the Midwest whose houses were under six feet of water from the floods. Then He reminded me of the families that I had seen last year in Nepal, who lived under blue tarps strung over a rope tied between two trees. Here I was, with a nice house in a nice neighborhood in America, the land of plenty. And I was listening to sermons on my I-pod as I worked! Why was I grumbling?

Happy, joyful, grateful children reflect the goodness and love of their parents. When you see a grumbling, dour-faced child, you don’t immediately think, “He must come from a loving home!” Maybe his parents are in fact the most loving, caring people in the world, but the child’s unhappy countenance doesn’t reflect it. As children of the God who has blessed us with every blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (1:3), by our thankfulness in every

situation we should reflect His goodness and love to a world that does not know Him.

Paul has already mentioned thankfulness in this chapter. In contrast to immorality, impurity, greed, and filthy talk, saints must give thanks (5:3-4). But now he brings it up again, because he knows how prone we are to grumbling. It's a lifelong battle to cultivate a grateful heart in all things.

And it's not optional. Peter O'Brien (*The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 361) writes, "Thanksgiving is almost a synonym for the Christian life. It is the response of gratitude to God's saving activity in creation and redemption, and thus a recognition that he is the ultimate source of every blessing." C. H. Spurgeon observes (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 19:68), "In heaven, we shall give thanks to God always for *all* things, without exception, and throughout eternity we shall magnify his holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord." So thanking Him now is just a warm-up for heaven. We should be growing continually in this grace.

Filled with the Spirit, believers are always to give thanks for all things to the Father through Jesus Christ.

In the context there is what O'Brien (p. 398) calls an "unconscious trinitarian focus," which increases the force of it. He writes (*ibid.*), "Christians filled by the Holy Spirit give thanks to God the Father on the basis of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished for his people by his death and resurrection."

1. To always give thanks to God for all things, we must be filled with the Holy Spirit.

As we've seen, verses 19-21 spell out the results of being filled with the Holy Spirit (5:18). To be filled with the Spirit is to be under the Spirit's control, with every conscious area of our lives submitted to Him. It is to walk in dependence on the Holy Spirit, as opposed to carrying out the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). As we saw, the first result of being filled with the Spirit is joyful singing (Eph. 5:19). Closely related to that, the second result is a heart that is thankful to the Father in all things. To the extent that we grumble, we are not living under the Spirit's control.

2. God wants us always to give thanks for all things.

If Paul had just said, "*Often* giving thanks for *most* things," it would have been more realistic and doable. I can give thanks *often* and I can give thanks for *most* things. But he doesn't allow us any exceptions! The Greek word for always means *always*, constantly, in every situation, including our trials. The Greek word for all things means *all things*!

What's more frustrating, this guy really practiced this! He exulted in his trials, knowing that God was using them to produce perseverance, proven character, and hope (Rom. 5:3). When he was illegally beaten, imprisoned, and put in the stocks, he sang praises to God (Acts 16:25). When he was imprisoned in Rome with the local believers slandering him, he wrote to the Philippians, repeatedly mentioning his own thankfulness and joy and exhorting them to joy (Phil. 1:3-4, 18, 25; 3:1; 4:4, 10). It was from that same prison that he wrote our text, "always giving thanks for all things."

It would seem that Paul deserved better treatment than this. After all, he was God's chief apostle to the Gentiles. There were still many places where he wanted to preach the gospel. And, he had served God faithfully through many trials already. He had been imprisoned other times, beaten times without number, and had often been in danger of death. He had been stoned and shipwrecked. He had faced dangers of all sorts. He had often been impoverished and deprived of the normal comforts of life. Critics relentlessly attacked him. And, he had the continual pressure of the problems that plagued the various churches (see 2 Cor. 11:23-28). Didn't Paul deserve a retirement condo overlooking the sea? But here, chained in a cold, stinking, stark Roman prison, he tells us always to give thanks in all things!

You may be thinking, does this mean that we're supposed to give thanks when an earthquake or hurricane kills thousands of people? What if my loved ones are among the victims? What if I lose one of my children or my mate? Or what about when someone we love is the victim of a terrible crime? Are we to thank God that a little child was molested or that a young woman was raped and murdered? Should we thank God when we hear about terrorists blowing up innocent people? Doesn't God Himself hate sin? How can we thank Him for it? Isn't mourning a more appropriate response than thankfulness?

We should never thank God for the sin that He hates. We should hate it, too (Ps. 97:10). Scripture clearly gives us a time to mourn and grieve over tragedies (Rom. 12:15). But, while we recognize that God is not the author of evil, we can thank Him that even evil is a part of the "all things" that He works together for good to His chosen ones (Rom. 8:28). As just stated, He uses these trials to produce perseverance, proven character, and hope in His children (Rom. 5:3). So, while we may not thank God for evil deeds or for things such as sickness, death, and natural disasters, which are the result of the fall, we can thank Him in the midst of these trials as we look to His promises and the hope of heaven.

Skeptics will sometimes taunt, how could a God of love, who could have prevented it if He chose to, allow little children to be sold into sexual slavery? How can He allow children to be abused or murdered? How can He allow all of the unjust suffering in the world?

My rejoinder is, how does it solve the problem to remove God from the equation? If there is no God of love, then you have a brutal, hopeless, pointless world where weak people are victims of the ruthless and strong. In such a world, suffering is pointless and there will be no future judgment to right the wrongs and punish the evildoers. It's just a dog-eat-dog world where some have it worse than others do. That view offers no hope to anyone!

But the Bible proclaims that because God exists, there is hope. He works all things together for good for His called ones (Rom. 8:28). There is an eternity beyond the grave when He will reward the innocent and righteously punish the wicked. And so we can always give thanks to Him in all things because we have His certain promise of eternal life.

On a practical note, I find that it's often more difficult to give thanks for minor frustrations and irritations than for the major trials that come. When major trials hit, I'm usually aware that God is dealing with me. So I stop and pray and try to figure out what He wants me to learn. But in the minor, day-to-day sort of hassles, I tend not to bring God into the picture. Why is this slow driver in front of me when I'm in a hurry? Why did my baby keep me up all night when I've got an important day at work? Why am I getting repeated interruptions when I'm trying to meet a deadline? In those

kinds of minor frustrations, I've got to stop, acknowledge God's sovereignty over them, and thank Him in the midst of them. I'm still working on that lesson!

3. To always give thanks for all things, focus on and joyfully submit to God the Father.

A. To always give thanks for all things, deliberately focus on God the Father.

(1) This focus must be deliberate, especially in times of trial.

I've always loved Psalm 57, which David wrote from a cave when Saul was seeking to kill him. If I were holed up in a cave with a mad king and his army trying to kill me, I probably would not have written Psalm 57! If I had written a song at all, the refrain would have been, "God, save my life!" But David wrote a psalm about God being exalted above the heavens and His glory being over all the earth! In the midst of that psalm, he writes (Ps. 57:7), "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises!"

Did you notice how deliberate David is? It's as if he says, "My heart is steadfast, O God," and then his heart wavers in fear. So he repeats, "my heart is steadfast!" He declares, "I will sing," but then he thinks, "Singing is a dumb thing to do when you're hiding in a cave from a crazed king who is trying to kill you!" So, David deliberately repeats, "yes, I will sing praises!" You won't thank God always for all things without this deliberate focus. The reason that thankfulness was so prevalent in the apostle Paul was that God was so deliberately prominent in his life.

(2) Focus on the Father's sovereignty.

The "all things" of Ephesians 5:20 is the same "all things" of Ephesians 1:11, which says that God has predestined us "according to His purpose who works *all things* after the counsel of His will." It's the same "all things" of Ephesians 1:22, which tells us that God "put *all things* in subjection under His [Christ's] feet." As we've seen, it's the same "all things" of Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes *all things* to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

There is a false teaching in our day called "open theism." The proponents of it deny the absolute sovereignty and omniscience of God. They claim that when tragedies happen, God is just as perplexed and vexed over it as we are. It's taught at a large church in our town. I once attended a funeral there for a young woman who had been killed in a car accident. The pastor pronounced authoritatively, "This was *not* God's will."

I think he was trying to get God off the hook for the accident, but in my estimation, he completely removed any source of comfort for those who were grieving this young woman's death. Was her death due to bad luck? Did Satan pull one over on God? There is no comfort in either of those alternatives. The only comfort when bad things happen is that of Joseph, who told his brothers (Gen. 50:20), "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive." Our main source of comfort in any trial, major or minor, is that our Father in heaven is sovereign.

(3) Focus on the Father's love.

Paul says that we should give thanks to God, but he doesn't stop there. He adds, "even the Father." The phrase could be translated, "our God and Father. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we know God as our Father. David put it (Ps. 103:13), "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."

Because God is our loving Father, who shows tender compassion toward us as His children, we can be assured that the trials which He sovereignly allows into our lives are not permitted in a cold or capricious manner. Rather, He lovingly sends them to conform us to the image of His Son, "who learned obedience from the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8).

We need to keep in mind that even earthly fathers see things from a different perspective than their children do. Children see things in the here and now. "I want a cookie now!" The wise father (or mother) says, "No, that would not be good for you right now." Often children lack discernment. They don't perceive the dangerous consequences of their actions. If they were left to their own

devices, without the guidance and restraint of a loving parent, they would quickly destroy themselves.

But a loving father sees the long-range perspective of what will be good for his children. He requires them to study when they would rather play, because he knows that it would be detrimental for them to grow up without learning important subjects. He requires them to eat proper food and to get proper rest and exercise, because he knows the long-range consequences if they don't. Even though some of these things are not the most pleasant activities in the short run, the father knows what is best in the long run.

Our heavenly Father has eternity in view, whereas we usually can't see much beyond the present. He doesn't always reveal to us why He does what He does, but He asks us to trust Him as our loving Father, even when we can't understand His reasons for our trials. To give thanks always for all things, focus deliberately on God's sovereignty and His love.

- (4) Focus on God's many blessings, but especially on His salvation.

The fact that He can be called, "*our* Lord Jesus Christ" and "*our* God and Father," brings into focus the reality of the salvation that He has freely given to us. As John puts it (1 John 3:1), "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are." Formerly, we were dead in our sins, under Satan's evil domain, and children of wrath. But God poured out His rich mercy and love upon us (2:1-7). Formerly, we were (2:12-13) "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

Or, as Paul puts it (Rom. 8:32), "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" Read that great chapter, which begins with no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus and ends with absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and you will be filled with thank-

fulness, even in the midst of your trials! But there is another element in addition to this deliberate focus on God:

- B. To always give thanks for all things, joyfully submit to God.

When we encounter trials, our sinful tendency is to become defiant. Either we think, "I don't deserve this! Look at all that I've done for You, God! Send your trials to the wicked, but not to me!" Or, we throw a pity party: "Poor me! Why is this happening to me? I've done so much for God. I've been so faithful. Now this!" Both attitudes stem from pride. I'm thinking more highly of myself than I ought to think, that I deserve better. Or, I'm thinking that I know better than God does what is best for me. So to be thankful, I've got to submit to His sovereign, all-wise, loving hand in my trials.

But it's not good enough to grit my teeth, put on my martyr's face, and grimly submit. Also, we must *joyfully* submit to God. This verse is a part of the sentence that includes verse 19, "singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."

Joyful submission is essential because God's reputation is at stake. If we grumble, the world thinks that our God must not be a loving, gracious, kind Father. Judging by how miserable we seem to be, He must be rather mean and ornery. Certainly, our grim demeanor would not cause anyone to say, "I'd like to know your God so that I can be as unhappy and miserable as you are!" And so our submission to God in our trials must be a *joyful* submission. We can be joyful because we know that He loves us and He does all things to conform us to the image of His Son. There's a final thing:

- 4. We give thanks to the Father for all things through Jesus Christ.

All of God's blessings come to us through Jesus Christ (1:3). He chose us in Him (1:4). He predestined us to adoption through Him (1:5). In Him we have redemption through His blood (1:7). "He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him" (1:9). "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance" (1:11). In Him, we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (1:13). It's all *in Him!*

In our text, "in His name" refers to everything that Jesus is and all that He has done for us (O'Brien, p. 398). To thank God in

the name of our Lord Jesus Christ means that we thank Him that Jesus was willing to leave the glory of heaven and come to die for our sins. As Paul says in Philippians 2:9-11, "For this reason also [because Jesus willingly humbled Himself to death on a cross], God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." So, filled with the Spirit, we are always to give thanks for all things to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins.

Conclusion

Matthew Henry was once robbed. How can you possibly give thanks to God when you've been robbed? That night Henry wrote in his diary: "Let me be thankful, first, because I was never robbed before. Second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life. Third, because although they took my all, it was not much. Fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed" (*Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers], by Paul Lee Tan, # 6578).

If like me, you're prone to grumbling, ask God each day to help you to be filled with the Spirit and always to give thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father. Then, rather than grumbling, you will prove to be a child of God above reproach, shining like a light in the midst of a crooked, perverse, and grumbling generation, holding forth the word of life (Phil. 2:14-16).

Application Questions

1. Is it possible for thankfulness and grief to coexist? Is it wrong to grieve a loss for a lifetime (such as the loss of a child)?
2. Is it hypocritical to give thanks when we don't feel thankful? How do we get the right feelings?
3. Why is the denial of God's sovereignty over evil a bad way to deal with the problem of evil?
4. Why is grumbling a dangerous sin? (See Rom. 1:21; 1 Cor. 10:10.)

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