

CULTIVATING A SPIRIT OF GRATEFULNESS

Philippians 4:6-7 "...with thanksgiving..."

Colossians 2:6 "...overflowing with thankfulness."

Text:1 Thessalonians 5:18 "...for it is the will of God..."

Luke 17:11-19 "...only one returned to give thanks."

Introduction: I first heard the words to the chorus "Give Thanks" in 1989 when I attended the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Manila Philippines. You may know the words.

GIVE THANKS

(Words and Music by Henry Smith, 1978)

Give thanks with a grateful heart; Give thanks to the Holy One;

Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son.

After repeating the verse a strong response is given!

And now let the weak say, "I am strong," Let the poor say,

"I am rich," because of what the Lord has done for us.

Second ending: Give thanks.

Five thousand delegates from 192 countries in July 1989 participated in the ten day conference. At the time of the conference the Berlin Wall stood firm. The Central and Eastern Europe Soviet bloc remained secure. Numerous African countries were involved in civil wars.

Yet I heard testimonies of God's grace from delegates from these and other countries where Christians were regularly persecuted. I was profoundly impacted. These believers accepted I Thessalonians 5:18 as an imperative and a way of life for them. "Give thanks in all circumstances for this will is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Two weeks later, July 27, 1989 to be exact, I was elected president of MVNC. For several reasons, Anne and I hesitated to accept the call of the Board. We were fearful that we would forget some core values of the Filipino Christians. With the average per capital income in 1989 at approximately \$700.00 a year, the Filipino Christians with whom we worked were such grateful people.

They prayed often for daily bread and were so free to express gratitude to God and to others for the numerous blessings (a word frequently used by Filipino Christians). God in His grace has given these “gifts” to them. Anne and I did not want to return to the States and get caught up in the cynicism, sarcasm, materialism, negativism, and criticism that we felt was so pervasive among Americans.

This academic year has been a wake up call for me. I began the year feeling as if I had been sucked into the very lifestyle and mindset, that I detested eleven years earlier. It came to a head for me last October with Brennan Manning during his Estep Prayer Lecture Series. Therefore, my last sermon to you, graduating seniors, is deeply personal.

Manning in a chapel message last fall asked, “Let’s say I interviewed ten people, asking each the question—‘Do you trust God?’ and each answered, ‘yes, I trust God,’ but nine of the ten actually did NOT trust Him. How would I find out which one of the professing Christians was telling the truth?” He continued, “I would videotape each of the ten lives for a month and then, after watching the videos, pass judgement using this criterion: the person with an abiding spirit of gratitude is the one who trusts God.”

The scriptures remind us that God desires a thankful people, a grateful people, not a murmuring, grumbling, faultfinding and complaining people. However, in our real world of living and leading within the Christian community, how can we recapture a spirit of gratitude as we work daily with problems, people, and the conflicting perspectives of those whom we serve?

Graduating senior, will you live as a faithful disciple with a consistently grateful heart in the difficult situations you will face and the multiple demands placed on you in your next assignment? I passionately desire that each of you depart from MVNC this weekend with a renewed commitment to cultivate a spirit of gratefulness in your life. [Pause] But how can we recapture a spirit of gratitude as a way of living? Listen again to I Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

“TO WALK IN GRATITUDE AS A WAY OF LIVING...” This text reminds us, our gratitude must be:

- I. ATTENTIVE, “Give thanks...”
- II. INCLUSIVE, “Give thanks in all circumstances....” and
- III. GOD-CENTERED “Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God’s will in Christ Jesus.”

Let’s look more carefully at each one of these imperatives for a consistently grateful Christian.

I. OUR GRATITUDE MUST BE ATTENTIVE. “”Give thanks...” (1Thes. 5:18a)

Do you recall the story in Luke 17 of the ten lepers cleansed by Jesus? Ten were cleansed, yet only one of the cleansed lepers returned to Jesus to thank him. Were the other nine not aware they had been cleaned?

Attentiveness to what God is doing enables us to “see” and “focus” through the ‘eyes of our eyes’—our spiritual eyes. We look for the miracles and marvels of God in our lives—our equivalent to the crossing of the Red Sea, the pillar of fire by night, and the manna by day, the daily protections from our ‘enemies’, or the ‘healing’ of our leprosy! And with this attentiveness comes gratitude to Him who promised never to leave or forsake us! God really is for us!

When we are continually preoccupied with busyness, the tyranny of the urgent, and the incessant running to meet everyone's expectations, then our thoughts cannot be focused. In my own flurry of activities last fall, Manning caught my attention when he repeated, rather loudly, I recall, "Awareness, awareness, awareness, awareness...."

A Spirit-empowered attentiveness to God alerts us to the presence of God manifested in a piece of music, a bird, a daffodil, a kiss, an encouraging word from a friend, a thunderstorm, a newborn baby, a fresh blanket of snow, a full moon, a sunrise, sunset or a rainbow.

There are gifts of God we often take for granted. What about the grace-gifts from individuals—people with whom we live, work, or worship--colleagues and friends on this campus or in local churches? And what about our family members and fellow employees...or even employers? Are we attentive to the small and large gifts God gives us through people close to us! Or are we taking them for granted...always expecting more? In the South where Anne and I grew up, should you spend any time with the older Christians, you could not help but notice how often they say, "Thank you, Jesus."

To be aware and alert to the presence of God manifested in the predictability of a job or the unpredictability of the people with whom we live and work requires a spirit-empowered attentiveness to God.

From this perspective, the difficult people with whom we work (or will work!), the conflicting expectations placed on us, the multiple demands and the sheer exhaustion we experience can be placed in perspective. Through attentiveness to God's activities in our lives, the people around us and the place we work can be made the source of joy—abiding joy—in the midst of seemingly impossible situations.

The Spirit of God within us enables us through attentiveness to 'give thanks.' Our gratitude must be attentive.

II. OUR GRATITUDE MUST BE INCLUSIVE—“Give thanks in all circumstances.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18b)

Job asks, “If we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow, too?”

Nouwen wrote in an article of the spiritual work of gratitude:

To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives—the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections—that requires hard spiritual work. Still, we are only grateful people when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for.

Don’t focus just on the circumstances you normally would call wonderful. God may use difficult circumstances in a wonderful way. So we thank Him in the difficult circumstances, also!

Manning told the story of a grateful, old woman in an extended care hospital:

She had some kind of ‘wasting’ disease, her powers fading away over the march of the month. A student worker spoke to her on a coincidental visit. The student kept going back, drawn by the strange force of a woman’s joy. Though she could no longer move her arms and legs, the elderly lady would say, “I’m just so happy I can move my neck.” When she could no

longer mover her neck, she would say, “I’m just so glad I can hear and see.’ When the young student finally asked the old woman what would happen if she lost sound and sight, the gentle old lady said, ‘I’ll just be so grateful that you come to visit.”

Remember to be thankful for little things. Jesus said “...whosoever can be trusted with very little can be trusted with much...” (Luke 16:10) If you are grateful in small things, even in a small way, you will naturally express gratitude in great things. Don’t forget the ten lepers. For whatever reason, nine of the ten cleansed lepers chose not to return to give thanks.

The discipline of giving thanks in all circumstances is so painful and difficult at times, especially when we have been hurt deeply. But I am learning to say, “Thank you God even in these times for the lessons You are teaching me about myself, my relationship to you, and others.”

Nouwen speaks of an old priest who told him, “My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.”

Our gratitude must be inclusive—the joy and the sorrow, the small blessings as well as the large gifts from God, the interruptions and the routine. “Give thanks in all circumstances....” (I Thessalonians 5:18b)

III. LASTLY, OUR GRATITUDE MUST BE GOD-CENTERED (I Thessalonians 5:18c)

Text: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

The theocentric or God-centered character of gratitude is anchored in ruthless trust that there is a God who is Sovereign and whose providential care guides His people.

By divine mercy, we have been given the unearned gift of salvation. We received this gift through no merit of our own. Our sins have been forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ.

When we celebrate that we have received a gift we can never repay, we notify our faces and our actions. The tenor of our lives becomes one of humble and joyful thanksgiving. We rejoice in the gift. “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, his love is everlasting.” (Ps. 107:1) “Now thanks be to God for His gift [of grace].” II Cor. 9:15

I was moved recently by a faculty member whose testimony reflected these passages. She said, “I am learning new ways to see life and work as a means to express gratitude to God for his grace, mercy, and faithfulness.” “New ways to see life and work.”

God reminded me throughout this year that the foremost quality of a trusting disciple and a Christian leader is gratefulness. Gratitude arises from the acceptance of all of life as grace—as an undeserved and unearned gift—a grace gift—from the Father’s hand. God has reminded me again this year that: GRATITUDE IS GROUNDED IN A FOCUS ON GOD AND HIS MERCY AND GRACE, AND NOT IN A PREOCCUPATION WITH PEOPLE AND THEIR PROBLEMS. I state this with conviction because:

- #1 The opposite of gratitude is, of course, ingratitude, and
- #2 The antithesis of giving thanks is grumbling.

So grievous was the matter of ingratitude in the mind of a great church leader that he wrote a letter stating: “...that ingratitude is one of the most abominable of sins and that it should be detested.” Why? “For it is a forgetting of the graces, benefits, and blessings received...[from our Creator and Lord.]”

Remember ingratitude and negative attitudes were among the Israelites major problems and caused them to wander in the wilderness for forty years before entering the Promised Land.

Grumblers are like a crew of vineyard workers who had labored from dawn to dusk and felt cheated when the latecomers received the same wage (Matt. 20:1-16). Grumblers bellyache about the unfairness of life, the poverty of their resources, the insensitivity of their spouse or employer, the liberals, the conservatives, the hot weather, the cold pizza, the rich, the poor, the inadequate administrator of a Christian college, and the incompetent pastor of the local church. Grumblers bellyache!

Gratitude, however, is not grounded in murmuring, grumbling, fault finding, or complaining, but in the conviction that God is big enough to handle any situation we encounter! Praise God!

I came to see this year in a profound way that it is gratitude that makes us joyful, not the other way around. Too often we are not grateful to God because we are sad, when things don't go our way.

Slowly, very slowly but surely, I am coming to see that joy does not make us grateful. Rather it is gratitude that makes us joyful. "Give us inner eyes—spiritual eyes—and see and embrace this profound truth, O God!"

Let me review:

1. As a disciple of Christ, who is a graduating senior from MVNC, do you find it difficult to imagine that gratefulness can become the basic attitude of your life?
2. This will only be possible when your gratefulness is
 - a. Attentive "Give thanks..."
 - b. Inclusive "In all circumstances..." and
 - c. God-Centered "For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus."...

3. For the class of 2001, I want to leave you with this challenge: Give thanks to God in the midst of your most difficult situations for this is the foundation of a spiritual life needed to sustain you during the months and years ahead.
4. Don't let the routines of life dull you to the surprises of God!
- 5.. Give thanks with a grateful heart; Give thanks to the Holy one; Give thanks because he's given Jesus Christ, His son. And now let the weak say, "I am strong," Let the poor say, "I am rich, " and let MVNC graduates say, "I will be a consistently grateful Christian, because of what the Lord has done for us. Give thanks!
6. Reflect on these words as the Collegians sing a gospel song reminding us of the foundation for an abiding spirit of gratitude. Because of the saving Grace of God in our lives, we can, "Give thanks in all things for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus."