

## Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, **giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything** in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### Give Thanks in Love

The message today is going to zero in on one verse of today's lesson, and that is about **giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything**. And because God created us to live together in peace with one another, it's important that we learn to give thanks to one another .

When I thought about today's sermon topic, "Give Thanks in Love," I asked, "Is it even possible to give thanks without love?" Does simply saying, "Thank-you" qualify as giving thanks? If we're honest we know that words like "please" and "thank you" don't always seem so sincere; think how often parents train their children to say "thank-you" to someone when they receive something from another person, but is that a sincere thank-you or is it something the child feels obligated to say because Mom or Dad told him to do it? Is it spoken with the same sincerity as the recorded message saying, "Your call is very important to us" that you hear ever twenty seconds for ten minutes as you wait on the line for the next available customer service representative, or is it something spoken from the heart, something accompanied by a hug?

It's easy to train ourselves to say "please" and "thank you," but gratitude runs deeper than words or feelings; gratitude is a lifestyle that we live. We may experience joy and warmth when we receive something from someone, but that may not be gratitude at all. I may be thankful that the dentist found no cavities or gum disease during my last visit, and the knowledge may make me feel happy, but then I may turn around and gripe about my sore shoulder. I may feel warm and fuzzy looking at a beautiful sunrise over the Jersey Shore, but am I actually grateful for that sunrise and the ocean?

1. Gratitude requires that you recognize that someone has done something for your benefit. Gratitude always looks behind the gift and recognizes the giver. In other words, **gratitude is relational**. The more self-centered you, the harder it is to feel true gratitude. A grateful person doesn't simply recognize that there is joy in her life; she recognizes that the source of the joy is beyond the object that triggers the joy. A grateful child does more than smile with excitement when flying down the hill on a roller coaster at Great Adventure; the grateful child recognizes that Mom and Dad have brought them to the park in order to benefit her. A grateful person doesn't just gaze in awe at a star-filled night sky; a grateful person recognizes an even-more awesome Creator behind those stars, a Creator who has given him these things called eyes with which to observe the beauty of

the universe, and the grateful person offers a prayer of thanksgiving for the wonder that he is able to observe. Gratitude requires us to see the goodness of God and the goodness of others.

2. **Which means that a grateful person accepts their vulnerability.** A grateful person recognizes that their joy depends of the kindness of others, that they cannot truly be happy *without* the kindness that others show toward them. There's a great company called NEXT JUMP headquartered here in New York that works with businesses to improve their work environment, and one thing that they've implemented is a special award given to a worker who other workers recognize as being most helpful in their own success. Usually we think of awards for the top seller, top producer, the biggest money-maker, and that kind of award culture emphasizes individual achievement and competition – everybody trying to outperform everyone else. But by giving an award to someone whose colleagues recognize as their biggest benefactor in the workplace – the one who helped them with a computer program or who encouraged them when they were in a slump – by recognizing the quality of helpfulness of others – it helps everyone to see that a company is a team of human beings who depend on each other for support and encouragement. Those who think that they are self-made, that their success is attributed only to themselves, are less likely to help others succeed and more likely to feel isolated and even suspicious of others intent. “Why are you being so nice to me?” “What are you hoping to get out of me?” A grateful person has a more trusting disposition toward others.
3. **Which brings me to the third point: a grateful person recognizes grace.** A grateful person understands that a gift is a gift – something given with no strings attached. The grateful person does not write the thank-you note out of obligation, in order to “pay back” or “get even” with the giver. A grateful person is able to see that what she has received has been given to her out of love. The point of us gathering here on Sunday morning is not because need to “pay back” God for the gift of Jesus Christ but rather to express our heartfelt gratitude for what was given to us out of compassion. A worship service is metaphorically a thank-you gift to God that we give out of gratitude, not because we owe anything to God but because we love him and recognize his goodness and grace; to think that we owe God something is to diminish God by characterizing God as less than loving, less than gracious.

Truly grateful people look beyond the gift to the giver, they recognize that their own life depends upon the goodness of others, and they recognize that the giver gives with a pure heart so that they too can give thanks with a pure heart. But knowing these things does not make gratitude easy for us. If you have been raised to believe that you create your own destiny, that you are mostly responsible for your own success (or failure), then expressing sincere gratitude will not be easy for you. If you are driven by the desire for fame or image or status you are not going to fully appreciate the kindness of others who help you in your pursuits; in fact, those three things – fame, image, or status – become your gods, your idols, and those become your objects of worship rather than the one

true God who loves and gives and whose will is for us to love one another and give to one another. This is why Jesus tells us in the gospels, “whoever saves their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will gain it” (Mark 8:35). A life lived for the self is a wasted life. Nurture a life that is spent on others, not just serving others but expressing gratitude for the ways that others serve you. And in all things, recognize the loving hand of God which has given you life as well as the blessing of others. And may your life be one of gratitude.