

"GIVING THANKS ALWAYS"
November 18, 1990

TEXT: Ephesians 5:20 "Always and for everything . . . [give] thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father."

I am sure it is no surprise to anyone here that Thursday is Thanksgiving. And I am confident, too, that in one way or another most Americans will celebrate the day. Yet many will almost certainly ignore its spiritual side. For them, it may mean nothing more than the famous four F's: fun, family, food, and football.

Others, perhaps, will make a dutiful --if somewhat half-hearted-- stab at giving thanks. But they may find it harder than they thought. Not only are many of us sadly out of practice, but I wonder how truly thankful we really are. Richard B. Douglass writes, "The modern American seldom pauses to give thanks for the simple blessings of life. One reason is that we are used to having so much."

In our own sophisticated way, we are not that different from a group of native women observed by a tourist as they washed their clothes. They were washing at a spot where hot and cold springs flowed out of the earth side by side. As the women washed their garments in the hot springs and rinsed them in the cold, the tourist said to his guide, "I suppose they think Mother Nature is very generous to them." But, to his surprise the guide replied, "Oh, no, Senor. "They complain because she does not supply the soap." How often are we like that?

But, assuming that most of us feel some need to give thanks, this is how to do it. The secret was discovered many centuries ago and is contained in the book of Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 20: "Always and for everything . . . [give] thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father."

First of all, let us note that word, always. In Henry VI (Part II, Act I) Shakespeare wrote,

"Let never day nor night unhallowed pass

But still remember what the Lord hath done."

It is fine to set aside a day to emphasize our thanks. But unless it is followed with 364 more just like it, then it probably does not mean very much.

Some of you may know the name of Burton Hillis. For many years he wrote a column called "The Man Next Door" on the last page of Better Homes and Gardens. In one of them he wrote, "I

don't think the Lord wants any pompous proclamation of thanks on one Thursday in November as much as He wants a little humble service . . . every day of the year." If giving thanks means anything at all, it has to be a constant state of mind.

Thus Wendell Fifield, long associated with First Congregational Church of Los Angeles wrote, "Most people think of Thanksgiving as a day on the calendar. They view it as historical, objective, and secular. This concept misses its real meaning. Thanksgiving is a quality of the inner life. It is expressed in the thankful heart. It depends not upon the 'muchness' of material possessions but rather upon the inner riches of the spirit.

In the second place, for thanks-giving to mean what it should we need to give thanks, not just for the pleasant things of life, but for everything. "Always and for everything . . . [give] thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." It is easy to give thanks for the pleasant things in life: for healing, a better job, a loved one's safe return, material blessings, and all the countless ways in which our lives are made easier and happier and fuller.

But it takes more imagination to give thanks for what we have been spared. Alexander Whyte, the great Scottish preacher, always began his prayers with some expression of gratitude. One cold, miserable day his people wondered what he was going to say. "Surely there could not be much to be grateful for today," they thought. But, when the time came for prayer, this is what he said, "We thank Thee, O Lord, that it is not always like this!"

When we have an ordinary cold, we can be thankful it is not a heavy cold. When we have a heavy cold, we can be grateful it is not pneumonia. And when we have pneumonia, we can give thanks that it is only in one lung. I realize there are those who would consider such an attitude to be naive. But it is just as realistic as seeing only the bad in life. And it is much more conducive to mental and spiritual health.

Most difficult of all however --yet, in some ways, most important-- is giving thanks even for the unpleasant things in life. It is easy for me to give thanks for steak and ice cream, but harder to be grateful for spinach and parsnips. Yet dietitians tell these are just as important as steak --and more important than ice cream.

In the same way, some of God's greatest gifts are the ones we least appreciate. In her book, The Hiding Place, Corrie Ten Boom relates an incident in her life which taught her that principle. She and her sister, Betsy, had just been transferred to the worst German prison camp they had yet seen, Ravensbruck. When they entered the barracks, they found them terribly overcrowded and infested with fleas.

But their Scripture reading that morning included I Thessalonians, chapter 5, verses 15-18, which reads: "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Betsy told Corrie to stop and thank the Lord for every detail of their new living quarters. At first Corrie flatly refused to give thanks for the fleas, but Betsy persisted, and finally she succumbed. During the months that followed, they were surprised to find how openly they could hold Bible study and prayer meetings without interference from the guards. It was only much later that they learned the guards would not enter the barracks because of the fleas.

Now I am not saying that God specifically put those fleas in there so the Ten Booms could hold their Bible classes unmolested. Nor do I believe that God specifically sends illnesses, accidents, and the disappointments of life. But it is these things which develop in us our most admirable human traits. Without them there would be no occasion for courage, or determination, or compassion. Whatever befalls us, I believe that God is there working to bring about good. Good which might not come to us --or through us-- in any other way.

And finally, it is important that we give thanks specifically to God. That may seem to be an easy thing, but it just might prove to be the hardest thing of all. Most of us can manage to be thankful in general to no one in particular. We thank goodness. We thank heaven. We thank our lucky stars. But being thankful to God admits a dependence, a creaturehood, we are often loath to acknowledge.

Yet that acknowledgement is crucial to any real religion. And it changes our whole attitude toward life. Henry Ward Beecher wrote, "If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my eyes, and search for them with my clumsy fingers, and be unable to detect them: but let me take a magnet and sweep through it, and how it would draw to itself the almost invisible particles by the mere power of attraction.

"The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day, and as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find, in every hour, some heavenly blessings: only the iron in God's sand is gold." Thanksgiving puts power into living because it opens the heart to receive joyfully, to respond gratefully, and to serve faithfully.

So, if you still have trouble feeling thankful, here are seven possibilities suggested by Gene Perrett:

Be grateful

... for automatic dishwashers. They make it possible for

Mom to get out of the kitchen before the family comes back for snacks.

...for husbands who do small repairs around the house. Sooner or later they make them big enough to call in professionals.

...for the bathtub--the one place where people give us a little time for ourselves.

...for children who put away their things and clean up after themselves. They're such a joy you hate to see them go home to their own parents.

...for gardening. It's a relief to deal with dirt outside the house for a change.

...for teenagers. They give parents a chance to learn a second language.

And last, but not least . . .

...for smoke alarms. They let you know when the turkey's done."

"Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."