

"IN EVERYTHING GIVE THANKS"

A Sermon By

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## "IN EVERYTHING GIVE THANKS"

TEXT: "In everything give thanks....for this is the  
will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you"  
(I Thessalonians 5: 18)

### INTRODUCTION

Of all verses in the Bible, why this one? And of all times for hearing such a word, why now? I feel that in a way I was driven to this text against my own will. In those secret chambers of the heart where one contends with God, I found myself protesting. Surely, I kept saying to myself, one can be more relevant than this...what with the problems and difficulties we face both as individuals and as a nation.

I struggled, but I could not prevail. So we're stuck - you and I - on this Sunday before our national day of Thanksgiving with a Biblical word that probably runs counter to our inner, individual preference. Hear it again,

"In everything give thanks...for this is the  
will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you".

### BACKGROUND

In fairness, let it be noted here at the beginning that these words were written in less than optimum circumstances. They were not penned in a bright, warm room after a full meal. The words belong to St. Paul, and they're a part of the first letter that he ever wrote. His infant congregation there in Thessalonica was little more than an itch in the side of a decadent empire. The members there would soon know what persecution was all about.

This little Church had mistakenly believed that Jesus would soon return and that none of them would die. But Jesus did not return, and some of their number did die. They were in deep discouragement. Their leadership was thin and there was no certainty that the Church would survive.

"In everything give thanks....for this is the  
will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

### DEVELOPMENT

Now the truth of this text has a driving force of its own that is not dependent on fair skies or good times.

I think it's important for us to note that Paul was not saying that we should be thankful for everything...we would be less than sane were we to glory in things like accidents and illnesses. No - not "for everything", but "in everything". In every circumstance of life the aim is to maintain a thankful spirit. And as you know, this is not easy to do.

Events of recent years - locally and nationally - have turned us into a generation of moralists. A lot of people out there are telling us what's wrong. A surprising number of articles and editorials are suggesting that our crisis is a crisis of the human spirit. Words like soul and morale and purpose and will and gumption are receiving thoughtful attention. Plain words such as greed, and ingratitude, indulgence and selfishness, prayerlessness and godlessness make their way into articles as well as sermons.

If our crisis is a crisis tied in with the human spirit then crash programs are not the answer, nor "Reganomics", nor the birth of another super agency. What

is wanted and what is needed is a new attitude. And this brings us back to St. Paul, for the "thanks-giving" to which he calls us is not an act, but rather an attitude. It's a steady "yes-saying" to life. It's an unquenchable flame at the center of our being that affirms that life is god, that it has ultimate meaning, that higher laws are structured into the very fabric of this universe. Therefore, said Paul, "in everything...give thanks!"

But you and I know that thankfulness cannot be commanded, that gratitude cannot be ordered on the spot. It's like saying to someone, "Hey, you...over there...be generous". Or, you...sitting back there under the balcony, "be happy". Or, you...down front..."be sweet". Not a chance. In other words, it can't be forced. You have to feel it yourself. And "thanks-giving" is the product of reflection, and it's well for us to pause occasionally and to reflect and to think about those things for which you and I should be grateful.

#### USES OF ADVERSITY

I heard a commentator in recent days suggest that we consider the uses of adversity. I mean...if you're down there on the floor and things are going bad you might just as well look for a little lift. This is an old and helpful theme. The Church has no monopoly on it. "It's an ill wind that blows no good". "Even the darkest cloud has a silver lining". We've all been down that road.

An article from a magazine entitled, "The Bright Side of the Economy" by James Boyd somehow turned up in my sermon notebook. I ~~must have clipped it some time ago and then forgotten about it.~~ It called our attention to such unnoticed blessings as (1) greater courtesy these days from salespeople (I hadn't noticed that myself). (2) wooing letters from banks offering to give us some gift to use our money (3) a cutback in the manufacturing of cars, and more importantly, a reduction in the number of large cars being made. (4) a 20% reduction in highway accidents as a result of the 55-mile speed limit. (5) developers and speculators are scrambling to unload their tracts of land, their further exploitation stymied. (6) waste materials are being studied for possible re-use. (7) the birthrate is down. (8) a new interest is developing in do-it-yourself courses and literature, (9) there is less padding of the government payroll. (10) repair shops are doing a brisk business as more people choose to conserve the old rather than purchase the new.

Maybe for some it helps to reflect on such developments, but this is not what St. Paul had in mind.

#### LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE

Others have suggested that we look at the big picture rather than the wallet-sized snapshots of our personal discomfort. This is the school of thought that urges us in the direction of a better perspective. You can't judge life by how it looks as it runs through your little strand. Stand back and look at the larger picture, and you may not be as quick to think those dark thoughts of gloom and of doom.

And there's something to this, too.

Really, is it catastrophic to enjoy a piece of steak twice a month rather than four times a month in a world where millions are stalked by hunger. Or, is it catastrophic not to be able to trade in for a new car every three years in a world where millions have an annual income of less than five hundred dollars a year. Is it catastrophic to be asked to work a few more hours a week in a world

where millions would give an arm and a leg for an income producing job?

This is not to say that our pain is not real. And certainly it is not to say that there is no authentic, down to the bone, hurt and privation in our city. It is to say that most of us need to get a line on ourselves so that what we may feel can be understood in relation to the whole.

Robert Prisig in his book, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance helpfully points out to the reader that there are two Americas that you and I tend to experience: a Primary America and a Secondary America. He writes:

"There's this Primary America of freeways and jet-flights and TV and movie spectaculars. And people caught up in this Primary America seem to go through huge portions of their lives without much consciousness of what's immediately around them. The media have convinced them that what's right around them is unimportant. And that's why they're lonely. You see it in their faces."

In other words, if you're not partaking of the goodies of this technological society, if your wife doesn't look like the young starlet on the tube, or if your car doesn't go quite as fast as the new sports' car, if you're not written up or mentioned now and then in a glossy magazine of large circulation, you're not really alive. And the sad thing is, many of us are dumb enough to believe it.

But the Secondary America is the America right around us: the back roads and the mountain ranges, the rivers and the parks and the children at play...the meditative thoughts and the good times and the books that we have. Are we poor, or are we in the position of having been told we're poor? Think about it.

Perspective is needed. And talking about attitude...remember that delightful story of the two boys. One boy was put in a room filled with many lovely toys... toys from FAO Schwartz...the best money could buy...a tricycle, an electric train, an ice cream cone...just to name a few. And the second boy was put in a room filled with manure. Well, after a few minutes, the first child began to complain. The wheel would come off the tricycle, the tracks for the train got bent and the ice cream cone was melting. And so on...in other words - nothing would please him.

The second boy in the room filled with manure found a shovel and began to dig with great energy. After a few moments, he was heard to say, "There must be a pony somewhere under all of this". An affirmative attitude and a positive perspective do help, but...that still isn't what Paul had in mind.

#### WHAT PAUL HAD IN MIND

What Paul had in mind as the subject of reflection out of which thanksgiving would automatically come was what God had done and is doing for the world in Christ Jesus. He was reminding those early Christians that though they were perched precariously on the face of the Roman Empire, they nevertheless were secure within the folds of a pledged and demonstrated love.

What Paul was affirming was that the inner gyroscope of their faith was set, steady and secure. And when the center holds, no vibrations out there on the circumference can make much difference.

A READINESS TO PRAISE

The unmistakable mark of a vibrant, living faith is this readiness to praise. We may not all fast; we may not all kneel; we may subscribe to different forms of worship and see the priorities of the Church in different ways, but the constant that determines authentic religious experience is this readiness to praise.

And no one understood this better than Habakkuk - that minor prophet whom we avoid because we find it difficult to pronounce his name the same way twice running. It was his misfortune to live at a time when the Chaldean Empire was making some menacing moves. That empire was described as a carnival of wickedness. And even though he lived in such an era, he gave us testimony to a faith that would be tough to surpass. Hear his words:

"Though the fig trees do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines;  
The produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food;  
The flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls;  
Yet - I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Let me try to modernize that for you so that it will more nearly fit our urban scene:

"Though the economy continue to be idle, and somewhat stagnant,  
Nor the inflation rate be cured;  
The production of goods be down,  
And the prices still sora;  
The number of bankruptcies and bank mergers increase  
And there be little relief in sight;  
Though the Big Apple show signs of being rotten,  
And more crime and garbage be seen in our streets,  
Yet - will I rejoice in the Lord,  
I will joy in the God of my salvation."

That's where it's at. The last time Job spoke to me I heard him say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

CLOSING

Button up your coat for a moment to receive one of the coldest pieces of graffiti that you'll ever hear. Is it buttoned - for this will chill you. Somewhere on a wall out there in California this line appeared: "Life is the flaw in the void". You can't get much colder than that. "Life is the flaw in the void". To that the Christian responds: "Nonsense". It is not a void we are in, for God has brought order out of chaos.

Life is meaningful - full of meaning and of purpose to the God you and I have met in the person of Christ. There, "in everything, give thanks" said Paul, "for this is the will of God in Jesus Concerning you". To this we are called and if we who have discerned the ultimate purpose and revelation of God in the person of Christ cannot say "yes" to life in these difficult and demanding times, I ask you then - who can?

PRAYER

Lord, light within our hearts the flame of gratitude that in a grumbling, complaining world, our light may shine. Where our thanksgiving cannot be "because of", let it be, we pray, "in spite of". All this in the name and spirit of Jesus. Our Lord. Amen