

Grace That Grows Into Gratitude

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 14 through 25. Hear the word of God. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all people.

See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. Rejoice always.

Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit.

Do not despise prophetic utterances, but examine everything carefully. Hold fast to that which is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Jesus Christ.

[1 : 28] In everything give thanks. Really? In everything? I know the Apostle Paul is no pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by kind of thinker.

I know that he is a no-nonsense kind of person. I know that he only exhorts us to be and do what we, by grace, can be and do.

In everything give thanks. Yet I want to ask him, is this really possible? In everything? Is this exhortation realistic?

As we approach this Thanksgiving Day, I am, as you have heard me say now for about ten weeks, very grateful for this ministry call. Yet I realize that not everyone can say that about their jobs.

I realize that many people feel stuck in jobs they do not like, and I realize that many people do not have jobs. As we approach Thanksgiving Day this year, I am very grateful for the staff of this church, for colleagues who love Jesus Christ and who love me.

[2 : 45] Yet I realize that many do not enjoy the people with whom they work. As we approach this Thanksgiving Day, I am very, very grateful for Sharon, my wife, my soulmate, my best friend.

Yet I realize that many do not have loving spouses, and I realize that many couples are going through tough relational times, and I realize that I may not always have her by my side. As we approach Thanksgiving Day this year, I am very, very grateful for my children, of whom I am very proud, and who, for the most part, bring great joy to Sharon and me.

Yet I realize that many parents are in much pain over their children's destructive choices. I realize that some parents have suffered the loss of a child this year, and this is the first Thanksgiving without him or her.

I am this year grateful for my health, especially for the gift of sight. Yet I realize that not all are well, and I realize that one day I will go through all of those uncomfortable stages of the aging process. I am this year grateful for a house, made possible in part by your faithful stewardship. Yet I realize, especially in the recent firestorms, that many do not have homes where families can gather this week in comfort and safety.

[4 : 10] I am this year grateful for access to the legal system, that I still see the courts, though not perfect, still a friend. Yet I realize that there are many who see no hope in the legal system, many who feel excluded from due process and equal treatment before the law.

In everything, give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. It makes sense when the job is going well. It makes sense when you have a loving spouse and a good family.

It makes sense when you have health and justice. But what about those times when you do not? Is it realistic for the Apostle Paul to exhort us to give thanks in everything, and then to add the line, this

is the will of God for you?

Paul is not alone in this exhortation. All the biblical authors sing the same note. It seems that for the writers of Scripture, gratitude is one of, if not the, chief marks of a true believer.

This is certainly the theme in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. It is more certainly the theme in his letter to the Colossians. Colossians 2, verses 6 to 7. As you therefore have received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in him, having been firmly rooted and built up in him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

[5 : 39] Overflowing with gratitude. Paul tells the Romans that the first sign a human being is in spiritual trouble is the lack of gratitude.

Romans 1, 21. For even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculation, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Os Guinness, commenting on Paul's words, writes, His words are a sober reminder that rebellion against God does not begin with the clenched fist of atheism.

Rebellion against God begins with the self-satisfied heart of the one for whom thank you is redundant. In everything, give thanks.

Someone has said that gratitude is inner health made audible. Gratitude is inner health made audible. Is it possible to turn that phrase around and say that one way to nurture inner health is to give thanks in everything?

[6 : 41] But is it realistic? In a broken world, in a rebel world, in a world seemingly on the brink of collapse, is gratitude in everything realistic?

Yes. But only if we are fully realistic. Paul's exhortation is realistic only if we have a fully realistic view of life.

What do I mean? I mean that most people, dare I say, even most of us believers, do not have a fully realistic view of life.

How many times are we told, or how many times do we ourselves say, come on, be realistic? What is meant by that is that we are to think and feel and react only in terms of what we can know and understand with our senses.

Right? Be realistic means deal with life in terms of what your eyes can see and your ears can hear and your nose can smell and your tongue can taste and your fingers can count.

[7 : 50] Be realistic. But that is not being realistic at all. It doesn't even come close to being realistic. For the really real is not limited by or confined to what we know with our senses.

It isn't even limited to or confined by what we can know from our intuitive side either. There is so much more to the really real than meets the unaided senses or intuition.

We must learn to live fully realistically. We are not fully realistic about anything unless and until we write into the equation the God factor.

We are not fully realistic unless and until our view of life is illuminated by the reality of the living God. Only then are we fully realistic.

And when we are fully realistic, it is entirely realistic to in everything give thanks. Let me show you why with three affirmations.

[9 : 00] First, when we are fully realistic, we realize that all of life is a gift. All of life is the gift of a sovereign and gracious creator.

It seems to me that modern secularized humanity is suffering from an arrogance that takes everything for granted. We tend to think that this universe has always existed and always will.

We tend to think that this universe exists on its own as an independent, self-contained, self-sustained machine with its own unlimited resources of energy. But that's not the case.

At least, it's not the case from a biblical view of life. From beginning to end, Scripture declares that there is only one self-sustaining reality, namely the living God, the living and triune God.

The universe and all of life within it owes its existence to Him. The universe and all of life within it is sustained moment by moment by the word and love of the living God.

[10 : 06] Were God to cease to exist, everything else would cease to exist. Were God to stop holding the universe together, were God to let it loose, it would collapse into nothingness. All of life is a gift.

Every breath we breathe, even the breath with which we complain is a gift. Every beat of our hearts is a gift. All we are and all we have ultimately comes from the hand of the Almighty.

Do you believe that? Yes, the farmer grows the wheat and the baker bakes the bread. Yes, the lumberjack cuts down the trees and makes the wood planks.

Yes, the carpenter and the plumber and the electrician build the homes. And yes, the genius of women and men have created the wonders of technology. But if the living God had not endowed us with the capacity to create, and if the living God did not sustain those natural processes and forces, the farmer and the baker, the lumberjack and the carpenter, the physicist and the technician would offer nothing.

All of life is finally and fundamentally gift. Now, admittedly, this perspective is very hard to maintain in an industrialized age.

[11:18] In his diary, published under the title *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, Richard Niebuhr, or Reinhold Niebuhr, makes the following observation.

I wonder, he writes, if it is really possible to have an honest thanksgiving service in an industrialized civilization. Harvest festivals were natural enough in peasant communities.

The agrarian feels himself dependent upon nature's beneficence and anxious about nature's caprices. When the autumn harvest is finally safe in the barns, there arises with a sigh of relief natural emotions of gratitude that must express themselves religiously.

All that is different in an industrialized civilization in which so much wealth is piled up by the ingenuity of the machine and at least seemingly by the diligence of man.

Thanksgiving becomes increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon His most excellent co-workers ourselves. I have had that feeling about the Thanksgiving proclamations of our presidents for some time.

[12:24] After attending a Thanksgiving service, Reinhold Niebuhr then makes an even more insightful and more stinging observation. He writes, The ecumenical Thanksgiving service we attended this morning was full of self-righteous bunk, which made it quite impossible for me to worship.

There was indeed a faint order of contrition in one of the prayers and an aside in the sermon, but it did not spring from the heart. The Lord who was worshipped was not the Lord of hosts, but the spirit of Uncle Sam, given a cosmic imminence for the moment, which the dear old gentleman does not deserve.

And then he writes, It's a bad thing when religion is used as a vehicle of pride. Who are we thanking today? Who are we congratulating?

King David was fully realistic. Remember when they dedicated the funds for building the temple in Jerusalem? Remember how David prayed? Who am I?

And who are my people? That we should be able to offer as generously as this. For all things come from you, and from your hand we have given to you. O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided to build you a house, it is all from your hand, it is all yours.

[13:39] When we are fully realistic, we realize that all of life is a gift, a gift from the gracious, outstretched hand of the Savior. G.K. Chesterton, the great Catholic philosopher, reminds us that the repetition of nature, which we take for granted, is not due to some inherent, inexorable law of nature, but rather it's due to the Creator and Redeemer's will to have it happen again.

Taking for granted the rising of the sun, for instance, is a sign that we have given in to the spirit of secularism. The sun rises because God wills it to again and again and again.

Chesterton argues that day after day God says to the sun, do it again, do it again, do it again. The flower breaks through the soil, not because it had to, but because the Creator willed another flower to come forth.

Do it again, do it again, do it again. Day after day, do it again, do it again, do it again. Then Chesterton writes this, the repetition in nature is not mere recurrence.

It is a theatrical encore. Lungs, do it again. Heart, do it again, do it again, do it again, until that day when we hear it's time to come home.

[15:02] First affirmation, all of life is a gift. Every moment is a gift. Every breath is a gift. In everything, give thanks, because in everything, we are experiencing gift.

The second affirmation follows from the first. When we are fully realistic, we realize that in everything, God is present and at work.

In everything. Especially for those who love God and who are called according to His purposes.

You know the text very well, Romans 8, 28. We know that God causes all things to work together

for the good of those who love Him.

Do you believe that? All things? God can take all things, everything, and make it work together for His good for us?

Paul is not saying that everything that is is God's will. Paul is not saying that everything that happened had to happen the way it did.

[16:13] Paul is not saying that everything that happens is good. He is saying that in everything, the living God who put on our humanity in Jesus Christ is working toward the good.

He is taking it all and like the master potter, molding it into His good purposes. In everything, the one who went to the cross for us is present and at work.

Hard to affirm at times, I know. Hard to feel, but it is what is happening. Perhaps the best biblical illustration of this is the story of Joseph.

Remember that story? I have often thought that Joseph's story would make a great script for a soap opera or for an evening miniseries. You could entitle it Days of Our Life Palestinian Style.

Remember how the story goes? Joseph's brothers are insanely jealous of him. Partly because Joseph's father, Jacob, is always playing favorite with him.

[17:18] Partly because Joseph nurtures that favoritism. He could be very arrogant about it. At one time, Joseph shares a dream with his brothers, a dream in which his brothers are going to bow down to him and Joseph shares that very proudly.

One day, his brothers had had enough of this and out of jealousy and irritation, they decide that they just have to get rid of him. They're going to murder him. On advice of one of the older brothers, they put him into a deep pit to allow him to starve.

Just then, a caravan of Ishmaelites come by and they decide to pull their brother out of that pit and sell him as a slave to the Ishmaelites. Then they go and tell their father, that a wild animal has eaten Joseph's body.

Give thanks in everything. When the Ishmaelites arrive in Egypt, they then sell Joseph to Potiphar, who is a high-ranking official in the pharaoh's government. Potiphar soon recognizes Joseph's administrative skills and puts him in charge of the government.

In everything, give thanks. Things are going well for Joseph until the day that Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. He would not give in to her seduction. She got angry and out of wounded pride told the pharaoh that he was trying to seduce her.

[18:27] Joseph ends up in jail. In everything, give thanks. Then one day, the pharaoh has a bad dream. He's told of Joseph's spiritual wisdom. He goes to the jail to see if he can interpret the dream.

Joseph can interpret it. He does. Pharaoh then makes him one of the leading men in the administration. Now, meanwhile, back in Palestine, Joseph's family is facing a severe famine.

They get word that there is grain in abundance down in Egypt due to Joseph's good work. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to get this grain. And with whom do they have to deal but Joseph?

At first, they don't know this. When they finally discover that it is Joseph, they become fearful. They beg Joseph to forgive them. Joseph does forgive them. And then it is at that point that Joseph makes the statement, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

But God. You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. God worked together with Joseph's pride, with his brother's jealousy, with the evil scheming, with an unsuspecting caravan, with a deceptive woman, with a pharaoh's dream, with a famine to bring Joseph to the good and to bring Israel and Egypt to the good.

[19:37] Now, it would have taken some time for Joseph to be able to make that claim. I don't think he would have made it while he was a slave or while he was in jail. But the fact is, the fully realistic fact is that the living God was present and at work in everything along the way.

In everything. Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch Christian who spent time in a Nazi concentration camp, found reason for thanksgiving in the image of the weaver weaving a tapestry.

If you look at the tapestry from underneath, all you see is the tangled web of string and yarn. But if you can look at the tapestry from the top, if only for a moment, you see the unfolding of a beautiful piece of work.

The master weaver is taking all the tangledness and all the disconnected strings and weaving something good. Two years ago now, this month, the five of us Johnsons decided, actually we felt led, to bring another child into our family.

Through some interesting circumstances, we felt that we were to try to bring a then ten-year-old boy from orphanage number five in Moscow into our family.

[20 : 52] We, mostly Sharon, worked for sixteen months on all the endless paperwork involved in something like this. Each month, the anticipation building. Finally, in May of this year, Sharon and I flew to Russia, and after three weeks of more red tape, we were finally able to bring Alexei home.

We were overwhelmed from day one and soon began to drown under stuff we could not understand or manage. In August of this year, while camping in the redwoods, it all exploded.

We felt like we were drowning and more like we were being destroyed. Through consultation with the adoption agency, we decided we had no choice but to place Alex in a foster home.

It was the most painful thing we've ever gone through. Since August, Alex has been in the boot camp situation, learning what it means to be part of a family. Since August, Sharon and I have been through intense wrestling and searching.

The pain has drawn us closer together. Sharon and I are closer than we ever have been in our 23 years of marriage. Even though we did not have one mind about what we were supposed to do.

[22 : 08] What we did share was the assurance that the Lord was up to something. Up to something good for Alex, for us, and for the three children we've nurtured since infancy.

Last week, we had Alex come for a visit. We saw a real change in expectation and behavior. He's trying very hard. We have a long way to go.

Oh, do we have a long way to go. But there's now enough to work through. So last Tuesday morning, the five Johnsons held a secret ballot. We cast our secret ballots and we voted to bring Alex home again.

I do not know where it's all going to go. But what I do know is that in everything, Jesus is going to be present. And that in everything, Jesus is going to be at work.

And in that, I will give thanks. Morning by morning, new mercies I see. In everything, the God who comes to us as Jesus is fulfilling His promise.

[23 : 11] In everything, this God is fulfilling His dreams for His people. He said He would never desert us and He is fulfilling that promise in this moment. He said He would cause His kingdom of wholeness to break into the world and He is fulfilling that promise in this moment.

He said that He would restore the created order and fill it with His glory and He is fulfilling that promise in this moment. He said that He would one day bring a new heaven and a new earth where there is no pain and there is no dying and He is fulfilling that promise in this moment.

The Scripture ends in Revelation 22 with Jesus saying three times, I am coming, I am coming, I am coming. Present tense, not future tense.

Jesus doesn't say, I will come. Present tense, I am coming. Even now, He is in the process of fulfilling that promise, I am on my way. The greatness of the sovereignty of God lies in the fact that He accomplishes His goal in spite of our mistakes and sin.

No, it's better than that. It's better than that. The greatness of the sovereignty of God lies in the fact that He even uses our mistakes and sin to accomplish His goal.

[24 : 27] In everything. Our Lord is present and at work in everything. Somehow, Lord, You are in this with me. You are actively achieving Your purposes and in that I can give thanks.

The third affirmation follows from the second and the first. When we are fully realistic, we realize that God is giving us the greatest gift imaginable.

In everything, the living God, the triune God, is giving us Himself. In the gift of Jesus and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Father is giving us Himself.

Can you think of any greater gift? It is the essence of all the covenants God has ever made with His people. In one way or another, every covenant has the words, I will be your God.

I will be God to you. This is the new covenant in my blood. I will be your God and you will be my people. And it means that God promises to place all that God is at our disposal.

[25 : 33] Philip Brooks, the great Puritan preacher who wrote the hymn O Little Town of Bethlehem, says it best. Regarding God's word, I will be your God, Brooke writes this. This is as if God said, You shall have as true an interest in all my attributes for your good as they are for my glory.

I want to say that again. You shall have as true an interest in all my attributes for your good as they are for my glory. My grace, saith God, shall be yours to pardon you.

My power shall be yours to protect you. My wisdom shall be yours to direct you. My goodness shall be yours to relieve you. My mercy shall be yours to supply you. My glory shall be yours to crown you.

This is the comprehensive promise for God to be our God. It includes all. Deus meus et omnia. God is mine and everything is mine, said Luther.

God gives us himself. C.S. Lewis is right. We are all too easily satisfied, which is why our lives do not overflow with gratitude.

[26 : 38] We settle for health when the healer wants to give us himself. We settle for guidance when the light of the world wants to give us himself. We settle for food when the bread of life wants to give us himself.

In everything, give thanks. It's interesting to note that the Greek word for thanksgiving is rooted in the Greek word for grace. The word for grace is charis.

The word for thanksgiving is eucharis. The point, when we are fully realistic, that is, when we are alert to charis, our lives will overflow with eucharis.

In everything, give thanks. It is realistic because all of life is a gift of grace because in everything the God of grace is present and at work fulfilling his gracious promises and because in everything the God of grace is giving us everything he's giving us himself.

All the gratitude be unto you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forevermore. Amen.