The Key To Happiness In The Christian Life

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] Now turn again with me this evening to 1 Thessalonians 5 and verse 18. 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 18 where we read these words, Give thanks in all circumstances.

Give thanks in all circumstances. How many happy Christians have you met recently?
Let's be honest, we are far better at complaining about our lot in life than being content with our lot in life. I'm probably only speaking to myself and about myself.
I suspect I'm not. But we are uniquely talented as Christians at grumpiness and not quite so good at happiness. And perhaps we might say that unhappiness is down to our personality type.
Maybe we can use that, maybe I can use that as a general excuse for my mood malaise. Or perhaps we can justify our complaining attitude by saying, well I'm Scottish, that's who we are.
[1:21] Or perhaps even we can point to our circumstances in life and find a reason there for our discontent. The truth is that as Christians, our maybes and our perhapses aren't really reasons for our unhappiness.

As much as they are excuses. Whatever our personality type, our ethnic background, or our life situation. The gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus surely is powerful enough to change us from being better at complaining about our lot in life.
According to one of my go-to Christian commentators, there is a secret to a happy Christian life. When he says a secret, he's not referring to something that's hidden, like a buried treasure. He's referring to something we all know about, and to which we give lip service.
But which to our considerable loss, we do not practice, and therefore we do not experience. Let me read you his entire quote. He says, We need to learn this secret of the happy Christian life.
[2:42] Thankfulness. We need to learn this secret of the happy Christian life. Thankfulness. He says, Thankfulness is the key to happiness.

Giving thanks to God is the precursor of receiving happiness from God. In this verse in 1 Thessalonians 5.18, we have words which are very easy to understand, but are very difficult to practice.
Give thanks in all circumstances. Tell me. Are we unhappy Christians? Furthermore, do we try to justify our unhappiness, grumpiness, and complaining spirits by our personality types, our ethnic background, or even our circumstances?
Listen again to my commentator friend. We need to learn the secret of the happy Christian life. Thankfulness.
Well, over the next two Sunday evenings, I want to invest in our happiness by spending our time in this verse.
[3:53] It is time we showed our grumpiness, our cynicism, and our complaining the door. And welcomed into our experience the happiness and contentment of gospel thankfulness.

Tonight, I want us to consider three things about thankfulness. And next week, two more. Tonight, we want to consider, first of all, thankfulness and its partners.
Second, thankfulness and its proviso. And thirdly, thankfulness and its platform. Remember, the key aim of the next two Sunday evenings is our happiness.
Thankfulness. Not just theoretical, but experiential. Not just on paper, but in practice. This is the secret of the happy Christian life.
Thankfulness. Well, first of all, let's look at thankfulness and its partners. Thankfulness and its partners. Because Christian thankfulness is not a solitary practice.
[5:03] I have never found it easy, at a distance anyway, to tell the difference between a crow and a rook. Both are rather larger than usually black birds.

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The ultimate difference from a distance between a rook and a crow is this. Rooks flock together, whereas crows tend to live alone.
If nothing else, you can tell a rook from a crow by the company it keeps. And the point is that gospel thanksgiving is not a crow.
It is not a solitary practice. It flocks together with other Christian practices. Namely, as you look at the text in verses 16 and 17, rejoicing always and praying without ceasing.
Here you have this sacred community of Christian happiness. Joy, prayer, and thanks.
[6:10] Thankfulness is a rook, not a crow. It flourishes in partnership with rejoicing always and praying unceasingly.

The apostle doubly emphasized the connection by using a sound that all three have in common.
A sound with which we Scots are very familiar. The kind of word we use for loch. In the original Greek language, rejoice, pray, and give thanks are all dominated by the sound.
These three Christian practices belong together. Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks.
You'll notice that all three are given in the imperative voice. Rejoice. Pray.
[7:12] Give thanks. Strain after them. Strive after them. Discipline yourself in the pursuit of joy, prayer, and thankfulness.

Now, of course, none of us need to be reminded that we need to pray. But we do need to be reminded that it's a command of God to be joyful and to be thankful.
These are commands. Just as it's possible through strenuous discipline to pray unceasingly, so it is possible to be joyful always and thankful in all circumstances.
And you know, Catherine will tell you, I for one desperately need to hear and understand this truth from God's word. Joyfulness and thankfulness don't come natural to anyone, me especially, but neither does prayer.
So therefore, I cannot use my personality, my ethnic background, or the circumstances of my life to justify my prayerlessness. Nor can I use them to justify my joylessness or my thankfulness.
[8:29] We need to work on them all if we are to learn the secret of the happy Christian life. They live together. Joy, prayer, and thankfulness.

This is very challenging indeed. Over the years, I've met many Christians who claim to be unceasing in prayer.
But they're also the worst grumblers I've ever met. They're also the least happy people I've ever met. The conclusion?
They're lying. They're hypocrites. A Christian who claims to be a man of prayer, but spends his life moping around, complaining about everything and everyone, is a hypocrite.
It's a contradiction in terms. Thankfulness is a rook, not a crow. The complete man or woman of God is growing toward maturity in all three practices within the sacred community of Christian happiness.
[9:37] Rejoicing, praying, and thankfulness. And again, I say that we are to pursue these Christian practices with equal discipline and determination.

For it's in so doing we will grow toward maturity in the Christian life. Christ-likeness. You can characterize Jesus. You can sum up his life in these three practices.
Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. Study his life in the Gospels. See him expressing his joy in the success of his kingdom mission.
Hear him praying for his people. Listen to him giving thanks for his heavenly Father's kindness and goodness. It's a curious fact that during his entire ministry, you never hear Jesus complaining to God once.
Nor do you ever hear of him grumbling with God. Well, you hear him crying out to his Father for help. You hear him crying out and calling out for clarity and for strength.
[10:48] But even with the torturous road to Calvary's cross before him, you never once hear him grumble or complain. Rather, you hear him giving thanks.

Father, I thank you. Father, I praise you. All too often and all too frequently, we hear the expression that we never hear of Jesus smiling or laughing at all.
But the Gospels read properly reveal a Jesus who is filled with joy and filled with thankfulness because he's a man of prayer. These three practices of rejoicing, praying and giving thanks live together in the sacred ministry of our Lord and Master Jesus.

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But then we must also say that all of these three practices must be pursued by every Christian. We can't divide ourselves and say, well, over on the left-hand side are all those whose strength is their joy.
And in the middle, then we have the prayer for people in the middle of our church tonight. And then on my right-hand side are the thankful people. We are not to be schizophrenic in our discipleship.
[12:11] Rather, all of us are to pursue all these practices so that whatever part of the church you sit in, you're sitting beside a Christian who is rejoicing always, praying unceasingly, and giving thanks in all circumstances.

Again, I say, these three Christian disciplines, spiritual disciplines, uniquely belong together. Rejoicing, praying, and thanksgiving. Like a three-piece jigsaw, each perfectly fits into the other. I'm not saying there isn't a place for discernment or truth-telling among them.
But these three seem to uniquely belong together, like faith, hope, and love. Prayer, joy, and thanksgiving.
Unless they're all present, the Christian remains incomplete and unhappy. Here, though, is the practical application of this point.
[13:14] So, how can we develop thankful spirits? How can we develop thankful spirits? Suppose by nature you're a bit of a grumbler and a bit of a complainer.

Suppose by nature you have a rather sour disposition. How can you pursue thankfulness? Remember, the three practices belong together.
Joy, prayer, and thankfulness. You can develop a thankful spirit by investing in the other two practices. Rejoicing and praying.
As you pursue joy in your relationship with the Lord, and you invest in a disciplined life of prayer, your spirit will naturally grow in thankfulness.
You begin to find yourself becoming more thankful. Not just when the wind's behind you and the sailing's easy, but when the wind's against you and it's tough. So, pursue a thankful spirit by investing both in your joy and in your prayers.
[14:23] So, my commentator friend wrote these words. We need to learn the secret of the happy Christian life. Thankfulness. At this point, we've learned that thankfulness is a rook, not a crow.

It's not a solitary spiritual discipline. It is firmly connected to rejoicing and praying. We've learned that we all have an obligation to exercise all of these disciplines.
And we've learned that one method to grow in our thankfulness is to invest in rejoicing and praying. Thanksgiving has its partners. It's as we invest in them together that we grow into maturity in the Christian life.
Because in doing so, we will grow toward the grace of Christ's likeness. Thanksgiving and its partners. Well, secondly, Thanksgiving and its proviso.
It's proviso. Little words in the Bible mean big things in the Christian life. Young folk, are you listening? Little words in the Bible mean big things in the Christian life.
[15:40] A tiny little stone in your shoe can make walking very difficult. And a small plaster placed on a blister in your heel can make it bearable. Read the little words of the Bible and take very close note of them.

I remember hearing a sermon many years ago now which left me cold and, in truth, very angry. It was taken from this text in 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 18.
Give thanks in all circumstances. Give thanks in all circumstances. The preacher, a rather stern-faced free church minister, joyless, dressed in black from top to toe, proceeded to harangue his connegation for not having the faith to give thanks for all the bad things that happened to us. Not just the good. So, someone gets cancer. In that preacher's mind, we should thank God for the diagnosis. Lord, thank you that I've got terminal cancer.
And thank you that I'm going to endure such pain over the next while before I die. Another Christian gets mental illness. In that preacher's mind, we should praise God for depression and for the mental torture of being at war with yourself.
[17:01] Another loses his job. Praise God, I've lost my job. Let's give thanks to God for the loss of my family income and my personal dignity. I've only ever heard two sermons in my life which left me cold and angry and made me frankly want to punch the preacher.

And this was one of them. First of all, it was untrue and unkind to human experience. Secondly, it was untrue and unkind to Jesus' experience.

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And thirdly, it was a serious misinterpretation of this text because that preacher, who claimed to be an uber conservative, did not read the text properly and treat these words for what they were.
You will notice how careful Paul is with his little words. In this verse, he says, give thanks in all circumstances.
He does not say, give thanks for all circumstances. He says, give thanks in all circumstances. He does not say, give thanks for all circumstances.
[18:17] I mean, what are we as human beings? Sadists? Do any of us really welcome mental illness, terminal cancer, or unemployment into our lives?

A few weeks ago, when I was trying to occupy my day, I was watching on YouTube the 20 best knockout punches in boxing history. That's what men watch late at night on YouTube, right?
And put me there in that ring with heavy weights. Let them keep on punching my head until it really hurts. I'll give thanks to God for every blow. Grow up.
Paul does not say, give thanks for every circumstance, but give thanks in every circumstance.
God's not calling us to give thanks for the valley of the shadow of death.
He's calling us to walk in the valley of the shadow of death. That's the proviso of giving thanks. Yes, God may have led us into some pretty difficult circumstances, but it's who he is and where he is and what he's doing in these difficult circumstances.
[19:28] We're giving thanks for. Not the circumstances themselves. Cut yourself a break. We read that Jesus endured the cross.

We never once read that he enjoyed the cross. It is a sign of mental instability when someone enjoys getting repeatedly punched in the head.
Job hated his boils every single festering one of them. You know, I think personally, I owe a lot to Bill Dunlop.
We all owe a lot to Bill Dunlop for this realistic worldview. Not everything that happens to us is good. Even if all things are working together for good.
In the same way, the Bible never once says give thanks for the difficult circumstances of your life. The Bible says give thanks in them.
[20:35] The source of thankfulness isn't the pain. It is who God is, where God is, and what God is doing in us and with us through it all.

Must never make a struggling Christian feel worse about herself by blaming her for not being thankful for her struggles. Rather, cut her a break and support her.
Don't berate her. And what's true for others is most certainly true for ourselves. We must never, ever find our source of happiness in life, in our sufferings.
We must be slow to give thanks for the rod with which we're being beaten by God. This is the proviso of thanks, and that's why I tell our young folk be very careful about reading the small words in the Bible.
Well, third and last, Thanksgiving and its platform. Thanksgiving and its platform. Let me read again that quote from my commentator friend. We need to learn this secret of the happy Christian life, thankfulness.
[21:55] We are only, we're happy only in as much as we are thankful in all the circumstances of life. Let me say that again. We are happy only in as much as we are thankful in all the circumstances of life.

As we've seen, Paul's not commanding us to do something inhuman. He's not commanding us to do something even Jesus couldn't have done. He's not commanding us to be thankful for the pain. He's commanding us to be thankful in the pain. What then is that for which we are to be thankful such that our happiness outshines our hardships?
The answer is found in the next clause in the verse. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Now we could spend all week, we could spend all century pawning over, unpacking, rejoicing in these, few words for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
[23:12] For example, given that God has a will, it means our circumstances aren't a function of happenstance. They're not random events.

Nothing that happens to us is random. The chance turn of a card. God has a purpose in all our circumstances and that purpose is good.

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Consider also, as you look at the text, that it's God's purpose for you. In other words, God's plan is person-centered. Never mind what God's plan for me is or for the person sitting next to you in the chair this evening.
It's what God's plan is for you. You've got to get on with living through. God's plan is for you. Our loving, heavenly Father knows his children and he knows exactly when and how to give us the most grace and to work us most perfectly into his image.
It's God's plan for you. And yes, therefore, although our circumstances are really tough, we can nevertheless be happy and thankful for the purpose of God in them all and for their purpose to us, their relation to us as individual Christians.
[24:29] They all bear the hallmark of your Father's personal grace. But the most prominent clause in this, the most prominent claim in this clause and that which makes us able to give thanks in every circumstance, look at the text with me, is found at the end.

In Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus. What we are able to give thanks for in all our circumstances is the unbreakable connection to and union we have with Jesus Christ.
But nothing can separate us from him. Not the shame of yesterday, not the circumstances of today, and not the sins of tomorrow. There is what lies behind these three sacred practices of Christian happiness.
Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. Not the circumstances we are in, not the times we are in, but the Christ with whom we are united by faith in Christ Jesus.
The platform of our thanksgiving is the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Christ, the God who is revealed to us in the face of his Son, the God who in Christ is with us in all our circumstances, supplying us with a hyper, a hooper abundance of grace, the God working out his wise and good plan for us through Jesus Christ.
[26:11] That's for what we can give thanks in the good times and in the bad, in the hard times and in the easy, in the up times and the down. because whether we're up or whether we're down, whether it's hard, whether it's easy, whether these times are good or whether they're bad, what gives us the greatest of joys, what motivates our prayers and what grounds our thankfulness is the gospel of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ and our union with him in faith.

If we locate our thankfulness in our circumstances, we will never truly be happy at all because only when things are going well will the world be good.
But if we locate our happiness in Jesus Christ, we have begun to learn the secret of true contentment in the Christian life. The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 4 verse 11, he wrote Philippians maybe, I don't know, five, six years after he wrote 1 Thessalonians, he says, I have learned in whatever situation I'm in to be content.
I've learned in whatever situation I'm in to be content. Well, tell me, what is this contentment you have, Paul? Is it a contentment for all the situations you face?
Not at all because in verse 13 of chapter 4, Paul says, I can do all things through him who strengthens me. He says, the source of my contentment isn't the highs and lows of my life, the riches and the poverty of my life.
[27:52] It's Jesus, the one who gives me strength. This is what the gospel of Jesus Christ does for a man. It gives him contentment and catastrophe.

So, there is a vast difference between cold-blooded creatures and warm-blooded creatures. The heat source for cold-blooded creatures comes from the environment around them, the warmth of the sun and the rocks.
In the summertime, you'll find others basking in the sunshine, not because they're particularly keen on getting a tan, but because if they don't get energy from outside them, they'll die.
The heat source for warm-blooded creatures comes from inside them, from their nutritional and circulatory systems. That's why warm-blooded creatures can adapt to living in every environment in the living planet.
Not because we're harder or tougher than reptiles, but because the source of our heat, our energy and light come from within us, not from outside. And in this verse, 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 18, Paul is commanding us to be warm-blooded Christians, not to be over-affected by the world around us, by the environment in which we're in.
[29:15] If the days are hot and sunny, we're fine with that. But if the days are cold and dark, we're fine with that also, because our heat and our life and our energy come from our living relationship and union with Christ Jesus.

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This is what it means to be thankful in all circumstances, because the thankfulness Paul is talking about is unrelated to our circumstances. It is thankfulness for Christian salvation, for our union with Christ Jesus, for the Lord Jesus.
So as we close, at a very practical level, we can apply this by growing in our thankfulness and therefore in our happiness, by spending more time thinking about the blessings of our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.
we can apply this by growing in our thankfulness and therefore our happiness by spending more time thinking about all the blessings of our union with Christ.
Turn the telly off. Turn the volume on the wireless down. Radio, sorry. Don't listen to the news. Spend a wee bit of time reading a book about Jesus, or listening to a worship song about salvation. [30:40] Do what you need to do to take your focus away from your circumstances and latch them on to your relationship with Jesus. Have you met any happy Christians recently?

I must confess that I'm deeply challenged by this verse in 1st Thessalonians 5 to give thanks in all circumstances. In the light of my favorite commentators' comments, we need to learn the secret of the happy Christian life.
Thankfulness. Do you want to pursue a happy Christian life? Then view it as a rook and not a crow. Pursue joy and prayer along with thankfulness.
Then view it as a function of our relationship with Jesus, not the circumstances we're in. may God bless his grace to us in the gospel as by his spirit we together invest in the happy Christian life.

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