

Give Thanks in All Circumstances

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Well, please grab your Bibles and turn back to 1 Thessalonians 5. As we've done over the last couple of weeks, we've been doing a topical series where I've been showing a number of verses on the screen.

After next Sunday, we'll get back to our normal practice, which is just working our way through a book of the Bible. So we'll do that after Cam and Jess Davey. But today, it'd still be handy to have 1 Thessalonians 5 open in front of you.

We'll look at it particularly at the beginning, at the end of the talk, and I'll show you some other verses in between. But let me ask you a question to start with.

Which kind of person are you on the screen there? Are you a glass half full kind of person or are you a glass half empty kind of person? If you've not heard that expression before, a person who sees the same amount of water in a glass as half full is what's called an optimist.

They see the water, not the emptiness. And an optimist, of course, is someone who always sees good and expects good outcomes no matter what. But the glass half empty kind of person sees the emptiness.

[1 : 18] They see bad and expects bad outcomes no matter what. In other words, it describes the character trait of a person. Of course, there's also the realist who just sees a glass of water.

And then there's the physicist who sees liquid and gas. And to use the other side of the brain, there's also the artist who just sees a place to put their brush.

But generally, the expression is, you know, are you a glass half full or empty kind of person? And which do you think God wants us to be? As I was thinking about this, I actually wonder if it's neither. After all, the Bible tells us to recognize and expect both good and bad. You know, to lament the bad things in the world, not to kind of stick our heads in the sand and be an internal optimist, but to recognize the bad, lament, and even expect bad outcomes like sometimes suffering and being persecuted.

The Bible tells us that. Or we're also to rejoice with those who rejoice, to recognize the good. And as well, expect good outcomes like a new heavens and earth to come where there'll be no more suffering.

[2 : 35] Rather, I think the person God wants us to be is, of course, like Christ. Someone who pleases God by doing God's will, which is exactly what Jesus did.

And as we will see today, that involves being a glass full of thanks kind of person. For that is God's will for us in Christ Jesus.

Today, I want us to focus on one verse in particular. Verse 18 in our passage. Because today is Thanksgiving Sunday. And verse 18 says, But before we get to that, let me just remind you of the context of where we're at here in this letter.

Paul and Silas shared the good news of Jesus to many people in the city of Thessalonica. And many became Christians. So many, in fact, that the Jews became jealous and they stirred up a riot and forced Paul and Silas to leave.

Now, Paul was worried about this young church left on its own. So he sent Timothy back to see how they were going sometime later. And in your Bibles or on the screen, actually, in chapter three, verse six, Paul writes, But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.

[4 : 00] They're standing firm in the faith. They're loving one another. And so Paul then writes this letter, thanking God for them in the first part in particular. And then from chapter four and five, encouraging them to keep pleasing God more and more.

And so chapter four, verse one, he says, As for the other matters, we instruct you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living, which is why he's thanking them to start with.

Now we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. This is a kind of person God wants us to be, one who pleases him more and more by doing his will, as Christ did.

In fact, part of God's will, just a couple of verses later, is that we are sanctified. That is, we are holy, set apart as different to the world in order to live for God.

And in the chapter four and five, he will mention a number of ways that we can do God's will and be sanctified and please him and so on. In our passage, though, it comes at the end of the letter where there's a whole host of ways we can do this.

[5 : 12] I don't know if you notice, as Vera was reading, but our passage is full of instructions, isn't it? There's loads of them. And so if you've got your Bibles there, let me see if I can just quickly summarize it for you before we focus in on our verse.

In verse 12 and 13, they are instructions about how to treat leaders. To acknowledge those who work hard among you and care for you and admonish you, hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.

I wanted to point out verse 13 to my kids, actually, to see if, you know, I get more respect. But anyway, 12 and 13, that's about leaders. At the end of 13, live at peace with each other.

And 14 and 15, it's about how to treat one another, how to relate to one another. Being at peace, urging, sorry, warning those who are idle, encouraging the disheartened, helping the weak and so on.

And then we come to verse 16 to 18, which are about how to live every day as Christians. And I say every day because you notice each one of those three commands has an always aspect to it.

[6 : 23] Rejoice always, says verse 16. Verse 17, pray continually. Verse 18, give thanks in all circumstances.

This is how we're to live every day as Christians. And then 19 to 22 are about how to respond to hearing God's word from others. Like not rejecting or quenching the spirit, but testing what we hear against the Bible, holding on to what is good, rejecting what is bad and so on.

But again, today is Thanksgiving Sunday, so I want to focus on verse 18. And I want to make two comments about it. Firstly, we ought to give thanks in all circumstances.

Point one. Why? Well, quite simply, we're told to, aren't we? You see verse 18? The words give thanks are a command. They're telling us, God is telling through the Apostle Paul, telling us to do this.

That we are to give thanks. This is not just an optional extra for us as Christians. In fact, this kind of idea, this command is seen throughout Scripture. So even in Ephesians chapter 5, Paul writes, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 40] I mean, that's pretty all-encompassing, isn't it? Or even Colossians chapter 2, where he talks about continuing to follow Jesus, just as received him of Lord, so follow him as Lord.

And notice at the end, overflowing with thankfulness. I mean, that's more than a cup full of thanks, isn't it? That's a glass overflowing with thankfulness.

Or at the end of our verse, in verse 18, he says, Give thanks in all circumstances. Why? Well, for, because this is God's will for you.

This is what he wants us to do. This is how he wants us to live. This is part of what it means to please him, to live a sanctified life. God's will for us is to be a glass full of thanks kind of person.

One who not only laments the bad and rejoices in the good, but can still give thanks in both situations. Giving thanks is a mark of the Christian life.

[8 : 42] Because not giving thanks is a mark of the non-Christian life, did you realize? In Romans chapter 1, Paul is talking about how God's judgment is being shown against humanity.

And he gives the reason, because although they knew God, that, you know, they knew there was a God from creation. He wouldn't just, you know, suddenly appear. They neither glorified him as God, nor gave thanks to him.

Here, at the heart of humanity's sin, is not glorifying God as God, and not thanking him. That's how important giving thanks is.

And in fact, not giving thanks leads to becoming futile and foolish, says the verse. You know, leading to more sin.

Just think, if Adam and Eve in the garden were more thankful for all the other fruit God had given them to eat, they would not have envied the one fruit they couldn't eat and disobeyed God.

[9 : 46] They'd go, oh, look at all this stuff. Thank you. I will glorify you. Thank you, God. But no, no. They just focused on the one thing, one fruit they couldn't eat. And in not disobeying God, it led to sin.

And so we ought to give thanks, not just because it's a command and God's will for us, but also because it actually helps keep us from sin. We kind of get this idea of thankfulness being the antidote to sin, or one of the antidotes, from Ephesians chapter 5, for example.

Here Paul lists all these sins, sexual immorality, impurity, greed, along with obscenity, foolish talk, coarse joking. All these things are out of place.

And in place of all those things, thanksgiving. Don't do all this. Instead of all that, do thanksgiving. That's the antidote to all those other things, isn't it? The antidote to a speech full of obscenity is speech full of thanks. The antidote to immorality and greed is thanksgiving, because when we thank God, we remember what he's given us.

[10 : 56] And it helps us be content rather than being greedy for more, whether it's more money, more sex, or whatever it is, immorality. Thankfulness to God encourages us to please God, not sin against God, you see.

It actually helps us to shine as witnesses for God. Paul writes in Philippians 2, for example, The word thanksgiving is not used here, but it's obvious how it can help us to be like this, isn't it? Because if we're thankful for things, it helps prevent us from becoming bitter grumblers and arguers, doesn't it? I used to be a primary school teacher in a Christian school, and devotions was part of my job each morning.

I had a year six class for a number of years. And I remember showing this verse to the kids one day. And I said, look, one way you can practice this, guys, is I'm about to hand out the homework. And so to help you not grumble, why don't you say thank you? And it worked! Actually, for just two kids, I think it was. Some of the other kids tried to be smart and grumble even more, as a joke.

[12 : 30] Such are kids. But do you get the idea? If we're thankful, it helps us not grumble. And by grumble, I mean tear down, or whether it's tearing down God for not being good enough, or tearing down people, we can still lament at bad things.

We can still discern who is a good and bad leader. But then we can fall into the trap of tearing them down, which is the grumbling part. I mean, that's what social media is sadly full of, isn't it?

But if we are thankful instead of grumbling, we will stand out. We will shine like stars. Can you imagine in your place of work or amongst your family, non-Christian family members and the like, you know, when things happen, everyone's grumbling about things, tearing down people.

And you say, yeah, look, that's not right, but I'm still thankful for at least this. It's going to make you stand out, isn't it? It's so easy to join the bandwagon of grumblers, to follow them along.

But if we don't, if we're thankful instead, it will help us shine like stars. Of course, giving thanks in all circumstances is not always easy.

[13 : 44] And yet we can, even in bad ones. Point two. Now, when circumstances of life are good, when things are going well, it's easier to give thanks, isn't it?

Although, if you're anything like me, I still often forget. Do you? But when circumstances of life are bad, when life is difficult or draining or almost despairing, it is hard to give thanks.

How can we still give thanks? What can we still thank God for in those times? Well, I want to suggest that if we stop and remember a few things, we'll still have reason to give thanks, even in bad circumstances.

Firstly, we need to remember who God is. And that's the big reason that our first reading gave. On the screen there, from Psalm 100, that Elaine read for us, in verse 4, there's talking about going and giving thanks to God and praising His name.

And in case we didn't get the idea, it repeats it again in the same verse 4. And then verse 5 gives us the big reason, doesn't it? For, because the Lord is good.

[14 : 59] His love endures forever. However, His faithfulness continues through all generations, even to ours. In other words, we can still thank God for who He is, no matter our circumstances, because He remains that, even in bad ones.

He remains good. He remains loving. He remains faithful. And so, He can still give thanks for who He is, even in bad circumstances.

Of course, His character is seen by how He then acts towards us, like what He has already given us, which is the second reason we can still give thanks, even in bad times.

For God has already given us a lot, both physical and spiritual blessings. The psalmist also says at the top of the screen there, that it is God who made us.

He gave us life. Is that not a lot in itself? Is that not something to give thanks to God for? I mean, how much is your life worth? A lot, isn't it?

[16:10] And as I said a couple of weeks ago, God doesn't just create us and leave us, but as we saw in the Bible, He continues to sustain us. Upholding our lungs, I said, so that the breath you just took is a gift from Him.

And that one. And so, we can still give thanks to Him, can't we? That there's other physical blessings, from family and friends who care for us, to a roof over our heads to keep us dry from all that rain, and for the sun today outside.

Not to mention the fact that we live in Australia, and not the Ukraine. Oh yes, pray for them. We need to keep praying for them.

But we don't stop thanking God for what we enjoy here, the peace we enjoy. We mustn't forget to do that either. Or access to medical help.

We have our friends who are missionaries in Indonesia for over a decade, said that to get a Panadol, you had to go to the hospital, wait, and then buy at a high price.

[17:19] Panadol. I bet you've got Panadol at home, in your medicine cabinet or wherever. We've got ready access, don't we? How much more do we have to be thankful for?

Our problem is we envy what we don't have, and forget what we do have, don't we? Yes, the world teaches us to do that. I mean, think of advertising, right?

The whole point of adverts is to make you want more, so you buy more. I mean, that's the whole point, isn't it? And there's nothing wrong with buying more. The problem comes when we fall into the trap of envying what we don't have, and forgetting how much we do have.

Or we're so familiar with what God has given us, we take it for granted or devalue it. As that old expression goes, familiarity breeds contempt.

Yeah, we take it for granted or treat it with contempt. Now, this hit me afresh recently when I heard about a missionary who said that they have to post lookouts on a Sunday morning outside their church gathering just in case the police come and arrest them.

[18:32] Can you imagine having to do that here? You know, we wouldn't be able to have all these windows that lead in the sunlight. Too easy to spot. Get arrested. And so we need to keep thanking God for the freedom we have.

That's just the physical blessings. And there's all the spiritual ones as well. As verse 3 at the top of the screen says, he didn't just make us in terms of physical beings creating us, he also made us his people, the sheep of his pasture.

And of course, that cost God, his only son, to do that. God sent Jesus to die the death that we deserve so that we could become part of his people, along with every spiritual blessing.

My daughter was unwell a little while ago and some of her friends dropped around a care package, which was really nice. It was this pink bag and it came with all these goodies inside.

There was popcorn. In fact, I think there was a couple of popcorns. There we are. There was a block of chocolate and then there was another block of chocolate. There was some lollies.

[19:44] And there was some Oreo biscuits. I'm not going to drop them because I'm going to crash. And she was really thankful for all this stuff that her friends had given her during this time.

And yet, the bag we've been given is so much bigger and better. Now, I know it's hard to get our heads around, but you know what?

But forgiveness is actually better than popcorn. Adoption is better than chocolate. The spirit is better than Oreos. Assurance of the world to come is way better than, well, whatever else she got.

And while that bag costs her friends a lot, our bag costs God so much more, didn't it? And I actually had to buy all that stuff again because that bag did not last very long.

Our bag in Christ lasts eternity. That's how much God has already given us. And so we can actually still be thankful, even in bad circumstances.

[20:55] There was a minister called Martin Rinkart, who was a pastor in the 30-year war in Europe, in the German town of Eilenburg.

Before long, the town was overrun with refugees who unwittingly brought the plague. Historians believe the deadliest period of the plague in Eilenburg was from 1636 to 1637, that two-year period. Eventually, Martin was the only pastor alive, left alive in the town. And at one point, he was conducting 50 funerals a day. In 1637, over 4,000 funerals, including one for his wife.

And yet, in 1636, Martin wrote a well-known hymn. It's probably well-known to those who are older amongst us here today. But it's this one on the screen. Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices.

He wrote that in 1636, at the height of this misery. How could he do that? Well, he goes on to say, he has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love that are still ours today, even in the plague, even in terrible circumstances.

[22 : 10] What are some of these gifts? Well, he goes on to say in the next verse, that God is near us, that God's joy and peace can cheer us, that he keeps us in his grace.

He guides us in life when it's perplexed. I think that's an understatement. When it's horrid. And he will free us from all ills of this world in the next.

That's how Martin was able to still give thanks, despite doing 50 funerals a day. But we can actually go one step further.

We can thank God, not just for what he's given us, despite suffering, but how God also uses even our suffering to grow us.

Like Joni Erickson. Do you know of Joni? She's still alive today, and she's been witnessing for a number of years. She broke her neck in a diving accident as a teenager, and became a quadriplegic.

[23 : 14] This year in July, marks 55 year anniversary of being in a wheelchair, she writes. And this comes with cancer, scoliosis, and pain, and yet she can still write this.

Decades of study, paralysis, pain and cancer have taught me to say, it was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. How amazing is that?

I won't rehearse all the suffering's benefits here. Many of you know them by heart, like the way God uses it to shape Christ's character in us, or how it produces patience, or how it refines our faith like gold, or gives us a livelier hope of heaven, and so on.

However, if I were to nail down suffering's main purpose, I'd say it's the textbook that teaches me who I really am. Suffering keeps knocking me off my pedestal of pride.

My displaced hip and scoliosis are sheepdogs that constantly snap at my heels, driving me down the road to Calvary, where I died of sins that Jesus died for me.

[24 : 21] You see, suffering teaches her to put off sin, including pride, that says she can do this, cope by herself, and drives her down the road to cling to Christ, to follow Him more and more.

In fact, because of this, she actually writes elsewhere. Sorry, there we go. She says, I've been giving thanks for most of my paralyzed life, not only giving thanks in everything, which is our Bible verse for today, but always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.

Maybe this wheelchair felt like a horrible tragedy in the beginning, but I give thanks in my wheelchair. I'm grateful for my quadriplegia. It's a bruising of a blessing, a gift wrapped in black. It's the shadowy companion that walks with me daily, pulling and pushing me into the arms of my Savior, and that's where the joy is.

The joy is not in the suffering itself, but how it pulls and pushes her to trust more in Christ and to grow more like Christ. And so, for that, she gives thanks.

[25 : 35] Even in suffering, we have something we can give thanks for. And the good news is, God will help us do that, which brings us to the end of our passage. Have a look there at verse 23 and 24 as we wrap up.

Verse 23 and 24. Paul finishes his letter by saying, May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who calls you is faithful.

He will do it. We're not alone in this journey of being sanctified, of doing God's will, including giving thanks in all circumstances.

God is with us, working in us to help us. In fact, did you notice the confidence we can have in verse 24 that he will keep us until Christ returns?

[26 : 38] the one who calls you is faithful. He will do it. We ought to give thanks in all circumstances.

It's a command. It's God's will for us. It helps us not to sin but shine. And we can give thanks in all circumstances for who God is, what he's already given us, even what he does through us in suffering, and because he will help us.

And so, will you be this kind of glass, a glass full of thanks kind of person? Let's pray. Gracious Father, we do thank you for who you are, for what you've already given us, both physical and spiritual blessings, and even for the way you use suffering to grow us.

Father, we also thank you that you work in us to help us live out your will, including being a glass full of thanks kind of person. Help us, we pray then, to be those kind of people, to give thanks in all circumstances, for this is your will for us in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen.