

Steadfast Thanksgiving

I don't remember when it was, but there was a time when we were talking with our children for family devotions at the dinner table, and I mentioned that the Bible commands us to *always* be thankful. First Thessalonians 5:18 says, **"¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."**¹ In addition to this, Ephesians 5:20 says, **"giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. . ."** When I mentioned the 1 Thessalonians passage, one of my sons chimed in saying, "Wait a second. We're supposed to be thankful *for* everything that happens?"

He struggled with this because immediately he thought about people's sins and injustices around him. Are we supposed to be thankful that people are disobedient? Maybe this is the thought that enters your mind when you think about giving thanks in all circumstances. We've all had difficulties and trials in our lives. No matter how much we dress up on Sunday, there are probably aches in our hearts over things in our pasts (or, present) that still burden us. And, when we think about these things along with First Thessalonians and Ephesians, we say, "There's no way I could be thankful for *everything*."

And so, maybe you do what a man I met did once. This man wasn't dealing with gratitude in everything, but there was something else he didn't care for in the Bible. He was a member of a church. He had been a Christian for decades, but there was one command he bristled against because he had been hurt by a pastor who misused that command against him. And so, one time I was preaching on a text that talked about that command. Then this man came up to me and say, "You know what I did when you said we were to do that?" I said, "No, what?" He said, "I drew a line off to the side of my Bible and said, "NO!"

Sometimes when we read certain commands in the Bible, we say, "Yes, that sounds wonderful." Other times, we question and wonder what it means. Then there are other commands that we can bristle sharply against. And, when you hear that today I'm preaching on thanksgiving, that might be you.

Yet, there could be others here today that don't have the question of my son. You think you've made sense of the command to be thankful in *everything*, and you say, "No, it doesn't mean be thankful *for* everything, it says to be thankful *in* everything." There is a difference between those two words. And, actually, that's what I taught my children. To be thankful *for* everything would mean that we approve of sin and sinful actions of others. I am not to say, "Lord, I thank you so much that this person has rebelled against you and hurt others!" Yet, I can say, "Lord, I'm choosing to trust you and be thankful that you are sovereign over this – working what is good, right and perfect." You see the difference? Romans 8 says that God works *all things* together for good. Romans doesn't say all things are good.

But some people still fall short of biblical thanksgiving in even understanding this point. As you notice my sermon title, you see that my hope is that we would have a *steadfast* thanksgiving, not a wishy-washy, wavering thanksgiving. And, I think many people have a wishy-washy sort of gratitude. They may say, "Give thanks *in* everything," But what they do is they still focus on circumstances. They'll say, "Lord, I praise you for the coffee I have today." Or, when situations get difficult, they'll say, "Well, at least I'm not as bad off as someone else." But I have a question, what if you are the person who is worst off in this world? Are they incapable of gratitude?

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Th 5:18.

This type of *thanksgiving* that primarily focuses on God's gifts to us is what I'll call subjective thanksgiving. In essence, you define what you think is good and pleasing to you, and you'll thank God for those things and you'll declare how good God is because of those things. Have you ever said before, "Oh, these circumstances today went like this and that. God is so good!" Now, is God good? Yes! But what if the circumstances didn't go your way? Is God still so good? Yes.

You see, a subjective thanksgiving is still dependent on circumstances. So, when you go through trials, you're going to try to still look at things around you to give you encouragement instead of taking the biblical route of thanksgiving. Biblical thanksgiving is *steadfast*. It is firmly rooted in the bedrock of God himself. Therefore, it's no surprise that the Bible is replete with commands to be thankful people. But as we think of being "thankful," Christians have a superior definition to thanksgiving. I'm not trying to be rude to those who are not Christians, but my point is simply that because God has reconciled us through Jesus, we have an eternal, steadfast gratitude that is not based in the shifting sands of our circumstances. So, today, as we move forward, my hope is that we would together see that **Thanksgiving's source and aim is God himself.**

With this as our understanding, let's pray together and then move forward in understanding more of what it means to give thanks *in* everything. [Pray for Lorraine Palmer; Ben Marx at First Baptist Holland; Naravarette].

There is no one specific passage today, although I will be referring back to First Thessalonians at various points. What I want to do this morning is show how subjective thanksgiving does not successfully point to God ultimately, nor is it often founded in God himself. Then I want to move to objective thanksgiving and reveal that it must have God as both the source and aim in order for it to be steadfast. So, let's start with the dangers of subjective thanksgiving.

1. Subjective thanksgiving's source and aim is often not God himself.

Again, let me define what I mean by "subjective" thanksgiving. I could also say "thanksgiving based on circumstances." So, if your circumstances are one way, then "Praise God." If they're another way, "Where are you God?!" It's therefore a type of thanksgiving that cannot be given *in* everything. In addition, subjective thanksgiving is something that is based on what you feel to be good or bad. If God gives you what you ask for, well, "Isn't God so good." But what if God is giving you what you ask for as a discipline?

Subjective thanksgiving affirms your natural tendency to think you know what's best. But subjective thanksgiving can be a bondage, too. I've known many people, myself included, that evaluate God's love for them on the basis of circumstances. If there are trials then God is against you. You look at others and wonder, "Why are things going so well for them?" And really, you're thinking, "God is punishing me." You're going through hurts and pains and you think you can't give thanks in your circumstances because God is against you, not for you. Maybe he's disciplining you for some unknown sin in your life.

All-in-all, your circumstances become your dictator, not God himself or his Word. Your thanksgiving was circumstantial and subjective. Its source isn't God, it's circumstances. Its aim really become *you* and how you evaluate things – not God and his glory.

But why does this matter? Because God wants you to have a steadfast gratitude. He doesn't want you crushed by the conflicting waves in life's sea. Circumstances can go all over the place, and if our mind

and heart is driven by those things, we will despair. Some days we'll be "up." Other days we'll be "down." And, more than likely, the majority of us will be "down." But even more worrisome than this is that if subjective gratitude is *not* based in God, then we are guaranteed to go into more sin. In Ephesians 5:4, the apostle Paul challenges the Ephesians to not engage in sinful behaviors, and then he says, "but instead, let there be thanksgiving." The implication is that the opposite attitude of a sinful heart is a biblically grateful heart. But again, we have to define what a God-honoring, steadfast gratitude is.

So, I want to look at just a few stories in the Old Testament to show that **subjective "gratitude" can be quicksand to a complaining spirit.**

Let's first think about Adam and Eve. When you read Genesis 1-2, and really studying the words, you re-discover that Eden was beautiful. Every aspect was very good. There are perfect animals. There are perfect plants. There are perfect people. And then, there's a crafty serpent that enters the scene. In essence, the serpent tempts Eve by getting her to be discontent. What we see here is that a perfect environment does not guarantee perfect morality. Satan tempted Eve to think that she was missing out. Sure, everything was perfect, but there was one tree. And not only was there one tree she couldn't eat from. That tree supposedly would put her on par with God. Instead of rejoicing in God and all that he is. Instead of being thankful to him, what we see is that she was basing her life on circumstances. In her mind, it was, "Do I love these circumstances while being subservient to God when I could have other circumstances and raise to the level of God?" She wasn't even thinking of gratitude for God himself. She was emphasizing self. Then what happened? She took the fruit and rebelled against God.

This type of scenario is played out in full color HD when we study the nation of Israel in their wanderings in the desert. We see them rejoicing in God and praising him when they are taken out of Egypt, but they quickly complain and murmur. God is so good when they plunder Egypt. But God is so bad when they have the Red Sea in front of them. God is so good when they make it to the Red Sea, but God is so bad when they have only manna and no meat or no water. Complain. Worship. Complain. Praise. Complain. Give thanks. But are they truly grateful? Their gratitude is all based in circumstances. My question is, "Are they really thankful for God? Or, do they just want God's stuff?" Subjective gratitude is a quicksand to a complaining spirit.

I want to speak on one other situation: God bringing Kings to Israel. We're told that the people wanted to be like the other nations and so they complained to the prophet Samuel, saying they wanted a king. Samuel was grieved, but God's response to Samuel is ". . . **they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.** ⁸ **According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you.** ⁹ **Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."** ²

God has done *all* for them, but God says that they continually rejected HIM. They have always wanted what they wanted. They'll only be "happy" if they get what they want. So, what does that lead to in these moments? They complain for a human king. And, God gives it to them. They get what they want! But it's given with an understanding of the pain that an earthly king will bring. And then, they're given Saul. Israel's subjective gratitude really was a rejection of God. It was a quicksand to a complaining spirit that only wanted what they wanted.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Sa 8:7-9.

It's because of stories like these that the apostle Paul warns Christians saying, **“⁹We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”³**

These were written for our instruction. Don't grumble and complain. Don't base your life on mere circumstances and miss God who is over all! But, I know many of you here could say, “But aren't we supposed to express thanks for specific circumstances? I mean, doesn't the Bible praise God for specific acts that are done in history?” Yes! Absolutely. But, my question is whether or not we're praising God as God for those circumstances or if we're praising God because he's just given us what we like and prefer.

So, think of it this way. Growing up my family was the type of family who would go into the Hallmark store and look for the cards that would make people cry. Even as a pre-teen or teenager, I could spend a while trying to find the perfect card. Today, let me say, many cards have deteriorated in their messages. I have found so many Valentine's Day cards or birthday cards or anniversary cards simply talk about loving someone simply because of all they do for *you*. They don't seem to have as much focus on the character and nature of the person themselves and why you appreciate *them* as a person. Now, I'm not saying that I'm against cards that say, “Mom, you've fed me. You took me clothes shopping. You made my bed. I love you!” are necessarily bad cards. But let me ask this. What if mom stopped feeding you, taking you clothes shopping, stopped making your bed? Would you still love her? Would you still be grateful for her? Is she still a good mom?

Ok, transfer this with God. Can someone be grateful and in awe that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things and miss God? I believe so. Think about the story of the Pharisee who prayed, “Lord, I thank you that I'm not like this other man.” He goes on and *thanks* God that he tithes. He thanks God that he serves him. He thanks God he isn't bound in other types of life-dominating sins. I've said it before, but I think people read too much into that prayer as though that man is being overtly arrogant. He's actually *thanking* God that he is all these things. He's recognizing only God does these things. And yet, he doesn't walk away justified. Meaning, he doesn't walk away forgiven and righteous in God's sight. Why? Because he doesn't live in dependence on God. He looks at the God-wrought works in his life and he trusts in those God-wrought works to make him right with God instead of being like the man who simply says, “Be merciful to me a sinner.” One man trusted God completely. The other man trusted in God's gifts (and focused his thanksgiving on the gifts, not God).

So, while I know I can praise God for a getaway with my wife and I can thank God for the minds he has given my children, I must be careful not to set my hope on those things. My gratitude is on GOD – not simply the circumstances. If my focus is on God, then I have a steadfast thanksgiving. Then I can actually be thankful to GOD for his gifts. I can say, “Thank YOU,” and appreciate his gifts while growing in my love for him. And, I can give thanks no matter what my circumstances are – whether painful or pleasurable – because God is my source and aim. And, this is the point I want to get to next.

2. **Objective thanksgiving has God as its source and aim.**

The word “objective” might seem confusing to some, and that simply is referring to something real and outside of us. Our subjective experiences or feelings don't dominate our giving of thanks. Our OBJECTIVE God is the source and aim of our thanksgiving. When God is the point, then everything comes together.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 10:9–11.

So, we have so many psalms that speak of praising God for his character and nature. Psalm 63:3, “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.”⁴ Psalm 69:30, **“I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.”**⁵ Psalm 95:2, “Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!”⁶ Psalm 104:33, “I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.”⁷

Give thanks. Sing praise to God. Why? For who he is! He is worthy. In Psalm 69:30, did you notice that he says that he will magnify God with his thanksgiving. What does that mean to magnify God? Well, there are essentially two different types of magnifying glasses. There’s the microscope and there’s a telescope. A microscope makes small objects seem bigger. A telescope makes objects that seem small be seen more correctly (larger). The psalmist says his praise is like a telescope on God! Look how glorious and wondrous *he* is. This is what thanksgiving ought to be like. When you give thanks, your heart should be drawn to greater affection and desire for God himself. This is what I mean by objective thanksgiving. The source of the thanksgiving is outside of us and our circumstances. The source is God. And, the aim is God – to magnify him!

A couple weekends ago, Tracy and I got a way for a couple nights up in the Traverse City area. I asked a couple people to pray for that time while away that it would be restful, enjoying and rejuvenating, and one of my friends texted me this, “I will be praying friend. Enjoy the time in light of this truth, ‘God owes us nothing. Not even rest.’ So I pray you get rest and praise Him for it!” Some could say, “How is that encouraging?” But I’ll tell you what, it encouraged Tracy and me throughout the time. In all of our experiences we thought, “We don’t deserve any of this, and look what God has given us.” He gave us rest, rejuvenation and enjoyment. When we knew that all we received was a gift from God, our love and appreciation and joy in God himself increased. God’s kindnesses actually led us to turn to him.

So, in saying all of this, please don’t hear me saying that we are never to be thankful to God for enjoyable circumstances. NO! We should praise God for his good and varied gifts. But our focus should be on praising GOD as God – not God as genie. Or, God who is good when I get a new car, but God who isn’t as good when my car breaks down. God is always good.

Now, I hope I’m not beating a dead horse, but I can honestly say that over the last 2 ½ years of my hip, knee and leg issues, it’s been a significant trial. And, gratitude didn’t come easily in my own heart. There were times I was angry with God. There were times when I simply felt numb. I didn’t understand my circumstances and I allowed circumstances to judge God. There were times I didn’t know how to think and I’d reach out to fellow elders and friends to pray for me and show me the Word. But what did it mean to be grateful? Was I supposed to like pain? Was I supposed to love the effects of the curse?

I don’t believe that’s what God means when he says give thanks *in* all circumstances. If you have a family member who is a Christian and they die, you don’t say, “I love death!” No. You love Jesus who conquers death. But death is our enemy. Similarly, we don’t love the effects of the Fall, but we love the Lord who is over the curse and breaks the curse.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 63:3.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 69:30.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 95:2.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 104:33.

This meant, for me, that God raised my trust to a very different level. I looked to my Savior who suffered in this world and despised the shame of the cross while at the same time, suffering God's punishment for sinners on himself. I saw how Jesus gave of himself for others and endured the greatest punishment any human could ever experience and also rose from the dead and promises reconciliation with God and eternity with him. I've come to cling more closely to Christ in the midst of the pain and trust my God who does not waste one moment of suffering in any of his children and promises to work all things together for good. Therefore, I can praise God in the pain.

But you could say, "How? How can you praise God? I could never do that." Well, believe me, I could never praise God in the pain either if it weren't for his superior grace. But I think about the night before Jesus' death on the cross, and he meet with his disciples for the Passover meal and transforms it into a new covenant practice that we call the Lord's Supper. Twice, we're told that he gives thanks. The word there is "eucharisteo." That's where some religious groups get the word "Eucharist." The word means to give thanks.

Ventura, every time we participate in communion together, we rejoice, don't we? We see the beauty and love of Jesus, but I think we ought to ponder that Greek word for giving thanks. Jesus gives thanks that his body will be broken for sinners and his blood will be shed. That doesn't mean that he is saying that Judas is good and that the Roman Soldiers are right in what they're doing. That doesn't mean Jesus *loves* pain. But in the midst of all this suffering, Jesus saw the joy before him. He trusted his good Father and could give thanks for what his broken body and shed blood would accomplish. Anyone who turns from their sin and recognizes they can't save themselves or make themselves right with God will be forgiven and reconciled to God. Only Jesus can do this.

And, because of Jesus, we have the confidence that nothing in this life will separate us from the love of God. No trial on earth or heaven can separate us from God's love in Christ. And, we're guaranteed that God's purposes will stand. Evil will not win in the end. Not only this, we're told that the trials of this present age are not worth comparing to the glories that are to be revealed to us!

Why? Because of Jesus. Therefore, we can give thanks *in* all things. We can heed the many calls to praise in the New Testament. Philippians 4:6 says, "⁶do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."⁸ Colossians 2:6-7 states, "⁶**Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.**"⁹ How are we abounding in thanksgiving? Through faith in Jesus Christ in whom we're rooted and built up! Do you see that an objective thanksgiving is rooted in and focused on the Lord?

This is what shaped the apostle Paul. He was imprisoned. He was beaten. He was unloved by many. Yet, he praised God. He wasn't thanking God that people sinned and hurt him. He praised God for his ways. Or, I think of the apostle Peter who was persecuted by the religious leaders and he praised God because he was counted worthy to suffer along with Christ. A biblically-based, gospel-flourishing thanksgiving is grounded in the Lord and its aim is his glory. Therefore, we can give thanks *in* everything.

Yet, even as I say this, there are two potential questions that people can ask. First being, "What about my painful circumstances?" Second, "What if I don't want to give thanks to God?" I've answered the first

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:6.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:6-7.

question in a couple of different ways already, but I want to focus a little more there. So, let's answer that one:

What about my painful circumstances? Being thankful doesn't mean that you sweep everything under the rug. Last week's Fighter Verse was "Cast your burden on the LORD and he will sustain you." We acknowledge our burdens! God wants us to take them to his throne. Thanksgiving doesn't mean we do not lament and sorrow over brokenness and sin in this world. Actually, we are commanded in various passages of Scripture to lament. And, what's beautiful is that the Scriptures tell us that God holds our tears in a bottle. And someday, all those tears will be answered in eternity future!

I know I've said this in various circumstances recently, but it's something that's obviously profoundly affected me while reading Scripture in the near past. When we read of Israel's grumbling and complaining in the wilderness, God always punishes them. But do you know that Moses often complains as well, and isn't punished? The only time he's punished is when he doesn't pray and he simply strikes the rock. The other times is when he converts his grumbings into laments to God. He prays his burdens! When he prays his burdens, he's acknowledging his need for God. He's acknowledging his confusion, but God's awareness of all things. He's trusting God himself! I am extremely grateful that God hears our burdens and calls us to take them to his throne room. As we do this, we can grow in gratitude *for* God himself. He's with us no matter what circumstance we face and we can trust that Satan and sin won't win in any circumstance in our lives. God will work all things together for our godliness!

But as I think about painful circumstances, I'm also reminded of Job when he said, "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." The blessedness he states is a word for thanksgiving and praise. Now, he says the Lord gives and takes. But wasn't it really Satan? Yes, it was Satan. Yet, Job is also right in that God is sovereign over all. And, Job shows us something very important. While Satan and his minions are at work in this world, God is more powerful. And for us who know Christ, we can trust that God is good because we've seen how he took the horror of the cross and made it our salvation! Therefore, we can say "Blessed be the name of the Lord." And, we can even apply it to our circumstances – even if today we can't see how those things can be worked for our good and his glory. Through eyes of faith. Eyes focused on Jesus, we can praise God in the pain.

As I thought about that, I was reminded of Corrie Ten Boom. She was a woman whose family helped protect Jews during the time of Nazi Germany. She eventually was taken to a concentration camp. As we all know, the terrors of the camps are beyond what our minds are willing to conceive. Yet there in the camp, she recounts a time when she and some other Christians found a solitary place and partook of communion together. The "Eucharist." How could she praise Jesus while being persecuted and starved? This is mental, emotional and physical torture. Shouldn't she be saying, "Where is God in all of this?" Yet, in this scenario, and in others, she sought to praise God in the midst of all her circumstances.

This is what God designs to give all who trust Jesus: a steadfast thanksgiving in him. For me, with my physical pain and also the mental struggles I've had, while I wouldn't wish for these things, I can thank God for these things – not because I'm thankful for the curse and affects of it, but because I'm drawn closer to God and I've also been able to serve others better because of this. Therefore, ultimately, I'm not simply thankful for pain. I'm thankful for God who redeems the pain. And, every Christian can be confident like this because of Jesus who is our Redeemer!

But maybe you say, “No. I refuse to praise like this.” **What if I don’t want to praise God like this?** One thing I discovered this past week, and was reminded of is that those who don’t give thanks with steadfast gratitude, will forever be apart from God. Isaiah 38:18 says, **“¹⁸ For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness.”¹⁰** And Romans 1:21 says, **“²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. . .”¹¹** There are plenty of people in this world who are “grateful” from worldly standards. They say thanks at meals. They’re going to celebrate thanksgiving. As a matter of fact, many in our secular society talk about the need for human beings to be thankful and to express gratitude. There’s a common grace that God has given this world. Humanity ought to be a grateful people.

But just being thankful for stuff doesn’t go far enough. If you refuse to trust God and be grateful to God *in* everything, you either are not a true believer or you’re missing more of the ramifications of the gospel. God has promised to give you a steadfast gratitude in HIM, not simply your circumstances. And, if you have a steadfast gratitude in him, then you will grow in gratitude in all things: the big and the small in this life – leading you to magnify him more and more through your thanksgiving.

So, let me challenge you to ponder God and his goodness each day. Don’t be content to take your gratitude to the foothills of the mountain, but let your gratitude soar to the heights of Everest and praise God for who He is! And, in the midst of pain or pleasure, give thanks to God for who he is. Trust you do not understand.

One of my favorite songs is a simple one. It’s written by a man named Rich Mullins. He battled multiple issues severely, but what song he wrote was “Sing Your Praise to the Lord.” “Sing your praise to the Lord. Come on, everybody, stand up and sing one more Hallelujah. Sing your praise to the Lord. I can never tell you just how much good that it’s gonna do for you to sing your praises to the Lord.” These lines are true because this is exactly what the Scriptures teach. **Our hope is found in God. As we praise him, we defy painful circumstances by saying God is in control and that he is good. When we praise him in calm and "good" circumstances, we biblical gratitude reminds us of our good and gracious God! Therefore, let us rejoice with steadfast thanksgiving.**

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 38:18.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 1:21.