

## LEARNING TO BE ALWAYS GRATEFUL

This is my final lesson in our “FOREVER GRATEFUL” series. Once more, I have proposed this definition: Biblically speaking, **to be grateful** is to be “full of feelings of joyful satisfaction which will overflow into expressions of praise for the One who has blessed us.” Today, just two days after Thanksgiving, let’s consider “**how to be always grateful.**” After all, this is the challenge the Holy Spirit presents to us in 1<sup>st</sup>Thessalonians 5:18. Here’s how four of the most popular versions render the verse:

**Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** (NIV)

**In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.** (KJV)

**Give thanks {to God} at all times. That is what God wants for you in Christ Jesus.** (ERV)

**Thank God no matter what happens.**

**This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus - to live.** (MESSAGE)

*In all circumstances? In everything? At all times? No matter what happens?* Paul, you’re joking, right? I think I hear Him saying, “*Not in the least. It’s what God expects from you.*” How am I supposed to manage that? Not easy especially when times are not easy.

The easy answer might be to keep our focus. *Concentrating on what God has done* for us in Jesus and on what hope we now have for the future can certainly brighten the darkest of days. It can minimize our troubles and lift burdens that would otherwise be too heavy to bear. Paul put it this way in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthian church: (4:16-18) “**We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**” Easy for him to say, He was an apostle. Really? (2 Cor. 11:23ff) It’s not that we don’t suffer hardships or feel hurt or pain. It’s that we realize these things are temporary. We’re not trapped in a tomb, but traveling through a tunnel. For whatever time we walk this world, **the Light of the cross** sheds light on our path – and the Light of heaven draws us forward, looking beyond the present reality toward our eternal home.

Yet, there’s more in Paul’s statement. *Troubles serve purpose*, achieving eternal glory. I don’t think he’s speaking of a mansion in the sky. The difficulties actually can bless us. In fact, in another place he says: “**Since we’ve been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we’ve gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; then character; and then hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.**” (Romans 5:1-3)

Then in James 1:2-4, it also says: **“Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”** Joy in the midst of trials? Peace in dire circumstances? Yes. How? It’s all about perspective. God sees something in His children that they don’t recognize in themselves. He sees beauty and glory below the hard surface. The blood of Jesus cleanses us, preparing us for the Spirit of God to work on us – and in us - to transform us.

At the beginning of the month - on the very day that I planned to sit down and put to paper the thoughts that the Spirit had been placing in my head for this series, I cracked my head on the lift gate of the Honda while loading food into it to take to Carpenter’s Place. It was still aching as I crossed the tracks on Broadway when the car suddenly grew louder. I sung underneath it after taking the food upstairs. The exhaust had rusted loose just after the catalytic convertor. I sighed thinking, *“You’ve got to be kidding me.”* I drove back here, pondering how I might fix it, but as I turned in off of Charles into the drive I remembered I had taken the letters for the marquee with me, planning to change the message when I returned. So, I went to work putting up these words: **“Learning to be grateful always.”** Would you believe I banged my head on the sign almost in the same place as I did earlier? It hurt, but I couldn’t help but grin. I said aloud, *“God, I know You’re not kidding, but it sure seems like You have a sense of humor.”*

Within the week, I managed to piece the exhaust back together, but while working under the car, I noticed how the catalytic converter was rusting but on the other end – and found myself quoting Paul’s words about *“wasting away outwardly.”* Of course he wasn’t referring to our physical bodies. I can relate to that, too. Not only do I have rheumatoid arthritis, I just learned last week that I have cataracts and the beginning stages of macular degeneration. Oh, joy. But, you know what? Inwardly, I am being renewed every day! As Paul wrote in **another place: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”** (Romans 8:18)

My troubles are small in comparison to many people I know. Your issues may be far greater – and I do not mean to belittle your struggles. Yet, the fact remains that if you are a Christian, you **ALWAYS** have something to be thankful for – and therefore you can be grateful **always**. It takes focus – and a proper perspective. Consider the view from what is called **the Thanksgiving chair**. Pull up a chair – and think about what you have to be thankful for. Can’t think of anything? Then, **what would it take for you to be truly grateful?** Family and friends all around? A new car? Renewed health? If so, **how long would your gratefulness last?** Everything fades with time. Only our relationship with God is forever – and only that can make us forever grateful!