

Choosing Gratitude

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Today's text is 1 Thessalonians 5:18. It's printed in the order of worship. Please read along with me, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (NIV). This verse doesn't mean that everything that happens to us is God's will. It's not God's will that we lose our jobs, or get a diagnosis of cancer, or that our children make poor choices. What this verse does say is that it's God's will for us to be thankful people in all circumstances, even in hard times—especially in hard times.

This passage reminds me of a scene from the classic novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. When Robinson Crusoe was wrecked on his lonely island, he drew two columns and listed the good and bad of his situation. He was cast on a desolate island, but he was still alive. He was divided from humanity, but he was not starving. He had no clothes, but was in a warm climate and didn't need them. He had no means of defense, but saw no wild beasts which threatened him. He had no one to talk to, but the destroyed ship was near the shore and he could get out of it all the things necessary for his basic needs. He concluded, therefore, that no condition in the world was so miserable that one could not find something to be grateful for.

That episode in Robinson Crusoe's life is true for all of us. At any point in our lives, we can draw two columns, a list of good things that are happening to us, and a list of bad things that are happening to us. That's just the way life is. And so we have to constantly decide—will we be primarily resentful for the bad circumstances, or will we be primarily grateful for the good circumstances. Where will our focus be? Resentment or gratitude? It's our choice.

Several years ago, at a Lions Club meeting, I heard a story about a woman who started going blind while carrying her last child. She was totally blind at his birth and lived in blindness for almost twenty years. Her boy joined the military and was soon stationed overseas. About that time, a Lion's club member referred her to a Lion's Club eye clinic. The doctors performed a simple, twenty-minute operation on her eyes. Afterwards, she gained full sight in one eye and partial sight in the other. When her son returned from overseas, she saw him for the first time in her life.

The response at the Lion's club meeting proved interesting. Some of the members said, "That's awful. She was blind all those years when all she needed was a simple operation to cure her. What a horrible waste of twenty years." However, others said, "Isn't it wonderful that she can see again! Isn't it great that she can once again enjoy eyesight, see her son, and see the world again!" Two very different responses.

I'd like to meet that woman. I wonder what attitude she chose—resentment that she was unnecessarily blind for twenty years, or gratitude that she could now see again. You see, it's always our choice. Resentment for the bad, or gratitude for the good, we must choose our focus.

That was true for the Apostle Paul. Like Robinson Crusoe, Paul could also draw two columns and make a list of good things and bad things. Paul experienced many positive circumstances—starting new churches, reaching people for Christ, developing wonderful relationships. But, at the very same time, he also experienced numerous negative circumstances—persecution, physical torture, shipwrecks, and imprisonment. Yet, in all of these circumstances—good and bad—Paul wrote again and again about thankfulness and gratitude.

To the church at Philippi, where he was imprisoned and beaten, he said, “I thank my God on every remembrance of you.” To the church at Corinth, who caused him all kinds of heartaches and headaches, he wrote, “I thank my God always on your behalf.” To the church at Ephesus, where he was driven out of town and unjustly accused and persecuted, he wrote, “Giving thanks always for all things unto God.” Paul was no shallow optimist or positive attitude thinker. He knew the hard realities of suffering. But Paul consistently chose gratitude over resentment, and it had a powerful and positive influence on his life.

You see, there is great power in gratitude. It can make a huge difference in our life. It did for John Claypool. When John lost his ten-year-old daughter to leukemia, gratitude was the only way he survived. After his daughter’s death, John walked down three different paths. The first path was to say, “Well, it was just God’s will. I have to accept it.” But that was not helpful. He could not believe that God willed ten-year-old girls to die of leukemia. A second path was to try to find an intellectual answer as to why this happened. He tried to make sense of it. But that didn’t work either. His daughter’s death didn’t make any sense. Finally, John walked the path of gratitude. He realized that life is a gift. We are not entitled to it. That we have any life at all is pure gift and pure grace. Therefore, John chose to be thankful for the ten good years they had together rather than being consumed with resentment for the years he did not have with her. This path of gratitude wasn’t easy, but it was the only path which offered any help.

Gratitude or resentment? It’s our choice. And we must make that choice most every day of our life. Like Robinson Crusoe, we can always draw two columns—both good and bad. We all have bad things we can be resentful about, and good things we can be grateful for. Therefore, we have to decide where to put the focus—resentment for the bad, or gratitude for the good. Although we can choose either one, the Bible is clear. It’s God’s will for us to choose gratitude.

This is what our Pilgrim forefathers and foremothers did back in 1621. You have heard many times how that little band of Puritans set out on the Mayflower and came to the new country. The first winter was much worse than they anticipated, and by April only fifty of the original 102 had survived. A discussion arose as to whether those remaining should give up and go back to the Old World. But they decided to stay and plant one more crop. When the time of the first anniversary of their landing rolled around, discussion arose as to how it should be observed. Some proposed a day of mourning when attention would be focused on all those who lay in unmarked graves in foreign soil. But the others said, “No, a day of thanksgiving would be more appropriate. After all, fifty

of us have survived. We have gathered in a good harvest. The Indians have been our friends. Let's focus on what we have going for us, not on what we have going against us." Those early Pilgrims chose gratitude rather than resentment, and that was the birth of what we call Thanksgiving. And that spirit of Thanksgiving, that discipline of choosing gratitude, is what God calls us to do.

Oh, I can hear the skeptics. "Preacher," you might say, "you just don't know my situation. Things are horrible. How can I be grateful?" Such a question reminds me of an old story that I'll conclude with today.

Years ago, an elderly English pastor was famous for his pulpit prayers. He always found something to thank God for, even in bad times. One stormy Sunday morning, when everything was going extremely bad in the community and in the lives of many people in the congregation, himself included, he stepped to the pulpit to pray. A member of the congregation thought to himself, "The preacher will have nothing to thank God for on a wretched morning like this. The pastor began his prayer, "We thank Thee, O God that it is not always like this."

Join with me once again in reading the word of God, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (NIV). May God help you, and may God help me, to choose gratitude.