

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Wednesday, November 25, 2015
Thanksgiving Eve**

A THANKFUL LIFE

Ephesians 5:3-20

Everybody knows that the proper subject of a Thanksgiving sermon is giving thanks. So it won't surprise you that I want to talk with you this evening about giving thanks. But I don't want you to think that giving thanks is just something you ought to do at Thanksgiving time. Thanksgiving should be more than something we do. It should permeate our lives. As recipients of the manifold grace of God, as beloved children of our Heavenly Father, as sinners saved by the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross, in response to all that God is and all that He has done for us, it only makes sense for each one of us to live a thankful life. Gratitude really is, or should be, one of the distinguishing marks of the life of a Christian. Even when we find ourselves in the valley of suffering, hardship, disappointment, or loss.

Consider this testimony from what may be an unexpected source. In an interview published in *GQ* magazine, Stephen Colbert, formerly the star of *The Colbert Report* on the Comedy Channel and now the successor to David Letterman as host of *The Late Show* on CBS, talks about gratitude in the midst of loss. Colbert's father and two brothers were killed in a plane crash when he was ten years old. Being raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, Colbert says he was taught that we are here "to know God, love God, serve God, that we might be happy with each other in this world and with Him in the next." In his mother's life, he says, he saw that even in the midst of unremitting grief, she drew on her faith in God, believing that the only way to not be swallowed by sorrow, to in fact recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy, is to always understand our suffering – ourselves – in the light of eternity.

In the interview, Colbert mentions a letter in which J. R. R. Tolkien, author of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit*, asked: "What punishments of God are not gifts?" With his eyes filled with tears, Colbert says: "So it would be ungrateful not to take everything with gratitude. It doesn't mean you want it. I can hold both of those ideas in my head." (Adapted from "The Late, Great Stephen Colbert, *GQ*, 8/17/2015)

Stephen Colbert understands that thankfulness and suffering – thankfulness and grief, thankfulness and pain, thankfulness and hardship, thankfulness and loss, thankfulness and disappointment – are not incompatible. It is in the midst of these things that you and I are to cultivate the grace of gratitude and to live genuinely thankful lives.

Notice what the apostle Paul says in the passage of Scripture we read from Ephesians 5. He begins in verses 3-6 by describing a number of things that are incompatible with life in the kingdom of God, such as sexual immorality, impurity, greed, and obscene, filthy, or vulgar talk. The word translated "sexual immorality" is *porneia*, from which we get the word pornography. It refers to sexual sin of any and every kind. The fact that Paul speaks to it so forcefully means that it is not a new problem in our day. Impurity has to do with the mind and what we fill it with. Greed can take different forms. There is the greed of sexual lust, the

greed or lust for power, and, of course, the greed of materialism, for wealth and possessions. All of these – sexual immorality, impurity, and greed – are indicators of a me-oriented, self-indulgent life. “Among you,” writes Paul, “there must not be even a hint” – not even a trace – of these things. Why? “Because these are improper for God’s holy people” (5:3). This is not the kind of life God desires us to live. It is not the kind of life that bears witness to the grace and love and worth-ship of the God who made us and loves us and saves us.

Nor is a foul, filthy, vulgar mouth, no matter how funny or clever one may be with words and innuendos. What you say reveals what is in your heart. You can bless God (and others) with the words you speak, or you can grieve God. What is fitting in the life of a Christian, says Paul, is not the kind of talk that pollutes the minds and hearts of others. These are “out of place” for God’s people. What is fitting, instead, is thanksgiving (5:4). In its noun form, the word is *eucharistia*. In its verb form, as in verse 20, it is *eucharisteo*.

It wouldn’t surprise me if some of us need to hear just these words – this message – in our lives this evening. Because of the culture in which we live, it wouldn’t surprise me if some of us need to have our mouths and minds washed out by the Holy Spirit. It wouldn’t surprise me if some of us are trying to rationalize or accommodate some form(s) of sexual immorality, impurity, greed, profanity or vulgarity of speech in our lives, even as we profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus. If this is true in your life, I urge you to confess it to the Lord, surrender it to Him, and ask the Holy Spirit to transform you by the renewing of your mind. In view of God’s mercies, because of who He is and all that He has done for you, present your whole self – body, mind, and soul – to the Lord as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to Him, which is really the only reasonable thing to do (Romans 12:1-2).

Thankfulness is meant to be one of the distinguishing marks of your life and mine as believers. It is meant to be a way of life. As we see in verse 20, it is a mark of being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is not dependent on our feelings. You don’t have to feel great in order to be grateful. Thankfulness has more to do with our perspective than it does with our particular circumstances.

I’m not going to talk about everything Paul talks about in this passage tonight. Suffice it to say that the world of the 1st century was very much like the world today. In a sin-saturated society that seems to be getting darker by the day, the task of God’s people, says Paul, is to “live as children of light” (5:8). We are to shine with the light of the Lord Jesus. We are to “leave the light on” (Klyne Snodgrass) for the world around us and to shine it into the dark places. One way we do that is by cultivating the grace of gratitude and living a thankful life.

In the Greek construction of verses 18-20, there are just two commands, just two verbs in the form of imperatives, both in verse 18: “Do not get drunk with wine” and “be filled with the Holy Spirit.” All the other verbs – “speaking,” “singing,” “making music,” and “giving thanks” – elaborate on what life looks like when you are filled with the Holy Spirit. True, God-exalting worship is one mark of a Spirit-filled life. Another is thanksgiving: “... always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20).

When is it time to give thanks? Always. There is never a time when it is not time to give thanks to God.

For what should we give thanks? When he says, “For everything,” does Paul mean we are to give thanks for literally *everything* that happens in life, both good and bad? Is Stephen Colbert supposed to give thanks for the plane crash that took the lives of his father and two brothers? Are we supposed to give thanks for the cancer or heart attack that takes the life of a loved one? For a life-threatening illness that turns your life upside-down? For the pain of divorce? For terrorist attacks and threats of more to come? For violence fueled by religious or racial prejudice? Are we supposed to give thanks when evil triumphs or tragedy threatens to overwhelm us?

No. This cannot be what Paul means. There is nothing Christian about rejoicing in evil or giving thanks for it. What Paul means, I think, is that thankfulness is to be the pervading attitude in our lives, whatever our circumstances may be. As he says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, we are to “be joyful always, pray continually, (and) give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Regardless of our circumstances, regardless of what happens, regardless of the trials or troubles that come, we can still be thankful people. We can still give thanks to God for the blessings and sufficiency of His grace. We can still give thanks that God is God. We can still give thanks for our great and faithful Savior, who accomplished our salvation on the cross of Calvary. We can still give thanks that “in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, (and) who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). We can still give thanks that, though we have troubles in this world, Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). We can still give thanks that God is with us, that He will never leave us or forsake us.

Last weekend, Mary Sue and I saw “The 33,” the new movie about the 33 miners trapped in an underground mine in Chile for 69 days in 2010 before being rescued. That all 33 survived those 69 days underground is miraculous. The hardships they faced are hard to imagine. But they all made it out. In the place of refuge where they waited to be rescued, 1700 feet underground, they left this message: “God was with us.” Just as He was with Stephen Colbert and his mother. Just as He has always been with me. In good times and hard times. Just as He has been and is with you.

Whatever you have gone through or are going through right now, you can be sure that God is with you. You can be sure that God is for you (Romans 8:31). And you can be sure that nothing can ever separate you from His love for you in Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 8:38).

If you keep these things in mind, and if you allow the Holy Spirit to fill you continually with His life and power, you will be able to live a thankful life – a life marked not by grumbling or complaining or lust or greed or coveting what someone else has, but by gratitude.

There really is no end to the things for which you and I can be thankful. There is a story about a teacher who asked the students in her class to make a list of what they thought were the *present* Seven Wonders of the World. Here is what got the most votes:

1. The Pyramids of Egypt
2. The Taj Mahal
3. The Grand Canyon (the only one of the seven not man-made)
4. The Panama Canal
5. The Empire State Building
6. St. Peter's Basilica
7. The Great Wall of China

One student's list, though, was unlike any of the others. On her paper, she had written: "I think the Seven Wonders of the World are:

1. to see
2. to hear
3. to touch
4. to taste
5. to feel
6. to laugh
7. to love."

That is the perspective of a person who lives a thankful life.

Let me tell you about someone else who, though she was blind almost from birth, cultivated the grace of gratitude and lived a thankful life. Her name was Frances Jane Crosby. She is better known as Fanny. In her lifetime, Fanny Crosby wrote more than 9,000 hymns, including such favorites as "I Am Thine, O Lord," "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross," "Praise Him! Praise Him!," "To God Be the Glory," and the hymn we will sing in a few moments, "Blessed Assurance."

She lost her sight when just six weeks old. Her father died a few months later and she was raised by her mother and grandmother. As a girl, she memorized as many as five chapters of the Bible a week. Just before her 15th birthday, she was admitted to the New York Institute for the Blind, where she spent 12 years as a student and 11 more as a teacher. She and her husband, Alexander van Alstine, whom she met at the Institute, had one daughter, who died in infancy. For decades, her blindness notwithstanding, Fanny devoted herself to working among the poor and destitute in rescue missions in the slums of New York City.

Fanny Crosby knew hardship, though she actually considered her blindness a blessing. She knew the searing pain of losing a child. And yet the dominant note of her life, along with unwavering faith in God and a heart of loving service to others, was thankfulness and praise to God.

This enduring spirit of thankfulness, of contentment and gratitude even in the midst of suffering, is, like a heart of worship, the fruit of being filled – again and again and again, daily, even moment by moment – with the Holy Spirit. So, dear friends, as God's Word says, be filled with the Spirit. Let the Holy Spirit fill you. Open your heart to receive the Spirit's filling. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you. And He will.

Be filled with the Spirit and keep on being filled with the Spirit. Because we have a tendency to leak, being filled just once is not enough. So keep on being filled with the Spirit, and let thankfulness flow out of you as a way of life.

You can be sure of this: A thankful life pleases God.

Lord, let it be so in each of us. Amen.