

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Wednesday, November 24, 2010
Thanksgiving Eve**

GIVING THANKS... FOR YOU

Philemon 1-7

Last week I had the privilege of going up to New York to a congregation that is pretty well known if you know anything about gospel music or if you've read any best-sellers in Christian books in recent years. The church is the Brooklyn Tabernacle and a week ago last night I found myself at the Tuesday evening prayer meeting. It's a small gathering – 2,500 people or so. I found myself praying with 2,500 members of my extended family. It was quite an experience.

In the course of the time that I was up there I had the opportunity to speak to the pastor, a fellow named Jim Cymbala, and to his wife Carol, who is also the choir director whose choir has won six Grammy awards for gospel music. She's a very accomplished musician. I enjoyed speaking to Carol. I went up to her and introduced myself, said where I was from, and said, "I want to thank you for what you've done over the last 30 years, in the book that you wrote and the more than a dozen albums the choir has put out. You have inspired me, you've helped me think, you've helped me pray." All she said was, "You're welcome," with a huge smile on her face because someone had come up to her, someone she'd never met before, but someone who was in fact related to her by faith, and took the time and the effort to thank her for what she's done. Now she's a person who's won accolades across the world and who has a trophy case full of awards for the music that she's written and directed. And she still had that big, beaming smile, simply because someone who she had never met and maybe will never see this side of heaven took the time to say thank you.

I thought of that moment later on during the prayer meeting, and it came to me what I should preach about tonight. When the Lord showed me Philemon my response was, "You're kidding, right? You actually mean 1 Thessalonians, give thanks in all things, or the 10 lepers in Luke 17, the usual sort of thing." But no, He pointed me back to Philemon and there's a reason for that. This book is like the other letters of St. Paul in that it begins with a standard, traditional greeting that was seen frequently in the ancient world in letters. He mentions the people to whom he is writing and who is writing to them – himself and Timothy. He says, "Greetings to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." And that's pretty standard for his letters. Then he goes on to say something else that's pretty much standard with most of the letters that he wrote, the difference being that this one is written to a person. "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers."

This is St. Paul the apostle. This is a man who over the years had been in countless places throughout the Middle East and southeast Europe and perhaps even to Rome at this point. This is the man who had founded churches. This is a man who wrote to congregations over half the Roman Empire. A man who had almost certainly met and

even brought to the Lord hundreds, probably thousands of people in the course of his ministry. And yet what does he say to Philemon: “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers.”

Question: How many of you have prayed for me today? I’m not asking you that to embarrass you, okay? You may or may not have given any thought to who the preacher was tonight and that he really needed it. Out of sight, out of mind. The fact of the matter is that I’m not here that often and so it’s easy just not to think about whether you should be praying for me or not or praying for your fellow Christians down at the Cove. But Paul says, “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers.” One man among thousands, and he remembers to pray for him and when he does, he gives thanks. Why does he give thanks? Well, for one thing because he is, according to verse 1, a dear friend and a fellow worker. One among thousands. A dear friend and a fellow worker. He thanks God because of what he says in verse 5. Philemon is one who loves the saints. “I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.”

This is not a man who simply occupies a pew. This church happened to be meeting in his home. This was not just a man who opened up his house and let his fellow Christians come in and use it for a church. This was a man who loved the saints of God. And I imagine that love extended a good way out beyond his house. And of course, he mentions Philemon’s faith as well. “I thank my God when I pray for you because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus.”

Once again, one among thousands. There are lots of people who have faith in Christ. But there’s something about this man’s faith that brings him particularly to mind. And he knows that this is a man who has given his life and because of that, and because of his love for the saints, he can go on to make the request that he makes later in the letter that involves a potentially difficult sacrifice on Philemon’s part.

He refers to him in verse 6 in a really interesting way. He says, “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of the good thing we have in Christ. The word “sharing” there is the Greek word *koinonos*, similar to Koinonia. You all know who Koinonia is, right? It’s a ministry to the poor in Fairfax County. Where did they come up with that name? What’s Koinonia about? It’s about deep, intimate fellowship between people. Between people and God and between brothers and sisters in the Lord. It’s not the kind of fellowship one has just in saying hello as you pass on the street. It’s probably not even the kind of fellowship that you might have with a good neighbor. It’s the kind of fellowship you have with someone with whom you can share your heart and with whom you can share your burdens and with whom you can pray. And with whom you can be open enough to be able to confess your sin. The kind of sharing that Paul is talking about is also interesting because the same word is used in verse 17 to refer to Philemon as Paul’s partner. So he calls upon Philemon to share his faith and in doing so essentially asks him to be a partner in the ministry that God has given to both of them. And finally he says in verse 7, “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.” Isn’t that a wonderful thing for someone to say about someone else?

I spoke to Jim Cymbala last week as well at the end of a pastors' conference that I attended. I thanked him, too. I thanked him particularly for organizing this opportunity to gather together with pastors from all over the country and from half a dozen foreign countries to be lifted up gloriously by the music that we heard and the worship that we experienced in that congregation, to be prayed for and to have the word of God preached to us and to be encouraged and refreshed. It was just 3 days. If it weren't for the fact that I couldn't wait to get back to my wife, I would have somehow arranged to have stayed there. Kind of like going to the mountaintop with Jesus and you don't want to leave. That's where we were. It was a marvelous time. And I didn't want to go because it restored me.

That's what Philemon did for Paul. "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement." The apostle Paul was one of the greatest men in human history. This is probably the second most important person in the history of the church, other than its founder. And yet, here's this guy Philemon, about whom we know virtually nothing, other than what's here in this short letter. And here is Paul thanking this man for his encouragement and for the joy that he gives to Paul. It's for all of this. His friendship, his love for Paul, his love for the saints, faith in Christ, fellowship, his co-labor in God, joy and encouragement. Probably a lot more that Paul gives thanks for in Philemon. And he does that for a number of reasons. He doesn't state them here. He doesn't have to. It's all through his letters, what he says to every church. It's implicit what he says to Philemon. He knows that it's only through God's sovereign grace that Philemon is a brother in Christ. If it weren't for God working, whether through Paul or someone else, Philemon would be a stranger. It is because he knows that Philemon's labor for Christ is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit rather than by his own power or by his own will or his own smarts.

Paul is the proverbial smartest guy in the world. On Sunday at the Cove I confessed that when I was growing up I was always the smartest guy in the room. I knew that because I told myself that regularly. But Paul really was the smartest guy in the room. And yet he knows, as Philemon does, that his work is only possible because of the Holy Spirit at work in them. He knows the kind of fellowship that they enjoy is a gift of God rather than the creation of men. And isn't it true? When we come together, when heart meets heart, and we can enjoy the kind of intimate friendship that doesn't come along all that often in life. And when that is between Christian brothers and sisters, that's a creation of God.

He knows that Philemon is producing the fruit of the Spirit and that those fruits are building up the body of Christ even as they build up Paul himself. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Love is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Philemon was producing those fruits and as he did, the church was being built up. It's only right for Paul to give thanks for Philemon. All this points to the fact that this isn't simply a human relationship. This is an act of God at work. It's a work of God. And so it's only right that Paul says, "I always thank you Philemon, because you're such a wonderful guy and we're so tight." No. "I thank God as I remember you in my prayers because of all that you are and all that you do."

In the same way, our relationships are gifts of God and thus proper objects of thanksgiving. It's unfortunate that all too often we take one another for granted in the church. We take lots of people for granted. Husbands take wives for granted and vice versa. Children take parents for granted and parents take children for granted. They'll always be there and do those good things they do and you don't have to pay them. But the truth is, there's a lot there not to take for granted.

It would be easy to take Neil Smith for granted. The man's my boss. Who likes their boss? Who gives thanks for their employer? Yes, they're thankful for a job, but the supervisor is always looking over your shoulder and breathing down your neck. You don't give thanks to God for them, right?

Bob Barnett is just another associate pastor, right? He's just there. Jarrett Van Tine is just a kid. Lauren and Joanna working in the office are just peons. They're not even ordained. For that matter, neither is Jarrett. And of course, all of you people of Faith, I'm glad you pay my salary, but who are you? I don't see you and you don't see me. What difference does it make?

The truth of the matter is that the gifts of God are as varied as His people. Neil Smith is not just a boss. He's a brother in Christ. He's a friend. He's a model of a peer and a leader. And I don't know what I'd have done the last five years without him. He is by far the best person I've ever worked for and with. And this congregation is so blessed to have him. I hope you let him know that. Give thanks for him.

Bob Barnett is not just another associate. He's been a valuable resource and friend as well as a prayer supporter. I have a file at home of stuff that he's written for Sunday School, not all of which I've used but some of which I've consulted as opportunities have arisen. How many people have a person like that on the staff that can provide that kind of stuff. Most of us have to go to Amazon for it, and then it's no good. So we've got an amazing leader who's forgotten more about theology than I ever knew. And who prays as a man inspired.

Jarrett has already preached for me, which from everything I've heard only produced the result that my contract is being reexamined. He's being used here by God to raise up yet another generation of God's people. And when I say that, I did that deliberately. I did not say another generation for Faith, because a lot of the people he deals with he's going to send off into the world and they're going to wind up scattered to the four winds and when they do so – I've already seen this and he's only been here 6 months – they're going to go with a foundation in Christ that's going to get them through the opposition of the world, it's going to overcome the skepticism of the college faculties they're going to deal with, it's going to produce fruit in the world and in them. God is using him to bring that about. Those of you who have teenagers or those of you who are going to have teenagers, I hope you thank him and thank Neil and thank Bob for the kinds of stuff they do.

Lauren and Joanna are not peons. They are dedicated and solicitous servants of the Lord without whom I would be far less effective than I am and I expect Neil and Bob would

say the same thing. I know Jerry Seager, as Treasurer, would certainly say that about Joanna. And all of you folks, you're not just faceless pew-sitters. You're members of my extended family. All of that talk about brothers and sisters? It can get stale and trivialized, but it's real. And when I see you, when I correspond with you, when I pray for you or you pray for me, when you offer your resources of time or talent on behalf of the Cove, as some of you did with the cleanup of the Occoquan River back in October, when that happens, we're not just a bunch of people who all occasionally happen to meet under the same roof. We're people who are tied together in the bond of love and mutual faith, such that I can honestly say that over the last five years I genuinely don't know where I would have been without you. And so I thank God for you.

And it can go even farther than that, really. We don't have to narrow the circle at all. I give thanks for the Presbytery of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, which has given me a way to serve beyond the local church that has been genuinely exciting, seeing what God has been doing among Presbyterians in the northeast. Someone before gave thanks for the EPC. You have no idea. I give thanks for the EPC every single day. Until we came here we felt like we were adrift, and furthermore, adrift in an ocean that was full of alligators and sharks and others who were all too willing to snap off a limb if they got the chance. I hate to say that, but it's true. So we've come into this denomination and we've been loved and we've been cared for and we've been supported and it has been marvelous. And I thank God for that.

I thank God for such organizations as Samaritan's Purse that have given me and countless other Christians the opportunity to minister worldwide. Anybody here do the Shoebox for Operation Christmas Child? If you haven't you'd better do so next year. It really isn't hard to do.

I'm going to tell a story I heard from Franklin Graham. Operation Christmas Child started during the Bosnia war in 1995. Franklin Graham was approached by someone who knew him from England who said they wanted to put together shoeboxes for children in Bosnia who had been victimized by the war. So he did that and it came together. The next year they did it again.

In 1996 one of the children who received one of those boxes at first was reluctant to do so. The volunteer who brought this young man, who was 8 or 9 years old, his box tried to hand it to him and he said, "I don't want a box." The woman said, "But why not? Somebody from another country has sent this to you because they care about you and want you to have a happy Christmas." He said, "I don't want a box."

Finally, she dug out of him why he wouldn't take a box. He said, "I don't want the box. I want my parents." His parents had been killed earlier that year. Finally she got him to take the box. When he opened it, he discovered not just all the gifts you put in the shoebox. He discovered a photograph of the people who sent it to him, along with their address. The volunteer said, "These are the people who thought enough of you to send this to you. Maybe you should send them a thank you note." And so he did. Six weeks later they got that note and they were tickled to death to hear that there was somebody

who had received their gift. They knew that child had gotten it and that he had been gracious enough to write.

So they wrote back to him. They told him about themselves and asked him to tell them about himself – where he lived, what his circumstances and dreams were. That started a regular correspondence. Every six weeks either a kid in Bosnia or some people in the States would get a letter. Ten months later that child got his Christmas wish because those parents adopted him. They had never been able to have children and they wanted to have a little boy. So God gave them that child. For Christmas that year he didn't get a box. He got his parents.

How can you not thank God for people who do that kind of work, who bring people together that way?

I'm thankful for the Presbyterian Church of America. I know they're the competition or the enemy or whatever. But their world mission organization, Missions for the World, gave me an opportunity to go to Mexico and to meet and work with and pray with and minister to brothers and sisters in a place I otherwise would not have gone to. Thank God for Missions for the World for what they have done both in me and for me.

I've given thanks this last week, every opportunity I've gotten, for the Brooklyn Tabernacle. I may never go there again. I certainly won't ever meet the vast majority of people who attend that church. But just in those three days those people were used by God.

All of these things are gifts of God. I go through this not just because I took the opportunity to monopolize the microphone. When Neil asked us what we're thankful for, I didn't say anything then because I knew I was going to go through this litany now. And I didn't even mention my wife or my daughter who are the best things that have ever happened to me. I go through all of this because what I heard Paul say to Philemon was "I thank God for you whether I'm in Corinth or Ephesus or Rome or Jerusalem, wherever I am, whoever I'm with, whatever I do, I thank God for you."

I'd like you right now to turn to the person next to you or the people on either side of you, whether they are family or people you just happen to be sitting next to this evening, and I'd like you to tell them that you thank God for them. Would you do that?

That's kind of neat. Some people not only did that, but they got up and shook hands, some people hugged. Why? Because you really are thankful for one another. Of course, you're thankful for the feast, and some of us are thankful for the football, we're thankful for family that will gather tomorrow, we're thankful for the country that we live in and the freedom that we have, but what I'd like to ask you to do this evening and every single day is to thank God for one another. This is a blessed congregation. You have no idea how marvelous the folks here and down in Woodbridge are. And that is God's doing. Let's thank Him for that.