

A THANKFUL HEART
Ephesians 1:16; 5:4, 20

Intro: We have just come through our nation's thanksgiving time. I hope that instead of limiting ourselves to that one day for our thanksgiving to God, the Lord may have used the day to remind us of how negligent we are in our thanksgiving. And coupled with that I trust that we all have determined that, by the grace of God, we will be more thankful to God for the many blessings He gives to us every day. As I said last Thursday, every day should be Thanksgiving Day for those of us who know the Lord. The only day we are not under an obligation to thank the Lord would be a day in which we receive no blessings. But, since that is impossible, every day is Thanksgiving Day.

In our study of Romans on Sunday mornings, we learned many weeks ago now that one of the sins for which man is condemned is his failure to give thanks to God. See Romans 1:21. But another thing about that Romans 1 passage is that the lack of thanksgiving leads to pride and foolishness, and ultimately to idolatry. Therefore, those of us who know the Lord need to realize that a failure to thank God for His blessings is one of the first steps to a spiritual downgrade. And so it is vitally important for us to do as the Doxology suggests, to "praise God from whom all blessings flow." And this means to praise the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is something which we cannot afford to ignore.

With all that Paul had to say in his epistles about thanksgiving, we know that he was a man with A THANKFUL HEART. And we can believe that this contributed greatly to the spiritual vitality which he always demonstrated. It would take hours to go through all of Paul's statement which have to do with thanksgiving and praise to God, and so tonight I want to limit myself to his epistle to the Ephesians. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to isolate verses dealing with thanksgiving because they often flow from one verse into another. But I have chosen three verses from this great epistle, and it is to them that I want to direct your thoughts tonight.

The verses are 1:16, 5:4, and 5:20. I am passing over most of chapter 1 since verses 3 through 14 are one long expression of Paul's thanksgiving to God for many of the blessings we have in salvation. Possibly we can get into that at another time.

First, let us look at Ephesians 1:16. In this we find:

I. PAUL'S THANKSGIVING FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD (Eph. 1:16).

But you can see immediately that it is really impossible to deal with this verse alone if we are to get the full impact of what he was saying in verse 16.

Paul's thanksgiving for them was "unceasing." And it was not just a good feeling that he had in his heart. He expressed his thanksgiving to God in his "prayers." So he was giving thanks to the right Person. He was not complimenting them for showing great wisdom in turning to the Lord, but he gave the Lord all of the glory.

We need to back up to verse 15 to see what got started Paul praying for the church at Ephesus. It was after he heard two things about them:

- 1) Their "faith in the Lord Jesus."
- 2) Their "love unto all the saints."

What did these two things mean to the Apostle Paul? They were the evidences that Paul always looked for as confirmation that people had been saved. It was not just that they believed in God, but they believed in the Lord Jesus. This would have been a very important distinction to make in a city where the people had been worshipers of the great goddess, Diana. Even today when we talk to people we need to make it clear when we speak about God that we are not leaving it up to them to choose any god they want, but that the God we know and love is as Paul said in verse 3 of this chapter, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." A true Christian is one who is trusting Christ. This kind of language was probably new to the people of Ephesus. They had been known as worshippers of Diana; now they were known as those who believed in Christ. Before they were trying to win Diana's favor by their sacrifices; now they rested in the work of the Lord Jesus for them.

This is one of the main differences between the religions of the world as compared with the Christian faith. The Christian knows that he has received from God more than he can ever return; the heathen are always trying to make their gods happy by the things that they do for their gods.

So when Paul saw this difference in the believers at Ephesus, he knew that only God could have made the difference, and so he thanked God over and over again. And it would seem quite reasonable to believe that the things that Paul gave thanks for were the spiritual blessings he had just mentioned in verses 3 through 14.

This verse with its context should teach us that the blessings we ought to be most thankful for in each other's lives are the spiritual blessings, the blessings of our salvation.

In Paul's epistle to the Colossians he gave thanks to God in these words:

Giving thanks unto the Father,
which hath made us meet to be partakers
of the inheritance of the saints in light:
Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness,
and hath translated us into the kingdom of
his dear Son (Col. 1:12, 13).

Only God could do a work like that.

The second thing that Paul gave thanks for was the difference that was evident in their interest in the people of God. Remember that most of the people Paul wrote to were first generation believers. They could not look back upon godly parents and godly grandparents because they were not the kind of parents and grandparents that they had. Not everybody in Ephesus had trusted in the Lord, and so when people were saved it often meant a break with their families -- just like it does today! But the evidence of their salvation was seen in the fact that they felt closer to their brothers and sisters in the family of God than they did to those who were their relatives in the flesh. Some of you have experienced this kind of a difference in your lives after you trusted in the Lord. Suddenly the people you had avoided before became an integral part of your life. You not only liked the Lord's people, but you preferred to be with them. This is one characteristic of love.

Paul called the Lord's people "saints." A saint is not a special kind of a believer; the NT uses this term to describe all of us. We are the people that the Lord has set apart for Himself, and a people in whose hearts He is working to perfect them in holiness.

Paul always looked for these two qualities in the lives of the Lord's people, and when he saw them, he apparently made them a part of his prayers. He didn't consider that the Lord had finished His work in any of them, but he saw the evidence of spiritual life, thanked God for the work He had started, and prayed that they would grow and mature as the children of God.

Chapters 18 and 19 in Acts tell us about Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Undoubtedly many had come to the Lord under his ministry. But he did not congratulate himself for the salvation of any of them. His thanksgiving to God showed that he knew that God alone deserved the praise.

This is a very simple but very important lesson for all of us. We need to pray for each other, and we need to thank God for each other. We may see many things in each other's lives

which are not perfect, but if we can only see what Paul mentioned, we are seeing enough to know that we need to thank God for what He has done.

Make sure that you are praying for the Lord's people, by name, and continually. Thank God for what He has done. And, as you see more changes for the good being made, it will should cause you to thank God even more.

But let us go on to the second verse: Eph. 5:4. Here we see that:

II. THANKSGIVING AS A SAFEGUARD AGAINST SIN (Eph. 5:4).

I want you to see something here that is of major importance.

I mentioned a little while ago that from Romans 1 it seems that man's failure to be thankful to God was one of the initial reasons for his fall into sin. Please turn with me to Romans 1, and I want you to see the connection that a lack of thanksgiving had to do with the following involvement of man in sin. Cf. Rom. 1:20-32. (Read.)

As time has gone on, man's involvement in sin has increased to where it is today, and Romans 1 indicates that one of the major reason for it, if not the major reason, has been because of man's steadfast refusal to thank God for his blessings.

That emphasis is also here in Ephesians 5. What a strange place to find the exhortation to give thanks, to give thanks to God!

Paul had a way of speaking very directly to the people of God. Perhaps we need more of that today in our degenerate society. Even Christians are getting caught in sins which should never even be seen in the Lord's people. Even some preachers are getting involved in immorality.

Here in verse 3 Paul was warning the believers about fornication, all uncleanness, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talking. And then he went on in verse 5 to point out that when people continuously are involved in these sins, you can be sure that they are not saved. And Paul said in verse 7, "Be not ye therefore partakers with them." A Christian cannot live in sin, but he can fall into sin. But Paul said that we shouldn't even fall. But how can we be kept from it?

We live in a very wicked society. People use profanity very freely. You not only hear women taking the Lord's Name and using vile language, but we are even beginning to hear it

from children. Sex talk has become so common that it is easy for us to treat that which God has made holy in marriage as common and actually having nothing to do with God. More and more couples are living together without marriage, and homosexual relationships are finding greater and greater acceptance.

I don't need to describe it for you; you can see it every day for yourselves. And many of you with children at home are concerned about raising your children in a vile society like we have. Again I ask, what provisions has God made for our preservation of godly living in a society like this where the pressures are on us to conform?

The Scriptures give us several answers, and you know many of them. But let me focus tonight on the one that appears here in verse 4: "giving of thanks."

Now this may seem to be an over-simplification of a very serious problem, but this is where we must be careful to take God at His Word. The Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to tell the Ephesians, and every generation from that day until this, that one of the great safeguards we have against sins of the flesh and sins of the tongue and sins of the heart is to have A THANKFUL HEART. One way to keep from saying the wrong thing, is to say the right thing. We do not necessarily offer our thanks audibly. The Lord will lead us as to whether we speak so others can hear us, or whether we speak silently in thanksgiving to God. We all are attracted by sin. But when the Lord changes our lives, we have much to thank Him for, especially for the work that He has done in our hearts to keep us from those things in which the world seeks happiness, but never finds it.

Take the Lord at His word, and you will see that thanksgiving is a real bulwark protecting us from sin.

But now let us go to the third passage: Eph. 5:20.

III. THANKSGIVING AND THE HOLY SPIRIT (Eph. 5:20).

This verse is linked to the one time in Scripture that we are commanded to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now we can look at verses 18 through 21 in at least two ways:

- 1) That verses describe a person who has been filled with the Holy Spirit. And I am sure that it does. Nothing is said here about speaking in tongues. That was already coming to an end. But we are told that a Spirit-filled child of God will be a happy person (v. 19), will be a thankful person (v. 20), and will be a submissive person

(v. 21). So looking at these verses in that way, a person who habitually gives thanks to God for all things is surely living under the control of the Spirit.

But there is also another way to look at it:

- 2) These verses can be describing what we need to cultivate in our lives if we are to be filled with the Spirit. When someone asks, "How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?", what can we say? It certainly means to put ourselves under the control of the Spirit, and we often find that when we begin to do what the Spirit of God has directed us to do, that only then do we experience His blessing and His fullness in our lives.

Our natural tendency is to be thankful for the things that we like, and perhaps not even talk about the things in our lives which we don't like. But that is not what the Lord wants us to do. He wants us to give "thanks always for all things." Now that is a big order, too big, in fact, for any of us to fill. I remind you again that I am not speaking necessarily about what you say, but about what is going on in your heart, A THANKFUL HEART! Just where the Holy Spirit exercises His power in a situation like this, I can't say for sure. I feel that we can't really take the first step in this direction without His help and blessing. But I am sure that if we are submissive to the Holy Spirit we are going to be so convinced that there is something in every situation for which we can give God thanks, that we will not stop looking until we find it. We may be going through a very severe trial. The trial itself is not a pleasant experience, but it is what God is accomplishing through that trial that is worthy of our praise. God is always in control! A Christian should never talk about being a victim of his circumstances. God never lets that happen. He always works "all things" together for good, and that is the main reason we can give thanks "always for all things." But we give that thanks to God our Father (and that should take the sting out of most of our troubles), and we do it "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul brings in the Holy Spirit, God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ (His full Name and Title). And how we should thank God that in any situation we can thank Him, knowing that He is infinitely wise in all that He does, and that He never ceases to love us regardless of what the trial might be.

Perhaps we are just as much in danger of neglecting to thank the Lord when things are going well. Everybody talks about having a good day. But we need to remember that every good day is good because it has been given to us by our good and loving heavenly Father.

Concl: What should all of this mean to us? It means that the Lord wants us to be a thankful people. We are to see His hand in everything. We are to remember that all of our blessings (sometimes disguised) come from Him. If your spiritual life has been on a low plane lately, let me recommend thanksgiving to you, not just words coming out of your mouth, but A THANKFUL HEART. If you don't have one, ask the Father to give you one. And notice what the Lord will do for you in many different ways when you are continually thanking Him for all of His blessings.

In Luke 17 we have the story of our Lord healing ten lepers. The Lord told them to go show themselves to the priest. And then Luke said that "as they went they were cleansed" (Luke 17:14). One of them, who was a Samaritan, realizing that he was healed, turn back, "and with a loud voice glorified God. Then Luke said that this former leper "fell down on his face at his (Jesus') feet, **giving him thanks**" (Luke 17:15, 16). Do you remember what the Lord said? He said, "Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?"

It is apparent that giving thanks pleased our Lord. But it is also clear that not giving thanks was noticed by Him. In a world which has forgotten all about God and how dependent we are upon Him, let us be people who are characterized by A THANKFUL HEART. We can be sure that in doing this we are pleasing God, and the Word indicates that thanking God for the blessings He has given will lead to the outpouring of even greater blessings.