Thanksgiving Is a Choice

Colossians 2:6-7 (NASB 1995)

6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, 7 having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and ***overflowing with gratitude****.*

Colossians 3:15 (NASB 1995)

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and ***be thankful****.*

1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NASB 1995)

"**In everything give thanks**; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Introduction

My message this morning is important to our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. Therefore, please listen carefully. Those who practice my message of 'being thankful' will garner the benefits of thanksgiving in all areas of life (body, soul, spirit, work, and even relationships).

It is our human nature to be grateful when life is good. When our families are healthy, our work is going well, and things happen according to our plans, it is relatively easy to give thanks. But the real test of being thankful comes when life is difficult, because thanksgiving is not always a feeling that comes naturally. It is a choice we make because we trust in God.

Let me begin with a story.

"*There was a shipwreck and only one man survived. He managed to gather some materials, piece together a raft, and eventually landed on a desert island. He scraped together a shelter and scrabbled to find food and water to keep himself alive, all the while hoping that someday he could catch the attention of a passing ship. From time to time, he would see vessels in the distance, but none noticed his efforts to hail them. Then a ship came closer than one ever had before. Desperately, the man tried to wave it down and even lit a signal fire. But the ship kept on sailing. To make things even worse, when the ship was well past, sparks from the fire set the thatched roof of the man's shelter ablaze. He could only stand and watch as everything he needed to survive burned up* (*God's mysterious ways*, pp. 17-18, Gary Inrig).

How would you feel if you were that man? Would you use the name of the Lord in vain in frustration and anger? Would you even question God? Or could you still be thankful to Him in such a terrible situation? I will tell you the rest of the story later.

1. **Why Should We Give Thanks?**

The key word today is *gratitude*. Why should we be grateful and thankful? Because it is God's will for us. God commands us to give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Notice: in all circumstances. In everything. Not only when everything goes well. But even when things are bad. Why? Because being thankful is good for us, and more importantly, it brings glory to God. Otherwise, why would He command us to do so, right? The question is: Are you thankful? Am I?

Paul gives us another reason in Colossians 2:6-7. He tells us to walk in Christ, to be firmly rooted and built up in Him, established in our faith, and overflowing with gratitude. Notice the connection. Thanksgiving grows out of our relationship with Christ. The deeper we are rooted in Christ, the more thankful we will be. Thanksgiving is not simply a positive attitude we develop through practice. It is an expression of a life rooted and established in Christ.

Then, in Colossians 3:15, Paul also says: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful." We become more thankful when Christ rules in our hearts.

So, thanksgiving is not merely a suggestion. It is part of the Christian life. God calls us to be thankful because we belong to Christ. When His peace rules in our hearts, gratitude overflows.

2. **How Can We Practice Thanksgiving?**

Now, how can we develop this attitude of thanksgiving? Let me share a simple practice that has helped me. I call it **D.O.T. 20.**

D.O.T. 20: stands for **'Daily Offering of Thanks for 20 things.'** Every morning, I count twenty things and thank God for each of them: ten '*good*' things and another ten '*not-so-good*' things. I have practiced this for nearly twenty years by now. *Every single day.* Over seven thousand times. It keeps me healthy and content each day. I encourage you to practice D.O.T. 20 every morning for the next twenty-one days. My prayer is that, as you continue practicing it, thanksgiving will become a more natural part of your life, and you will benefit from it.

Here's how you do it: **First, thank God for ten good things in your life.**

When you start your day, thank God first for ten specific blessings such as *life, health, family, faith in Jesus, eternal life, good jobs, air to breathe, food, clothing, shelter, church, friends, and so forth*. It is relatively easy to thank God for these blessings, isn't it? Even grumpy people can find reasons to be grateful when life is going well! For such blessings, I use the word "*grateful,*" not "*thankful*." I will explain to you later.

Second, thank God for another ten '*not-so-good*' things. This is where D.O.T. 20 becomes more challenging. The first ten are relatively easy. We can readily recognize God's blessings. But the second ten are different. They require something more than recognizing blessings. They require faith. I am talking about the things that trouble you, raise your blood pressure, keep you awake at night, or give you ulcers. Something that you wish had never happened. Something you have prayed for has still not happened, even after a long time. We all have such things in our lives. Even in those circumstances, God commands us to "be *thankful*!" This is where we learn what it means to be thankful in difficult times.

3. How Can We Give Thanks in Difficult Times?

Please understand that being thankful in difficult circumstances never means saying, "Lord, I am so glad that this bad thing happened to me!" It does not mean calling evil good or pretending that suffering does not hurt. Neither does it mean that we must be happy about everything that happens. Rather, it means that we can be honest with God yet not complain even when we do not understand our circumstances. It also means to trust in Him by saying, *"Lord, I don't understand why this is happening. I do not like this situation, and I wish things were different. But I choose not to complain. I believe that You are working all things (good and bad) together for my good according to Your purpose* (Romans 8:28)*. You make everything beautiful in Your time* (Ecclesiastes 3:11), so *I trust in You."* Indeed, God like the Master Weaver will put both good and bad things (many different threads) in your life and turn them into a beautiful piece of tapestry.

Is it really possible to thank God in difficult circumstances? Yes. But it becomes possible only when we learn to recognize God's presence and providence even when life does not make sense. Consider Joseph's life.

Joseph spent thirteen years in slavery and imprisonment after his brothers betrayed him and sold him into Egypt. Yet, years later, after he became the prime minister of Egypt, he said to his brothers: "*4 I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life….7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. 8 Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God;"* (Genesis 45:4, 5, 7-8). What an amazing perspective!

Joseph did not pretend that what his brothers had done was right. Their actions were evil. But he recognized that God had been at work even through those painful circumstances. God had sent him ahead to Egypt to preserve many lives, including the lives of his own family.

He saw God's providence in the midst of hardship and was able to forgive his brothers. In the same way, when we see God's hands even in bad things, we can be thankful.

As I mentioned earlier, I would like to differentiate two words: "grateful" and "thankful." Most of the time, we use those two words interchangeably, but here's how I use them differently. In my personal practice, I use the word grateful when I recognize God's blessings, and I use the word thankful when I choose to trust Him in difficult circumstances. Both are expressions of gratitude, but the second requires a deliberate act of faith.

4. What Are the Benefits?

What happens when we practice D.O.T. 20 and learn to give thanks in every circumstance? It will benefit us in all areas: spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being.

First, there are spiritual benefits. As we practice thanksgiving, our faith grows stronger and our relationship with God deepens. We will *less* complain and trust *more* in God's ultimate good will for us. We will learn to be *patient*. We will also learn *not to be afraid* even though you walk through the valley of shadow of death—that's our spiritual benefit.

Second, there are physical and emotional benefits. When you are thankful in difficult circumstances, we will have less stress and worry. That will keep you healthy and positive. Let me share a personal experience. Almost 20 years ago, I was under considerable stress because of several things happening in the church. I ended up having shingles and my triglycerides number was 206, which concerned my doctor. She suggested that I take medication, but I asked her to give me six months. During that period, I began practicing D.O.T. 20 consistently. Three months later, my triglycerides level had dropped from 206 to 150 with no medication. I can tell you that the practice helped me manage my stress and approach life with a more peaceful and positive attitude.

Conclusion

Let me bring this message back to the story I shared at the beginning. Remember the man stranded on the desert island? He thought he had lost everything when his shelter caught fire. But let me tell you how the story ends.

(As he saw his shelter burned up, he felt that) "*His last hope was gone. Full of despair, the man didn't notice that the ship slowly began to turn and make its way toward his little island.*

But looking up, he watched with increasing excitement as it drew closer and closer. Finally, it came to a stop, a lifeboat was put over the side, and a party was dispatched to rescue him. Once on board, all the man could do was repeat his gratitude over and over again. Finally, though, curiosity got the best of him---he asked the crew why they had turned around so long after they had sailed past. "Why, we saw the signal fire you made when you set your shelter on fire!" the captain answered. The very thing that looked like it had destroyed him had, in fact, saved him. The fire that seemed to consume his hope was the means of preserving his life" (ibid.).

Imagine this: if the man's shelter had not caught fire, the captain would've never noticed him and perhaps the ship would've never come around to rescue him. The moral of the story is that even when you think it the worst thing that ever happened to you, it can turn out to be the best thing ever. A disaster can turn out to be a disguised blessing! That's why we need to be thankful to God in all circumstances. What looks like a disaster may become an instrument in God's hands. Even when we cannot understand what He is doing, we can trust that He is still working.

So, folks, are you enjoying a good season of life right now? Praise the Lord and be grateful. Are you going through a difficult season? Pray, trust in Him, and be thankful. He holds everything in His hands. He will make all things beautiful in due time. Remember, thanksgiving is not merely a response to good circumstance. It is a choice to trust in God in every circumstance. Amen.