

Sermon outline and notes:

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Colossians 1:3, 9-14; 2:6-7; 3:15-17; 4:2     “Thanksgiving: A Christian Obligation”

(Read 1:3-4, 9-14)

Intro. Thursday is our national day of thanksgiving. In preparation for the observance of Thanksgiving, I wanted to preach a message from the Word of God about giving thanks. I’m afraid that Thanksgiving has mainly become our national day of feasting, family, and football. In recent years Thanksgiving has even become a day of shopping for some. But I call upon us all to focus upon the true reason for the holiday, and that is giving thanks *to God*. It is not just a day to give thanks to anyone and everyone, but especially to God. In George Washington’s 1789 Thanksgiving proclamation, he began by saying, “Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits....”

Therefore, I want to bring a message on this important subject. Since thanksgiving is a common theme in Paul’s letters, I looked up what Paul had to say about thanksgiving. There are at least 43 references to giving thanks in his letters. I was surprised to learn that the theme of thanksgiving was most frequent in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Appeals for thanksgiving run through Colossians like the refrain of a song. In fact, there are a total of 7 references to thanksgiving in this brief letter of Paul, and thanksgiving is found in every chapter.

And so this morning I will preach a message on the subject of thanksgiving from various verses of the book of Colossians. Now I want to begin by establishing the fact that:

## I. IT IS GOD’S WILL THAT WE GIVE THANKS

This is explicitly stated in I Thess. 5:18, “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” We also see that it is God’s will for our lives to give thanks to God in the following verses from Colossians. First of all:

A. In Paul’s Prayer for Believers - In vv. 9-14 we find a prayer of Paul for the Colossians. He prays in v.9 that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. In v.10 he prayed, “that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him....” Then, what follows are four participial phrases that give God’s will for every Christian. The fourth is found in v.12, “giving thanks to the Father....” That is God’s will for your life. It pleases Him (v.10) for you to be thankful. Those who are not appreciative by nature especially need to pray that God would enable them to express thanksgiving to God on a regular basis.

Furthermore, we also see that it is God’s will to give thanks:

B. In Paul’s Commands - The only place in Colossians that we have an explicit command to be thankful is found in 3:15. There he says at the end of that verse “and be thankful.” Though all *should* give thanks, Christians are commanded to do so. The present tense of the verb also suggests that being thankful should be a habit of our lives. Also, the verb “be” is literally translated “become,” that is, we are to become thankful. This is one way Christ transforms our lives. By nature we are not very thankful (Rom. 1:21). Parents typically have to teach their children to express gratitude. That’s because by nature we tend to feel entitled to what we have and we tend to

complain, thinking we deserve everything good that happens to us, and do not deserve the bad that happens to us. So we need to learn to *become* thankful. That is my challenge for us all today.

We also have in Colossians some implicit commands to be thankful to God. For example, Paul says in v.17, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Paul commands that we should do all things in the name of Jesus Christ in a grateful spirit. In all that we do, we are to have an abiding sense of God’s goodness to us and are to be careful to thank Him.

Now let’s back up to 2:6-7. There Paul is giving more commands concerning the Christian life. He says, “As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.” From the context we see that a thankful spirit is a mark of Christian maturity.<sup>1</sup> Notice also that we are to “abound” in thanksgiving. We should not be just a little thankful, or just occasionally thankful, but we are to be very thankful often.

Why are there commands to become grateful? It is not that God seeks grudging gratitude, for that is no gratitude at all.

We are coming up on the Christmas season, and our children will receive gifts. At times parents will need to squeeze little Johnny and say, “Now tell them thank you,” and they will usually do as commanded, though reluctantly.

But we must realize that these commands to be thankful are there simply because we so often fail to be thankful. Instead, too often we complain and grumble. So God is simply holding up for us His will for our lives. One primary purpose for our lives is to bring glory to God, and one way we do that is by vocalizing our thanksgiving to God publicly. Gratitude is that which completes the circle whereby blessings that drop down into our hearts and lives return to the Giver in the form of unending, loving, and spontaneous adoration, praise, and thanksgiving.

So we see that you cannot be a good Christian, and you cannot please God without being thankful on a regular basis. What about you? Do you realize that giving thanks is indeed God’s will for your life? Do you maintain a habit of being thankful to God, and to others? Are you becoming more thankful as you grow in your Christian faith? Prior to today’s service, and apart from a meal, when was the last time you thanked God? This week in particular, I want to challenge all of us to practice thankfulness. And let us not do so for a day, or even a week, but let us begin to practice thankfulness all the time. May it become a habit of our lives. Clearly, it is God’s will for our lives. Thanksgiving pleases God.

Now we not only have God’s will concerning thanksgiving, but we also have in Colossians:

## II. GOD’S INSTRUCTIONS CONCERNING THANKSGIVING

Once we understand God’s will concerning being thankful, we need some instruction concerning thankfulness, that we may do so in a proper and pleasing way. So I will talk about the object of our thanksgiving and secondly the occasion of our thanksgiving. First, I want to start with what should be obvious. I want to encourage you to:

A. Direct Thanksgiving to God – It’s important to be thankful to other people, yet God should be the primary object of our thanksgiving. He is our Creator. He is our Provider. He is our Savior. God is the One responsible for the virtues and graces of His people. Yet have you noticed

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<sup>1</sup> Other writings of Paul give commands concerning thankfulness (see 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 5:20; Phil. 4:6). Again, as we study Paul’s letters, Paul frequently expressed thanksgiving. He certainly practiced this command.

how God is taken out of many expressions of thanksgiving at this season of the year? They talk about being thankful, but leave God out! While we should be thankful to others, the supreme expression of thanksgiving ought to be directed to God.

In this context we see that thanks should be given first of all to:

1. God the Father – Notice how Paul begins his prayer in 1:3, “We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ....” Likewise, he says in v.12, “giving thanks to the Father....” (cf. 3:17).

Why should we be thankful to God the Father? Well, one thing in particular is this: Paul makes reference in the last of v.6 to the grace of God. All the blessings that we have received from God are given out of His grace. We do not deserve any of His blessings. From the very beginning, when these Christians heard the gospel, they were taught about the grace of God. Paul emphasized that salvation is not a result of our works, but it comes to us by God’s grace (Eph. 2:8). Thus, God is to be thanked and praised for His work of grace in our lives, giving us far more than we deserve.

A king who wished to express his affection for a soldier in his army gave him a richly jeweled cup, his own cup. The soldier stepping forth to receive the gift exclaimed shamefacedly, “This is too great a gift for me to receive.” The king replied, “It is not too great for *me* to give.” You see, God is a great giver. Let us give thanks to Him for the great and wonderful gifts of His grace.

Furthermore, we are to give thanks to:

2. God the Son – Note that in v.3, Jesus is closely linked with God the Father in Paul’s prayer of thanks. All blessings are made possible by the Son of God. In fact, it is on the basis of the Son’s atonement that sinners are accepted by the Father, and that they receive every blessing. For example, in v.14 Paul says of Jesus, “in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” Then notice in 3:17 that our thanksgiving is “to God through Him,” that is, Jesus.

So let us thank God for His Son Jesus, and for what Jesus did for us on the cross.

We are also to give thanks for:

3. God the Spirit – Though Paul does not directly give thanks *to* the Holy Spirit, I believe he certainly gave thanks to God *for* the Holy Spirit. All blessings are the work of God’s Spirit. For example, back in 1:8 Paul says, “who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.” I believe Paul intends for this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> The blessing of love is a product or fruit of the Holy Spirit, so thank God for His Holy Spirit who has been freely given to us, and thank God for all the blessings the Spirit works in our lives. Think of all the work of the Holy Spirit that we should be thankful for. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin (Jn. 16:8); He converts the sinner; He gives the new birth (Jn. 3:5-6). After we are saved, it is He that produces love in our lives (v.8), as well as many other fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), including joy and peace. In Romans 5:5 Paul says, “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” So thanksgiving should go to God for His work in our lives by His Spirit!

I want to challenge us all to express thanksgiving to God, especially this week. For example, you can call for thanksgiving testimonies as you gather as a family for thanksgiving. Those of us on Facebook or other social media can write out what we’re thankful for, and be sure to begin by thanking God for His Son, for His Spirit, and for the many blessings you have received from His good hand.

Finally, I want to give one more instruction concerning giving thanks from Colossians:

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<sup>2</sup> Though “in the Spirit” here can be translated “in spirit,” it is not likely.

B. Remember the Occasions of Thanksgiving - The annual Thanksgiving holiday is one occasion for thanksgiving, but that is not enough, for it is only once each year. The fact is God has given us several other occasions that call for thanksgiving on a regular basis. Let's look at 4 occasions that I see here in Colossians:

1. Prayer - Thanksgiving should *always* be an element of prayer (cf. Phil. 4:6). If you pray daily as you ought to pray, then you will be thanking God on a regular basis. Paul exemplifies thanksgiving as a vital part of prayer in 1:3, "We give thanks to the God...praying always for you." Then in 4:2 he commands, "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving." Prayer thrives best in the soil of a thankful heart. Thanksgiving should be the pervading element in which prayers are to be offered. The odor of the sweet-smelling incense of thanksgiving should ever ascend.

But sometimes our prayers can be depressing! All we seem to talk about in prayer are all our problems. Too often our prayers are too self-centered. When you pray, don't jump right into your prayer requests. Be sure to spend time giving thanks to God and praising God first. We ought to focus more on what we have to be thankful for.

So daily prayer is certainly an occasion for thanksgiving. Are you praying and giving thanks to God on a regular basis? You should, because you should pray on a regular basis!

Another occasion for thanksgiving is:

2. Singing - In 3:16 Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." What does it mean to sing "with grace"? The word translated "grace" (*charis*) probably means "thanks" in this verse. After all, it is translated in such way at least 9 times in Scripture (Luke 17:9; Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 10:30; 15:57; 2 Cor. 2:14; 8:16; 9:15; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:3). The HCSB translates it "with gratitude" (as also in RSV). We talk about saying grace at the table, that is we give thanks for the food. This is made more clear in the next verse, where he says, "And whatever you do in word or deed [including singing], do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." Indeed, praise and thanksgiving should be an important part of our singing. Heb. 13:15 links praise and thanksgiving, "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." So one way we praise God is by giving thanks, and so our songs of praise should be filled with thanksgiving. We should sing to bring glory to God. And Paul is saying that the songs mentioned here must be sung in a thankful spirit. The songs must be poured forth sincerely, rising from within the humbly grateful hearts of believers. Our singing should not be mechanical, but heartfelt.

So every time you sing in church, it can be another occasion for thanksgiving. In fact, we will close the service today with a song of thanksgiving. Even when not in church, you should sing unto the Lord and give thanks. Do you ever do so around the house? God has given us the ability to sing, not just for our pleasure, but also to praise Him and give thanks to Him.

Another occasion for thanksgiving is:

3. Eating – This is certainly an occasion for regular thanksgiving, for we eat not only daily, but several times a day. This is not addressed specifically here in Colossians, but it is included in 3:17, where Paul says, "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God...." That certainly includes eating. Giving thanks at a meal is addressed in Rom. 14:6 where Paul says, "...He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks...." 1 Tim. 4:3 says that foods have been "created to be received with thanksgiving." 1 Tim. 6:17 says, God "gives us richly all things to enjoy." We can be thankful to God that He did not just create food for nourishment, but also for

enjoyment! Don't feel guilty about enjoying your food. Thank God for the enjoyment it brings! Now you remember this on Thanksgiving Day when your eyes behold all that food on the table! Maybe more of us would be truly thankful for our food if more of us knew what it was like to be without food.

There was once a good king in Spain called Alfonso XII. Now it came to the ears of this king that the pages in his court neglected to ask God's blessing on their daily meals, and he determined to rebuke them. So he invited them to a banquet, which they all attended. The table was spread with every kind of good food, and the boys ate with delight; but not one of them remembered to ask God's blessing on the food. During the feast a beggar entered, dirty and ill-clad. He seated himself at the royal table and ate and drank to his heart's content. At first the pages were amazed, and they expected that the king would order him away. But King Alfonso never said a word. When the beggar had finished, he rose and left without a word of thanks. Then the boys could keep silence no longer. "What a despicably mean fellow!" they cried. But the king silenced them, and in clear, calm tones he said, "Boys, bolder and more audacious than this beggar have you all been. Every day you sit down to a table supplied by the bounty of your heavenly Father, yet you ask not His blessing nor express to Him your gratitude" (Illus.#C-223).<sup>3</sup> Let us not make the same mistake at our mealtimes!

So we should give thanks in prayer, in singing, and when we eat. Yet we know from Scripture that we should actually give thanks:

4. At All Times - We see this truth in 3:17, where Paul says, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."<sup>4</sup> No matter what we do, we should give thanks. I believe this fits in with the concept found in 2:7, where Paul says we should be "abounding ... with thanksgiving." We should overflow with thanksgiving to God. That certainly includes the idea of doing so frequently. When you go to work, thank God for a job. Thank God for the transportation you used to get you there. When you go on vacation, thank God for it. Students, when you go to school, thank God for the opportunity to get an education. When you go to church, thank God that you can freely worship, and enjoy fellowship, and receive many spiritual blessings. Thank God for the health you enjoy. The fact is, everything should be an occasion for giving thanks to God.

We should even give thanks as we face problems and difficulties. I Thess. 5:18 says, "*In everything give thanks....*" He doesn't say we have to give thanks *for* everything, but in everything. After all, Rom. 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Surely, on the basis of this verse the believer can be thankful regardless of his circumstances. Paul was a prisoner at the time he wrote the letter to the Colossians. Yet he thanked God while in prison, for his time in prison gave him the opportunity to write several of the letters of the New Testament. It gave him the opportunity to witness to many who would otherwise have not heard the gospel. So if Paul could give thanks from prison, you can give thanks in the midst of your circumstances. Are you giving thanks to God even in trying circumstances?

So if you obey the command to give thanks to God, and if you take advantage of every occasion and opportunity to give thanks, it will transform your attitude and outlook on life. Also, thanksgiving is a good cure for anger and bitterness. Who wants to be around an angry, bitter

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<sup>3</sup> Heartwarming Bible Illustrations, © 1998, AMG Publishers. Alternate illus. C-515. Or use story of Thanksgiving pilgrims.

<sup>4</sup> We can add that in **2:7b** the tense is present, meaning that thanksgiving is to be a continual, habitual thing on the part of believers.

person? So be thankful at all times.

Conclusion: We have so much to be thankful for, so we ought to practice thankfulness. Yet too often, we fail to be thankful. Years ago, Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois had a life-saving squad that assisted passengers in boats on Lake Michigan. On September 8, 1860, a passenger boat, the Lady Elgin, floundered near Evanston, and a ministerial student, Edward Spencer, personally rescued seventeen persons. The exertion of that day permanently damaged his health and he was unable to train for the ministry. When he died some years later, it was noted that not one of the seventeen persons he had saved ever came to thank him. [Illus.#C- 2978]

God has saved us from a more terrible loss. He has rescued us from self-destruction, from death, and from hell. He has made it possible for us to have an abundant life, and delivered us unto a hope in heaven. Let us not fail to thank Him in every circumstance, every day, and in every way!

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible 8.0* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996). Lehman Strauss, "Prayer & Thanksgiving" in *Sense & Nonsense about Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974); Curtis Vaughan, *Colossians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Warren W. Wiersbe, "Be" Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, Colossians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, inc. Colossians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). McGee not helpful.

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