

Grateful: 2. In Every Situation
Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
November 8, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

This year is certainly teaching us about living with uncertainty. At a time when we want certainty, this past week has been challenging. And if it's not the election or this coronavirus, you may have your own personal list of things that keep you awake at night. This is a series that offers a solution to that – not the election, the virus, or the real life challenges – but a solution that will enable you to rise above all that. Last week, I issued a 28-day challenge as I spoke on the power of gratitude. For some of you, it must be having an effect because I've received more thank you notes and thank you emails in the past week than I have in the past 10 months. One night I was ready to go to sleep when I remembered I hadn't written in my gratitude journal – so I got out of bed and wrote a note of gratitude – and I don't know if it was the note but that night was the best sleep I've had in a while.

Researchers say that negative emotions like fear, greed, envy, anger, and regret block gratitude and keep us from all of the positive physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits of gratitude. At the same time, grateful people tend to be satisfied with what they have and are less likely to succumb to negative emotions. It's like a gerbil wheel: positive people are grateful and grateful people are positive. The apostle Paul had already made this discovery. He wrote to the Christian community in the city of Thessalonica: **Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** In every situation? Before you ask if that's even possible, Paul was not saying give thanks for every situation but in every situation. I will never give thanks for cancer, for the death of a child, for an assault or child abuse or the destruction we've seen this year in hurricanes and fires.

There are some who say everything that happens is the will of God and so they force themselves to give thanks, but John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said if God orchestrates everything, then there is no such thing as free will. In Genesis chapter 6, we find the story of Noah. God looked at the human race and saw all the evil they were doing and how they used their freedom to hurt each other and God grieved over making humans. And even today, there are things that happen that are not God's will. And God grieves over that. Jesus came into the world to show how we can be instruments of change. "God, help us confront what is harmful."

There are times when things happen beyond our control. Cells in the human body go haywire and result in cancer. A virus jumps from one species to humans. The forces of nature result in a hurricane. Though we are not thankful, we praise God and look for God in the midst of life's storms. The reason Paul tells us to give thanks is because that's not our nature. It's easy to give thanks when things go well, but when they are not going well, gratitude is not our first thought. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, God heard the cries of the Israelites who were in slavery and sent Moses to win their freedom, but not long after that had crossed the Red Sea into freedom, they began complaining. "We were slaves in Egypt but at least we had food." God gave them Manna and they don't like it. God gave them quail and there not enough of it. They complain about Moses and want a new leader. Complaint after complaint. In the New Testament, complaints were about to derail the Christian movement. And in Philippians, Paul says: **Do everything without grumbling and arguing.** Paul says that because they were grumbling and complaining. James says: **Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters.** Why did he write that? That's what they were doing. Giving thanks is the antidote to our tendency to grumble and complain, because gratitude changes our orientation. Some people are positive about everything but most of us are not there.

Benjamin Zander is the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. Even before the coronavirus, he realized that people weren't coming to orchestra concerts. Only 3% of the population listens to classical music. So to turn things around, he realized the importance of attitude and how people are treated. In his book, *Art of Possibility*, he says: **"You can face problems with resignation, anger or possibility. These are all valid responses. You have a choice."** He describes two types of symphony conductors, but I think this applies to us all. He says there are downward spiral thinkers [slide] who talk about how horrible things are: [camera] schools aren't teaching music, people are not listening to real music – *"nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I guess I'll go eat worms."* (Do you know this song?) And it can feel good to vent – to whine for a while, but nobody wants to be around someone whose is complaining all the time. So Zander says there is another kind of conductor who radiates possibility. This person sees the same situation. Both see only 3% of the population listens to classical music, but the one who radiates possibility says there is a 97% untapped market for classical music. Schools may not be teaching music, so let's send musicians to volunteer in the schools, or let's plan a concert where a rock star comes to play with the orchestra. Or in this pandemic, instead of focusing on what we can't do, we look for the opportunities – this worship is now reaching people across the country who claim this as their church. We've learned to meet together without being in the same room. We have turned much of our energy outward to help others in ways that amaze me. Instead of shutting down and saying we can't be the church, we have embraced possibilities. Downward spiral or radiating possibilities? Which are you? Gratitude forces us to see the good even when life's circumstances are not good.

Remember the characters in Winnie the Pooh? There's Tigger (t-i-double g-r) who is so full of energy and optimism that he's always bouncing around. And then there's Eeyore: "I guess it's going to be an OK day." He's always down. And there's an Eeyore in all of us and either we feed that or we overcome it by feeding the Tigger that's also within us. It's like this ad that maybe you've seen: [video]. "I'm the greatest pitcher in the world!" It's about perspective. We wake up every day and we have a choice. Will we focus on what's wrong or look for what's right? In 1898 Ada Blenkhorn wrote a song that you may have heard. She had a nephew that she cared for who was paralyzed from the waist down. She would take him for walks, pushing his wheelchair through town. And he would say: "Auntie, take me to the sunnyside of the street." And that became the way she looked at life. Here's her song [video].

Sometimes it is so dark, that it's hard to see any sunny side – times when life is so difficult that we don't feel it. Gratitude isn't in us. That's the power of a Gratitude Journal – we do it anyway. I may not feel the gratitude but once I work at it, it's there. Three weeks ago I received a phone call from one of our members, she was calling me on her cell phone from Intensive Care Unit. She is living with a chronic illness, two forms of cancer, and she had contracted a severe form of pneumonia that left her completely immobilized and unable to call for help. But unknown to her, her son from out of town had made a last minute decision to surprise her with a visit – and if it was not for his unexpected visit and his call to 911, she would have died. And she was calling to express her gratitude to God. I spoke with her on Friday. She still has all of the physical issues and she's been told her prognosis is not good, and she could have gone on and on about her health and how unfair it is, but what she really wanted me to know was how grateful she was. It was her birthday – and who gets a November birthday when it's 75 degrees in Minnesota. I believe it's her gratitude that will get her through whatever lies ahead.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus sat down with his disciples for what would be their Last Supper. Jesus knows what's about to happen – Judas will betray him, Peter deny him, all of them abandon him, he will go into the Garden and Luke tells us he is in so much anguish that he sweats drops of blood. Jesus will be arrested, tortured, and crucified. As they eat this meal,

Jesus knows all this. But he takes bread in his hand and gives thanks. Then he takes the cup and gives thanks. Moments later, he will be in the garden pleading for his life, but still he gives thanks. Thanks for the way he will be treated? Thanks for being tortured? Thanks for the cross? He was giving thanks because he knew whatever happened God was still God and God would take the evil done to him and redeem it for good. Evil would not have the final word – and that’s how he could give thanks.

We have a choice: grumbling or gratitude, downward spiral or radiating possibility, Tigger or Eeyore? Gratitude give us the power to see the blessings of life and to give thanks.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 8, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, there are times when the circumstances of our lives make it difficult to give thanks. Give us courage and strength to claim your presence and the peace that you offer. We are thankful that you never leave us alone. May our praise and thanks for you transform any and every darkness that we face. Amen.

Monday, November 9

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18

Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Observation: We often think gratitude is purely a feeling, a reaction to something outside of us. That makes “give thanks in every situation” puzzling, because some situations do not trigger positive feelings. A recurring theme in gratitude research is that choosing to be a grateful person does not mean you become blind to the bad things in life, or the sad or angry feelings you may have about them. It does mean, however, that we also choose not to let the bad things blind us to the things for which we are grateful.

Application: In his commentary on today’s scripture, William Barclay wrote, “There is always something for which to give thanks; even on the darkest day there are blessings to count. We must remember that if we face the sun the shadows will fall behind us but if we turn our backs on the sun all the shadows will be in front.” As this series focuses on gratitude’s benefits, are you finding yourself more inclined to resist changing the direction your life faces, or to seek to increasingly “face the sun”?

Prayer: O God, you are like the sun, always shining your love and mercy into my life, whatever may happen in my family, my workplace or my health. Help me learn how to keep my focus on you every day. Amen.

Tuesday, November 10

Scripture: Psalm 42:1-5; Psalm 43:5

Just like a deer that craves streams of water, my whole being craves you, God. My whole being thirsts for God, for the living God. When will I come and see God’s face? My tears have been my food both day and night, as people constantly questioned me, “Where’s your God now?” But I remember these things as I bare my soul: how I made my way to the mighty one’s abode, to God’s own house, with joyous shouts and thanksgiving songs—a huge crowd celebrating the

festival! Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside? Hope in God! Because I will again give him thanks, my saving presence and my God.

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Observation: Psalms 42 and 43 belong together. Psalm 43 lacks a title; and more importantly, the shared refrain (verse 5 in both psalms) indicates a literary unity. The refrain also divides the prayer for help into three sections, all of which include the psalmist's deep desire to experience God's presence. This honest prayer gives us a model for carrying our hurts to God while maintaining an intentional stance of gratitude and praise.

Application: For the ancient Hebrews, the waves of the ocean ("all your massive waves surged over me" 42:7) symbolized the frightening, disorderly forces of chaos in life. What waves are sweeping over your life today? Do they tend to drive you away from gratitude and trust in God, or make you want to cling more tightly than ever to God's presence with you in all circumstances?

Prayer: Loving God, some days I find it hard to even address you as loving. Yet letting go of that doesn't take away any of life's tough stuff; it just leaves me with no one in whom I can trust. I choose to hope in you, to know I will again give you thanks. Amen.

Wednesday, November 11

Scripture: Mark 14:22-26; Psalm 118:5-6, 28-29

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. I assure you that I won't drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way in God's kingdom." After singing songs of praise, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

In tight circumstances, I cried out to the LORD. The LORD answered me with wide-open spaces. The LORD is for me—I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me?

You are my God—I will give thanks to you! You are my God—I will lift you up high! Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.

Observation: Psalm 118 praised God's steadfast love. It was the last *hallel* (hymn of praise) Hebrews sang at Passover as they recalled God freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt. Mark 14:26 strongly suggested that Jesus, just before his arrest and crucifixion, sang from the Psalm: "The Lord is for me—I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" and "Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever."

Application: The Psalmist asked the simple yet profound question, "The Lord is for me...What can anyone do to me?" To what extent are you able to trust that God is indeed "for" you? How much stronger is that level of trust for you on a beautiful, sunny morning when all is going well than on a cold, gray day when you've received troubling news that made you sad?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, sometimes in anger we'll think or say, "I didn't ask to be born." But that's also true when loved ones gather, when warm homes shelter us from the cold or when health lets us play games or pursue hobbies we enjoy. Thank you for the gifts of my life. Amen.

Thursday, November 12

Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-21

So be careful to live your life wisely, not foolishly. Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times. Because of this, don't be ignorant, but understand the Lord's will. Don't get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and submit to each other out of respect for Christ.

Observation: In the ancient world, as today, some people tried to numb themselves against life's pains with alcohol (as well, of course, as with other escape mechanisms). Recent media reports indicate this has been increasing during the isolation and uncertainty of the current pandemic. To Christians in Ephesus, Paul wrote that psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and always giving thanks to God were a much better alternative, with better life results.

Application: The Message paraphrased Paul's counsel in verses 18-19 this way: "Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him. Sing hymns instead of drinking songs!" Can gratitude to God be in any way "intoxicating," even habit-forming? Have you ever been in that condition, and if so, what was the experience like? What can help you look beyond whatever challenges you face in order to experience the power of gratitude on this day?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as most of us pause in our pursuit of more to offer thanks for what is already ours, guide my heart into a more determined choice to make every day you give me a day of thanksgiving. Amen.

Friday, November 13

Scripture: Luke 4:16-21; Isaiah 61:1-3

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify himself.

Observation: Israel's law included a provision (perhaps honored more as an ideal than in actual practice) that every fiftieth year was a "Jubilee" year in which people forgave debts, returned property and restored hope to all citizens (Leviticus 25:8-10). Isaiah 61 evoked that idea as a model for what God would do for God's people. Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 to define his mission: he would do good things for us that we were incapable of doing for ourselves.

Application: After Jesus spoke, the people of his hometown tried to kill him (Luke 4:28-30). Why? In his commentary, N. T. Wright wrote: Jesus “speaks of Israel being called to be the light of the nations The servant-Messiah has not come to inflict punishment, but to bring the nations God’s love and mercy. That was a central theme in Israel’s own scriptures, yet...Jesus’ claim to be reaching out with healing to all people...was not what most first-century Jews wanted or expected.” Are you inspired or frustrated that the same love and mercy Jesus extends to you is also for all other people?

Prayer: Lord, thank you that even as I seek you, you have been seeking me. Help me respond by setting aside anything that might get in the way of loving and serving you. Amen.

Saturday, November 14

Scripture: Philippians 4:6-7, 10-13

Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

I was very glad in the Lord because now at last you have shown concern for me again. (Of course you were always concerned but had no way to show it.) I’m not saying this because I need anything, for I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor. I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength.

Observation: Many scholars call Paul’s letter to the Philippians his “epistle of joy.” From a prison cell, he wrote this letter known for its emphasis on joy. Believers have this gladness because they know that having problems, or even enduring harassment, doesn’t mean God has deserted them. But Paul didn’t say his joy grew from a naturally grateful, upbeat disposition. Quite the contrary, “I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance” (verse 12).

Application: Simply venting about life’s circumstances does not produce change – until you are able to take a fresh, redemptive perspective. This is an advantage that grateful people have—and a skill that anyone can learn. What life experiences and choices have already helped you learn to live life from a more grateful point of view? What additional steps do you want to take to learn this important spiritual and life skill?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, if the aggressive, angry Pharisee Saul could learn to be the apostle who wrote an epistle of joy from prison, then I can learn, too. Guide and teach me in the ways of gratitude. Amen.