

**How Are You?  
1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24  
Don Lincoln**

There's a story about an old man, who every Friday in the early evening, walked from his house down to the ocean, carrying a bucket of shrimp. He would walk to the end of the pier, reach in his bucket, and feed the seagulls. Slowly, silently, he distributed the contents of his bucket, every Friday evening, while the sun slipped over the horizon.

His name was Eddie Rickenbacker, the most decorated WWI fighter pilot. In 1942 during WWII, President Roosevelt dispatched Eddie with a special message to General MacArthur in the Pacific theatre. The B-17 in which Captain Rickenbacker was flying got lost due to instrument malfunction, was running out of fuel, so they ditched in the sea.

The crew of eight made it into life rafts and began a long and desperate fight to survive the sun, sharks banging on the bottom of the raft, waves, but most of all hunger. They ran out of food on day three.

On day eight, when it seemed the end had come and there was no hope, and they had prayed what they thought were their last prayers together, Captain Rickenbacker, in the raft, was dozing with his cap over his eyes. He felt something. A bird had landed on his head. He thought if he could catch it, they might survive. He caught it. And they ate it. And used its intestines for bait and caught fish. The capture of that seagull gave them enough hope and strength and fortitude that seven of the eight men survived the 24 days adrift in their rafts.

The story of old Eddie Rickenbacker feeding the seagulls in his neighborhood every Friday, as a way of thanking them for his rescue, has been told countless times, including in Paul Harvey's "...now you know the rest of the story." While there is some disputing whether Rickenbacker actually fed gulls every Friday, the story of the plane being ditched in the Pacific, the seagull alighting on his head, and his capture, Rickenbacker himself recounted in his autobiography.

It's an inspiring story of gratitude. Thanksgiving for a seeming miraculous experience of providence – when a seagull shows up hundreds of miles offshore, and provides enough resources to survive such a harrowing time.

And – we all know, when something significant blesses us – particularly an unanticipated help, or encouragement, or surprise gift of time, energy, thoughtfulness, resources – most of us find welling up inside a spirit of gratitude, or thanksgiving. After all, most of us are trained that way, from the very beginning. "What do you say?" my

mom would ask when the lady at the bakery in the grocery store would hand me a free sugar cookie to keep me happy while mom shopped. “What do you say?” “Thank you.”

But that is NOT what the Apostle Paul is suggesting to the Thessalonians.

The letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest of the New Testament writings, written less than 20 years after Jesus’ death. Paul is writing to a community of believers, who anticipated Jesus would return during their lifetime, but to their dismay, Jesus hadn’t. Even more to their dismay, some of their company had died before Jesus got back – and there was unrest. If that wasn’t enough, as a church they were suffering persecution. Some in the church had thus become susceptible to false teachers, including teachers who suggested to the church in Thessalonica they had actually MISSED Christ’s return.

Paul is writing to correct and encourage this young and struggling church. But these short, pointed phrases in our text don’t seem to me (at first reading) to be all that pastoral.

Rejoice always.

Pray without ceasing.

Give thanks in all circumstances.

Instead, at first reading, they sound almost cruel. Paul isn’t just saying, “Suck it up, Thessalonians!” He’s calling them to rejoice constantly. And to give thanks no matter what is happening. As if gratitude can be ordered on the spot. “Hey you, be thankful. You, over there, be sweet. You, be happy!”

But if you read the whole letter, you’ll discover Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that though they are perched precariously on the face of the Roman Empire, they are secure within the folds of a pledged love from God.<sup>1</sup> I love the commentator who said “.....it’s as if Paul wants them and us to look at the big picture of life, rather than the wallet-sized snapshots.”

Paul reminds the Thessalonians they have been let in on a secret – in the end, God wins. God eventually gets God’s way with the world. Even in the painful and difficult times in life, God is working behind the scenes, busily redeeming our sins and failures, moving a groaning creation toward redemption and triumph.

Now if you heard it like me, at first reading, it appears Paul is saying be thankful FOR everything. But that is NOT what the text says. Paul did not say be thankful FOR everything. That would be cruel at best; crazy at worst. You and I would be less than sane were we to glory in illnesses, accidents, persecution, violent crimes, war and death.

That verse hinges on the little two word phrase “en panti” – **in everything**. Give thanks **IN** everything. Not **BECAUSE** of everything; not **FOR** everything, or with regard to everything – but “**IN THE MIDST** of, or **DURING** everything.”<sup>2</sup> Maintain a spirit of thanksgiving.

I was grateful to get my head around that little phrase in the Greek because it's what kept me from the tortured mental gymnastics you and I would have to go through in order to be thankful **FOR** everything. Instead of a ridiculous command, it is an encouragement to be grateful to God in all things – because that is a sign of our faith in God's faithfulness – not our appreciation for what's happening to us at any given point in time.

The writer of the Book of Habakkuk says it this way: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines, though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation." (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

One only talks like that if one knows God – and **knows** God as their salvation. And if one does know that – then one is able to be thankful for **that confidence** no matter what comes their way.

Paul wants the Thessalonians and you and me to remember that the present moment – any moment – cannot and does not supersede who God is and what God is doing. It doesn't mean the current moment might not really stink, perched precariously on the edge of some danger or pain. But the moment doesn't carry the day. God does. The story isn't finished, and we know how it ends – ALWAYS in God's good hands.

We all know people who instead of being grateful in all things, seem able to focus on the **worst** in any and every circumstance and call it out. Winston Churchill told the story of a little boy who fell off a pier into deep water. An old sailor, heedless of the danger to himself, dove into the water, struggled with the boy, and finally, exhausted, brought him to safety. The next day the boy's mother came with the boy to the pier, looking for the sailor who rescued her son. Finding him, she asked "Are you the one who dove into the ocean to bring my boy out?"

"I did", the sailor replied.

The mother quickly demanded, "Then where is his hat?"

Talk about ingratitude.

The opposite spirit would be the story of Matthew Henry, a well-known Bible scholar, who was once robbed of his wallet. Reverend Henry, a Presbyterian pastor in England, knowing his calling in this text from Thessalonians to give thanks in everything, pondered that, meditated on it, reflected on it, and then that evening recorded in his diary the following words:

Let me be thankful, **first**, because the man never robbed me before; **second**, because although he took my purse, he did not take my life; **third**, because although he took all I possessed, it was not much; and **fourth**, because it was I who was robbed, and not I who did the robbing.

## Thankfulness in all circumstances.

Scholar NT Wright talks about this Thessalonians text using the example of trying to learn a second language. Most of us know how difficult that is – and have that high hope to become so fluent the language will become second nature to us. So much so that we will no longer have to stop and conjugate verbs in our brain before speaking, nor ponder whether the article comes before the noun or after in French or Spanish..... We would just speak and it would just flow.

NT Wright says the Apostle Paul is giving the Thessalonians little rules, rhymes and memory aids for their language as new Christians – language of the new life in Christ – so that their lives would just automatically overflow; that this changed, grateful spirit would become second nature. “Always celebrate. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances.”<sup>3</sup>

You and I know what a pain it is to have a constant whiner around us all the time. Someone who always complains. And we also know what a gift it is instead, when someone in our life always overflows with gratitude. It’s contagious. And you and I know where stewardship comes from. Not obligation. Gratitude. Thanksgiving.

I told you a number of years ago of my friend – Pastor Rob – who was in my pastors’ group for many years and who, whenever you asked him how he was doing, he always responded, “grateful.”

“Hey Rob, how are you?” “Grateful.”

When he lost his job..... “Rob, how are you?” “Grateful.”

When he battled cancer, treatments and an unexpected recurrence.

“Rob, how are you doing?” “Grateful.”

Nine weeks ago, days before he died, when he knew time was short, my father said to me, “I don’t care what else you put on my grave marker. Just make sure there is one word: **BLESSED.**” That’s an attitude of gratitude.

So my encouragement to us from this text – let thanksgiving be our thought – not just this Thursday – but all day, every day, all year long. I guarantee you it will change your life – and the lives of those around you. Be thankful in all circumstances.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Ernest T. Campbell, sermon “In Everything Give Thanks;” September 28, 1975,
2. Homiletics, December 14, 2008.
3. NT Wright, Paul for Everyone, commentary on the text.