

# THANKS TO GOD

Philippians 4:4-20

Thanksgiving

November 22, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, chapter 4, verses 4 through 20. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Philippians 4, beginning at verse 4, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup> What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup> I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

<sup>14</sup> Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. <sup>15</sup> And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. <sup>16</sup> Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup> To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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We humans are strange creatures. The more we have, it seems, the less thankful we are. I don't know if this is true for everyone. I hope not. I hope you're better than I am.

But if you are, unfortunately, like me, then you know how it is. When you have little, you appreciate every bit of that little. But when you get a little more, then you get used to having more, and you think you're entitled to it, and if something gets taken away, you think it's unjust.

Like when one of our cars breaks down. I usually try to fix it myself, and there's always a stage of anger in the process. I might get mad at the bolts for being rusty, or I might get mad at

## THANKS TO GOD (Philippians 4:4-20)

the engineers for putting the alternator in a weird place, and I lose perspective that the car is a gift.

Here I have this car, and even though there's something wrong with it in that moment, it is still an asset, because, with a little more work, it will be a functioning automobile again. So I have to stop and have a conversation with myself. I say, "Is this car good?" "Yes, self; it is better to have it than not to have it. I am blessed."

If I think that I am entitled to a perfectly functioning automobile, then a broken car is an injustice. But if I remember that I am entitled to nothing, and nothing is what I would have without God's grace, than an almost functioning automobile is a gift.

So sometimes we need to change our perspective. And it's not just because we will be happier this way. Happiness isn't really the goal. We should change our perspective simply because our natural perspective is false, and God's Word is true. Every good thing is a gift from him (James 1:17), and we deserve none of it. We do not deserve our cars, our homes, our clothes, our food, our friends, or even the air in our lungs. From the moment we are conceived, we receive things we do not deserve. A baby has done nothing to deserve a warm and safe womb, but God gives it. Then we spend a lifetime sinning, and God still gives us good things. He provides for our needs before we ask and before we do anything to earn it. And even though we live in rebellion to him with a general attitude of ingratitude, he still provides far more than we realize or deserve. We should see every good thing as a gift and give thanks to God, because it's true.

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Our culture has a way of secularizing holidays. Perhaps you've noticed. Christmas is about Santa Claus, trees, and presents. Easter is about bunnies and eggs. Halloween is about costumes and candy. They all have candy, but especially Halloween. I don't really mind these little cultural things. They're harmless if left in their proper place, and they can be fun. I also really like candy. So we don't need to go on a crusade to put Christ back in Christmas. I just want you to recognize that when the world celebrates holidays, they do it as if it has nothing to do with Jesus.

Holidays in a secular world are also about family. This is kind of a sneaky shift. If you don't want the holy days to be about Jesus, but you still want them to mean something, you say that they're all about family. And who wants to argue against family? No one, certainly not Christians. But it's a sneaky shift to distract from the best part of holy days. If you neglect Jesus and focus only on family, then you're replacing the best thing with a good thing.

The other problem with making the holidays all about family is that family is good if you have one to spend the holidays with. But if you don't, you're just left feeling like you're missing out on an experience you should be having. Keeping Jesus as the center of every holy day levels the field. Whether you are rich or poor, surrounded by a large family or alone, you have the same Jesus. And you have a church where you have fellowship with the family of God.

These days are secularized by taking Jesus out of them. But this doesn't really secularize them. Nothing is really secular. There's just a different god or gods put in Jesus' place. And the Department of Secularization neglected to strip God out of Thanksgiving. I suppose they didn't see so much of Jesus in it. So they let it be about gratefulness, which is great. But it left an obvious God-shaped hole. As soon as we start talking about thankfulness and gratefulness, we have to ask, "Thankful to whom?"

I always think it's funny when atheists or agnostics talk about thankfulness. I think, *Thankful to whom?* Are you thanking the universe? That might reveal that you've turned the universe into a god, and you treat it like it has an intelligent and benevolent consciousness.

## THANKS TO GOD (Philippians 4:4-20)

Christians might do this too. We can think of all the things we are thankful for without giving much thought to the giver of those gifts. Talk of thankfulness reveals who or what our god really is. And I don't mean that it reveals the true God. I mean that it reveals who or what we treat as god. We might have people or things that are not really gods, but we give them the place of God in our lives. We fear, love, and trust in them instead of the one true God.

So you might say, "I'm thankful for ..." Fill in the blank. It could be anything. It could be persons, like your spouse, children, or parents. It could be stuff, like your house, car, or PlayStation. It could be some other category entirely, like your health or a peaceful society.

When you express gratitude for these things, what do you think of more: the thing or the person who gave you the thing? If we spend more time thinking about the gifts, instead of the one who gives us all good things, then we're not really thankful *for* those things, but we are thankful *to* those things. And do you know what the difference is between being thankful *to* something and being thankful *for* something? Whatever you are thankful *to* is your god. Being thankful *to* someone or something identifies them as the source of the benefit. And that's idolatry. We look to things or persons for satisfaction instead of the one who gives us all good things. And this reveals that these things are actually our gods. So do not be thankful *to* your house, your health, your PlayStation, or even your family. Be thankful *for* those things. Give thanks *to* God.

Now it's obviously okay to say, "Thank you," to your spouse, parents, or anyone else who does something good for you. We should say, "Thank you." But we should also say, "I thank God *for* you." And I don't think they will be offended by that. We should thank God for every good gift.

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This is the secret to contentment. We live rather unsatisfied lives. When you're a kid you want to be a grownup. When you become a grownup you want a better job. When you get a better job you want to retire. And when you retire you want better knees. Then you die. We're always longing for something more, and we're not finding it in this life. And this is natural, because our hearts are made to desire a perfect world in which righteousness dwells, and we're just not there yet. And we live with discontentment, because we expect this world to be able to satisfy, but it can't.

So in this passage from Philippians 4, Paul teaches the secret of contentment. It's prayer.

Prayer has a way of changing the way we think. Are you anxious? Do you worry? Pray. Pray for whatever it is that makes you anxious. Pray even for your anxiety. Confess it as a sin, because it is a sin, and ask God to take it away. Ask him to grant you peace. Ask him to grant you faith to trust his promises. And thank God for everything he has given you. Prayer, especially thanksgiving, is Paul's secret of contentment (4:6-7, 11-12).

Prayer reminds us that God is in control of all things, and he provides all we need. When we pray, we also start to see our prayers answered. We might not get everything we ask for, but when we pray for things that are good, we will see at least some of those good things come to pass. This reinforces in our minds that God is good, and powerful, and watching over our every need. The power of prayer is not in our prayers, but in the One who hears and answers them. It is because of his goodness that we are strengthened in our faith when we pray.

And Paul especially instructs us toward thanksgiving. When we give thanks, we fix our eyes on what God has already given us. Too often we take God's past gifts for granted. But recalling God's goodness in the past shows us his pattern of taking care of us. This gives us confidence that he will continue to do so. We remember this when we give thanks.

## THANKS TO GOD (Philippians 4:4-20)

And we should not merely give thanks for temporary earthly blessings. All these things fall into the category of “daily bread,” which is just one of seven petitions in the Lord’s Prayer. Give thanks, even more so, for his spiritual and eternal blessings, for these are his greatest gifts. Give thanks for the forgiveness of sins. Give thanks that your names are written in his Book of Life. Give thanks for the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and preserves us through this life. Give thanks for the Holy Scriptures. Give thanks for the promise of the resurrection of the dead and eternal life in the new creation. Give thanks for all of God’s gifts, and, especially, don’t forget the big ones.

These big ones are at the core of Paul’s secret of contentment. Paul “learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need” (4:12). Paul was content to suffer. He was content to be hungry. He wrote this letter from prison, but he was still content, because he knew that no one could take anything from him that God would not give back in the resurrection of the dead. This is why he says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

That’s probably one of the two most misapplied verses in the Bible. In our selfish ambition we take it to mean that Christ will give us the strength to be wealthy, powerful, successful, or whatever else we want. In other words, *Jesus is going to make me a winner!* Taken in context, it means about the opposite. Paul is talking about enduring hardship. *God will strengthen me so that my faith will endure any and every hardship.* It does not mean that you can win the championship, get the promotion, and be wildly successful in the strength of Jesus. God does not promise you that. But he promises that you can endure without those things. Your faith can endure losing, being passed over for a promotion, and being a complete failure in the eyes of the world. That is the strength we have in Christ, because there is nothing this world can take from us that God will not give back in the resurrection of the dead.

The secret of contentment lies not simply in giving thanks for God’s temporal and earthly blessings, because everything in this world fades, but in giving thanks for his spiritual and eternal blessings, because these things cannot be taken from you.

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Every good gift comes because of Jesus. We deserve nothing from God. We are entitled to nothing. We might not feel this, because we don’t see ourselves or this world rightly. But God sees it and reveals it to us in Scripture. The baby in the womb has done nothing to deserve a warm and safe place. Much less do I deserve a warm bed or a tasty turkey leg. But God gives these things for the sake of Jesus. And we owe goodness to one another, because God has been gracious to us. It is only because Jesus bore all of our sins and died for us that God rightly gives us anything. Without Jesus’ atonement, it would be unjust to even give us air to breathe. But God is gracious. He desires to give us good things. He even desires to bless those who do not and will not believe in him. So the Son of God came to bear the just consequence for all our rebellion and disobedience. Every good gift is the result of Jesus’ death on the cross.

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So give thanks for all of God’s gifts. When there is food on your table, give thanks. When your bed is warm, give thanks. When you have loved ones to share a table with, give thanks. All of these are gifts from God. And do not lose sight of his greater gifts. If you have no food, and your bed is cold, and you are all alone, give thanks, for your name is written in his book. Also, let someone know, because we can fix the hungry, cold, and lonely thing.

In all things, give thanks. Pray. Your loving and all-powerful Father hears you. He answers you according to his wisdom and for the sake of Christ Jesus. We have nothing to be anxious

THANKS TO GOD (Philippians 4:4-20)

about. In all things, “by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.