

Choose to Be Thankful
1 Thessalonians 5:18
November 22, 2020

This week, people all over the United States will be celebrating Thanksgiving. With the coronavirus, I suspect that this Thanksgiving might be somewhat different from the previous years. Perhaps less people will gather together. No matter how we do it, I am sure, we will celebrate it.

Author Charles Dickens once said something very interesting about the way we celebrate Thanksgiving. He said, the way we celebrate Thanksgiving, is wrong. We have just one day a year that is designated as a Thanksgiving Day. He said this might be the reason why the majority of Americans live their lives without gratitude. We live with constant complaints instead of thankfulness. We give thanks to the Lord just one day a year, and the rest of the year, 364 days, we live without gratitude. Had we had a “Complaining Day” instead of a “Thanksgiving Day,” we would have lived with much more gratitude. Instead of having one day to thank God, we should have just one day to complain to God. If we do that, then the rest of the year would be filled with gratefulness.¹

He has a good point, don't you think? If we have a designated day to complain to God, then maybe we will live the rest of the year with gratitude.

Let's stop for a moment and examine our lives, look at our own lives, aren't we really blessed?

Actually, we are so blessed that we could and should celebrate Thanksgiving not just once but several times a year. Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't that be appropriate? We don't have to have turkey and heavy meal but we can have multiple days designated to thank the Lord. Actually, we should thank the Lord each and every day but nationally, we need to thank the Lord more than one day a year.

The storyteller, Donald Davis, once told about a kindergarten teacher named Mrs. Rosemary who loved to celebrate holidays. She loved all the holiday celebrations so much that she celebrated them several times a year. She didn't see any reason to wait until the designated day to celebrate.

¹ Anonymous. *Your Sermon Illustration Library: The Preacher's Tool* (Kindle Locations 10845-10846). AAA SMARTWORLD. Kindle Edition.

So, every Monday morning, Mrs. Rosemary's class celebrated a different holiday. In her class, the children celebrate Memorial Day, Valentine's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas and Easter two or three times a year. Every child in Mrs. Rosemary's class also celebrated his or her birthday at least two or three times each year. Mrs. Rosemary's spirit of celebration made her class magical for her students.² Everybody loved her class. Every parent wanted their child to be in her class.

What a great idea! Why not celebrate every holiday two or three times a year, especially Thanksgiving?

I believe celebrating Thanksgiving several times a year might be a good idea. Pastor Martha Graybeal Rowlett is a pastor in our Annual Conference. She writes, "It has been said that a thankful person tastes joy twice---once when it happens, and again when gratitude is expressed to God for the joy."³

We often forget how blessed we are because we are hurried with a busy schedule, distracted with all the things happening around us and stressed with all the things we have to deal with. Our mind is somewhere else. We don't think about the incredible blessing of being alive, of having a sense of hope, of having people who love us.

John Kralik is a lawyer in Pasadena, California. Back in 2007 he reached a really low point in his life. His life was messed up. By that time, he had already divorced twice. He was out of shape and having money troubles. He had nothing to look forward to in life. He felt so stuck in his messed-up life that he didn't see any way out of it.

But in the midst of his tough circumstances, an idea came to John: write one thank-you note every day for a whole year. This was John's way of forcing himself to notice something positive in his life. He began writing one thank-you note each day to family members, friends, colleagues, former bosses and professors and teachers. It was hard at first, because he did not know where to find the things that he was thankful for. So, it actually forced him to look for it. Even when he saw just a routine and mundane thing, he forced himself to see good things out of it.

² Donald Davis. *Ride the Butterflies* (Little Rock, Ark.: August House Publishers, Inc., 2000), pp. 14-15.

³ Martha Graybeal Rowlett. *Responding to God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996), p. 106.

This act of writing one thank-you note each day changed his life. He wrote about it in his book, *A Simple Act of Gratitude*. His relationships improved. He was able to leave his negative mindset behind. He began to notice many reasons to be thankful for each day. It really took training. He had to train himself to see things in a different way, and he became more thankful, more joyful and more hopeful.⁴

The Apostle Paul didn't write 365 thank-you notes but he wrote many letters. The half of the New Testament is his letters and his letters were filled with gratitude. Yes, some of those letters include some challenging and even rebuking words but by far we can sense a deep gratitude of God's grace, mercy, goodness and blessings. No matter what challenges or hardships he endured, Paul's letters were filled with thankfulness. Because he was so thankful, he was joyful. Today's Bible passage gives us a great example of heartfelt gratitude and joy.

Paul was thankful that Thessalonian Christians not only accepted the gospel message but they were living it. He wrote, "We thank God continually because, when you received the word of God...you accepted it...as the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."⁵ They not only accepted the word of God and they were living it. They were practicing their faith in the midst of persecutions and Paul was thankful.

Their faith in Jesus gave them a foundation of hope and purpose for their lives. It enabled them not only to endure persecutions but to keep and exercise their faith in the midst of it. When people exercise their faith, they reach out to one another in love and grace.

Think for a moment about how amazing the church is. Not that it is perfect. In fact, none of us lives up to Jesus' example all the time. But if you walk into any Christian church in the world and ask people the question, "How has your church family shown its love for you?" You will get story after story of people whose lives were changed by the love and encouragement of their church.

When people live out their faith in a joyful and thankful way, amazing things happen. Scott Macauley was 24 years old when his parents were going through a divorce. His home was a war-zone. His family was just arguing and fighting all the time and eventually it was torn apart by bitterness. Scott dreaded

⁴ "How a Simple Act of Gratitude Changed One Man's Life—And Can Transform Yours Too" by Omaid Homayun Forbes.com, Sept. 13, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/omaidhomayun/2015/09/13/how-this-simple-act-of-gratitude-can-impact-your-life/#65b0526e5c3e>.

⁵ 1Thessalonians 2:13.

the thought of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was a horrible holiday. He did not want anything to do with it but deep down in his heart, he wished he could have a Thanksgiving with people who were truly thankful.

So that year Scott put an ad in his local paper inviting anyone who might be alone on Thanksgiving Day to come to his house for dinner. He cooked a big meal. He spent all day preparing the meal. A few people showed up that night. They were strangers but everyone had a good time. Scott wanted to do it again the following year, because he wanted to share his joy and gratitude with others. So, he has done this every year since. He has fed police officers, newly widowed or divorced people, immigrants who are new to the U.S. and still learning English, people who have just moved to his town and haven't made friends yet, and many others.

Scott tells of one woman suffering from Parkinson's disease who hadn't left her nursing home in seven years. When she heard about his Thanksgiving dinner, she hired an ambulance to drive her to his house. She had a great time at his dinner and cried when it was time to leave. She enjoyed it so much that did not want it to end.

Scott says that he wants the theme of his life to be "Brighten the Corner Where You Are." He is a great example of how the spirit of thankfulness spreads joy to others.⁶ When faith is lived out in action, joy and gratitude fills our lives, and it brightens the lives of those around us.

So, let us be thankful in all circumstances and put our thankfulness into action so that joy, laughter and gladness may fill this world in some small and not so small ways.

⁶ "Three Stories of Gratitude and Powerful Love" by Scott Isay. From the book *Ties That Bind: Stories of Love and Gratitude from the First Ten Years of StoryCorps*. Published in *Reader's Digest*, <https://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/stories-of-gratitude-powerful-love/>.