

“ Practical Christianity”

I Thess 5: 16-22 Pt 3

¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Introduction

by John MacArthur

The atheists' dilemma: whom do you thank when you think there's no one to be grateful to?

Thankfulness is one of the distinguishing traits of the human spirit. We sense the need to say thanks, and we realize we ought to be more grateful than we are. We furthermore perceive that we are indebted to (and accountable to) a higher power than ourselves—the God who made us. According to Scripture, *everyone* has this knowledge, including those who refuse to honor God or thank Him (**Romans 1:19–21**).

Ingratitude is dishonorable by anyone's reckoning, but to be willfully ungrateful toward the Creator in whose image we are made is to deny an essential aspect of our own humanity. The shame of such ingratitude is inscribed on the human conscience, and even the most dogmatic atheists are not immune from the knowledge that they *ought* to give thanks to God. Try as they might to suppress or deny the impulse, “what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them” (**Romans 1:19**).

During a November 2009 debate in England sponsored by a rationalist group known as Intelligence Squared, Richard Dawkins admitted that when he looks at the Milky Way or the Grand Canyon, he is overcome by a profound feeling of thankfulness.

“It’s a feeling of sort of an abstract gratitude that I am alive to appreciate these wonders,” he said. “When I look down a microscope it’s the same feeling. I am grateful to be alive to appreciate these wonders.”

But to whom does an atheist like Dawkins express such gratitude?

I’m by no means the first person to point out this conundrum. In fact, the Internet is peppered with failed attempts to justify an atheistic celebration of Thanksgiving. Atheists insist they are not ungrateful. They confess that they *feel* thankful, and they clearly sense a need to avoid the ignominy of brazen ingratitude on a cosmic scale—especially at Thanksgiving.

One atheist has practically made a hobby of writing articles to explain why atheists feel the need to be thankful. He tackles the question of whom an atheist is supposed to thank. His best answer? Atheists can be grateful to farmers for the food we eat, to doctors for the health we enjoy, to engineers for the advantages of modern technology, to city workers for keeping our environment clean and orderly—and so on.

Here’s the problem with that: Tipping the waitress or tipping one’s hat to sanitation workers doesn’t even come close to resolving the problem of whom Dawkins should thank when he looks at the stars, stands at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or studies the world of countless wonders his microscope reveals in a single drop of pond water.

Of course we ought to be thankful on a human level to people who help make our lives better. But if thanking *people* exhausts your sense of blessedness and satisfies that “sort of ... abstract gratitude” you feel when pondering the vastness of the universe, you have already suppressed your own conscience to a frightening degree. Your worldview is spiritually bankrupt.

Another atheist writer, acknowledging this problem, says the answer is easy for her: she thanks her lucky stars. “What it comes down to,” she writes, “is that an atheist is generally thankful for good luck, serendipity.”

That's an odd and ironic answer from a point of view that repudiates theism on the grounds that it is not "rational" to believe in God. (Not that atheism itself truly stands on solid rational grounds. After all, the starting point for atheistic materialism is the equation *Nobody times nothing equals everything*. What could possibly be more irrational?)

Chance, luck, fortune, happenstance, fate, kismet—whatever label you want to put on it—is not a force or intelligence. "Chance" has to do with mathematical probability. Flip a coin and there's a 50-50 chance it will come up tails. But "chance" has no power to flip the coin, much less design an ordered universe.

Nevertheless, this is how atheistic materialists have trained themselves to think: chance is the ultimate creator. In the words of one Nobel Prize-winning atheist, "Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, is at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution." Fortune has thus been personified—imbued with the power to determine, order, and cause everything that happens. That's mythology, not science. At the end of the day the atheist is no more rational and no less superstitious than the astrologist (or the animist) who thinks impersonal "lucky stars" determine one's fortune.

On some level, atheists themselves surely realize this. Proof of their internal angst is seen in the fact that so many of them are not content merely to disbelieve. They are militant in their opposition to God. They *hate* the very thought of God and would love to have every mention of Him removed from public discourse—as if that would somehow remove the burden of their own ingratitude and relieve the pangs of a guilty conscience.

Such hatred is as irrational as atheism itself, and it is further evidence that atheists have some awareness of God that they desperately want to bury. Who nurtures such hatred for someone they truly believe doesn't even exist?

Indeed, as Scripture says, it is the ultimate folly to try to suppress our own innate sense of obligation to our Maker. "The *fool* says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (**Psalm 14:1**). In short, to deny God is

to debase one's own mind and dehumanize the whole person (**Romans 1:28**).

That's why we remind ourselves to give thanks to God—specifically, the one true God who has revealed Himself in Scripture as a God of grace and forgiveness, who so loved the world that He gave His Son as an atonement for sin, so “that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (**1 Peter 2:24**).

He graciously compels us to thank Him, and He himself should top the list of things we are thankful for.

Review

Lesson

I. The Context of Thankfulness

A. Our Lost condition

Luke 17: 11-19

Christ Cleanses Ten Lepers

¹¹ Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. ¹² Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. ¹³ And they lifted up *their* voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

¹⁴ So when He saw *them*, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵ And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, ¹⁶ and fell down on *his* face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where *are* the nine? ¹⁸ Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ And He said to him, “Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.”

Romans 1:21

¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, **nor were thankful,**

2 Tim 3:1-2

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come:

² For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, **unthankful,**

If there is one sin that most prevalent today, it is the sin of ingratitude. God does so much for us. Our indebtedness to him is enormous and yet we rarely or at least infrequently offer thanks for what he has done. In fact, most professing Christians don't even offer thanks over their meals much less offer thanks over all that God does in their lives. We are much like the little boy who was given an orange by a man. The boy's mother asked, "What do you say to the nice man?" The little boy thought and handed the orange back and said, "Peel it."

Joni Eareckson Tada

Well, the fact is, ingratitude is part of human nature. We humans are inclined toward ingratitude—we compare our lot in life with others, and either admire them from a distance or we burn with envy; we miss the job promotion and collapse in discouragement; we feel overwhelmed with home duties and complain bitterly. When hit with hardships, many people choose one of three responses: Either we give up and resign ourselves to pulling the plow everyday as we go through the day-to-day routines, or we make suffering the focus and coddle hidden feelings of submerged rebellion. We feel resentful at God and others who seem to have an easier life; and the third most common response? We become bitter. That happens when we miss the grace of God, like it talks about in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 15, "We miss God's grace which results in a bitter root that not only poisons our lives, but the lives of everyone around us."

B. Our Limited Connection

This is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, We cannot do this on our own

Eph 5;18

¹⁷ Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord *is*. ¹⁸ And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ **giving thanks always for all things** to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

II. The Command of Thankfulness

A. Its Mandate for Christians

Give thanks (2168)(**eucharisteo [word study]** from **eucháristos** = thankful, grateful, well-pleasing - Indicates the obligation of being thankful to someone for a favor done <> in turn from **eú** =

well + **charízomai** = to grant, give.; English - Eucharist) means to show that one is under obligation by being thankful. To show oneself as grateful (most often to God in the NT).

Moulton and Milligan note that **eucharisteo** originally meant “do a good turn to” or “oblige,” and in late Greek passed readily into the meaning “be grateful,” “give thanks”. Giving thanks is the quality of being grateful, with the implication of also having appropriate (Spirit filled) attitude.

B. Its Universal Application

always (Same word as in [1Th 5:18](#) = pas = everything, no exceptions) giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father ([Eph 5:20](#)-note)

Notice that Paul say **in** everything not **for** everything give thanks. Paul is not calling us to be thankful **for** the rebellious kids, or **for** the terminal illness, etc. The preposition is **in** all things. **In** the midst of all things, we can give thanks because God will enable us to do so.

God is sovereign and is over all adversity and all prosperity. The upshot is that everything that is allowed into our lives either from His hand directly or is filtered through His hands of perfect love and infinite wisdom. And so we can give thanks in everything because He is still on the throne and is in control. He [El Elyon: Most High God, Sovereign Over All](#).

Richison makes a distinction that...

There is a difference in giving thanks “for” everything and “in” everything. If we gave thanks “for” everything that

would mean that we give thanks for the Devil and his plan for the world!

Whatever comes in our lives comes in by the will of God, otherwise, He would prevent it. God mixes with His divine compound the bitter and the sweet, the good and the bad, in appropriate proportions so that they work together for good. God knows just the right amount of sunshine and rain. He measures out these things with great precision...(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

God designs all circumstances for the benefit of the believer. God thinks about your limitations. He knows the proper proportions of adversity that are right for you. We should not concern ourselves with the portion given to someone else. God works in each person's life differently.

He custom designs the structure of their circumstances by divine design. God knows the straw that will break the camel's back. He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear, but He wants a tested product. Engineers of today's automobiles test drive prototypes so that they know what these cars can tolerate. God wants to bring out the best in us...

God's providential plan for our lives includes all contingencies. God foresees every circumstance that comes into our lives. Not only does He foresee everything that happens to us, but He providentially plans or allows each situation that comes into our lives.

There is no substitute for understanding the will of God for our suffering. Nothing can come into our lives unless the Lord allows it. God must put His initials on everything that comes into our state of affairs. We may give thanks

through tears.

Our obligation is to believe God's Word about these matters. The Bible teaches God's providential care of His creatures throughout the Scriptures.

Two men were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. Instantly they darted toward the nearest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they wouldn't make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, "Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!" John answered, "I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life." "But you must!" implored his companion. "The bull is catching up to us." "All right," panted John, "I'll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: 'O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.'"

Philippians 4:6

6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Psalm 107:1

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!

Ephesians 5:20

Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Colossians 3:15-17

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Psalm 106:1

Praise the Lord! Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!

9. Psalm 105:1

Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples!

10. Colossians 3:15

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

III. The Character of Thankfulness

A. Its Happening

The prime **OT illustration** of this supernatural response even in the face of overwhelming troubles (If you think you're

experiencing trials and afflictions read [Job 1:13, 14,15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20](#)) is **Job** who...

said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” ([Job 1:21](#))

The opposite of **giving thanks in all things** is grumbling or murmuring, an attitude and response Paul addressed in his letter to the Philippians...

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; **15** (Paul explains why this response is so important) that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, **16** holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. (See **notes** [Philippians 2:14; 15; 16](#))

MacArthur commenting on [Ephesians 5:20](#) writes that

To be thankful always is to recognize God’s control of our lives in every detail as He seeks to conform us to the image of His Son. Nothing must grieve the Holy Spirit so much as the believer who does not give thanks. In King Lear (I.ii.283, 312) Shakespeare wrote, “Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend! ... How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child!” When God brings trials and difficulties into our lives and we complain and grumble, we question His wisdom and love as well as His sovereignty... The only person who can genuinely give thanks for all things is the humble person, the person who knows he deserves nothing and who therefore gives thanks even for the smallest things. Lack of thankfulness comes from

pride, from the conviction that we deserve something better than we have. [MacArthur: Ephesians]

B. Its Hindrances

What hinders a thankful heart?

1., doubt about God..

Doubt about God's wisdom. Doubt about God's love. Doubt about God's Word. Doubt about God's immutability, or changelessness. Doubt about God's power. You're not thankful because you don't believe God can overrule the problems that you have to bring about His glory and your good. Wherever there is ingratitude in your life, no matter what's going on, wherever there's a failure to thank God for His purpose unfolding in the situation, whatever it might be, there is a serious sin taking place because to doubt God is, in a sense, to say that you can't trust what He says about Himself. And that borders on blasphemy.

2. selfishness.

It's the inability to say, "Nevertheless, Your will be done." It's not being able to say what Jesus said, "Father, if there is any way to get out of this, if there's any way that this cup can pass from Me, I would like that, nevertheless Your will be done." Selfishness says, "I really don't care what Your will is, this is what I want." It's really a kind of God complex. I want to be God and I want to call the shots. I want to make the choice. That will hinder your gratitude. Self-will, if it dominates you, is more important to you than God's will. What you want is far more important than God wants, even though you have no clue as to what is best. You have no right to define for Him what is best for Him or what is best for Him. I think another thing that hinders thankfulness

3 worldliness. And it's kind of what we talked about this morning, it's getting caught up in the pleasures and the people and the places and the possessions and the pursuits and the popularity and prestige that define human life. God and Christ don't fill your vision. It's not like David in Psalm 16, "I've set the Lord always before me, therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices." I mean...he means by that his voice. As long as I set the Lord before me, I have constant joy and constant gratitude. As long as I have my focus on Him, as long as I set my affections on things above and as long as I have...you know what the old theologians used to call "the beatific vision," as long as Christ is the object of everything, I'm going to...I'm going to be thankful. But when I get my eyes on the world and I begin to measure out my life in terms of what in the world I get or don't get, my gratitude disappears.

4. a critical spirit.

If you are a negative person, if you're a bitter person, if you have a sour...generally a sour attitude in life, if it's unchecked, it will destroy a thankful heart. It will blind your vision. It will destroy your relationships. It will make you really an ugly person to be with and you'll become useless to people and useless to God. A critical attitude, a judgmental attitude, a condemning attitude corrodes spirituality, to say nothing of destroying love...and I don't care what you say, or what you do, if you have no love you're...what?...you're nothing, you're a banging gong and clanging cymbal. Critical attitude, judgmental attitude steals gratitude.

5. impatience.

People don't give thanks because their perception is that God is not operating on their Daytimer schedule. They've got it down for Thursday, but Thursday's come and gone. Come on, God, I don't have time to be dallying here, move. They want everything on their schedule, on their timetable. People do silly things like this. You know, "Lord, show me by next Tuesday and if I don't get a no

by Tuesday, I'm going." They want everything fixed in their time frame.

You know, the opposite of all these things ought to be obvious. What engenders a thankful heart is trust in God, not doubt. A servant attitude, unselfishness...absolute abdication of all your rights so that God's will is all that matters. A focus on Jesus Christ, being consumed with Him rather than the world. A loving attitude, forgiving, gracious, kind tender heartedness. And gratitude wells up in a heart that is marked by great patience.

6. Coldness,

sort of spiritual lethargy, or spiritual indifference really does kill gratitude, where your love for God grows cold like the first love in the church at Ephesus, where there's a lack of zeal in service. Some of you people come to church and that's good, you come, you come, you come. You don't serve, you don't give your life away. You don't spend your life on the Kingdom of God. You fiddle around with your life here and there on things that are trivial and passing. You don't have a passion for the service of Christ. Lack of diligence in the study of Scripture. Lack of passion and worship, neglect of the Bible, waste of time, leaving you really so caught up in the temporal that you have no cognizance of what's going on in the spiritual realm. Now one of the contributors to my own joy obviously is that I'm so engulfed and engaged in ministry that there's no end to the things that make me joyful, that make me thankful.

7. rebellion,

just outright rebellion. You just do not like your lot in life. You're just plain angry with God at the way things have gone. Now all this is sin, all this is defying the Spirit's command. Even though things are bad, it is not outside the plan of God, not outside the discipline of God, the perfecting of your life through difficulty and trial and suffering,

Billy Graham wrote, "Ingratitude is a sin, just as surely as is lying or stealing or immorality or any other sin condemned by the Bible." He then quoted [Romans 1:21](#), one of the Bible's indictments against rebellious humanity. Then Dr. Graham added, "Nothing turns us into bitter, selfish, dissatisfied people more quickly than an ungrateful heart. And nothing will do more to restore contentment and the joy of our salvation than a true spirit of thankfulness."

Thanks For Fleas - Corrie ten Boom was an inspiration and challenge to thousands of people after World War II. Hearts were stirred and lives changed as she told with moving simplicity about God's sufficiency to meet her needs, even as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp.

Not only was the camp filthy, but there were fleas everywhere. Corrie's sister Betsie, who was imprisoned with her, insisted that 1 Thessalonians 5:18 was God's will for them: "In everything give thanks." But giving thanks in a flea-infested place seemed unrealistic to Corrie—until she realized why the guards didn't come into their barracks to make them stop praying and singing hymns. They wanted to avoid the fleas! So, the prisoners were free to worship and study the Bible. The fleas, yes, even the fleas were agents of grace, and something to be thankful for.