

In Everything Give Thanks

By Patrick Swayne

Thanksgiving. Even the mere mention of that word probably floods your mind with images: turkey, mashed potatoes, sweet potato casserole, pecan pie, stuffing, cranberry sauce... the list could easily go on. In addition to the food of course, other images probably come to mind: maybe the smiles of friends and family, the Macy's Parade, or the big Thanksgiving football game. With a vast array of memories competing for our attention, it is easy to forget what Thanksgiving actually stands for: giving thanks.

On the one day set aside for being thankful in America, the actual purpose of the day is too often buried in tradition and turkey. This is a symptom of a much larger problem; far too many Americans have forgotten what gratitude truly is – even some Christians. Christians cannot afford to lose sight of gratitude, as we are expected live under a command from the Lord and spoken by Paul. That command tells us, “In everything give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Why give thanks “in everything?” Paul responds, “For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Yet what exactly does this mean and how far does it go? Does this mean that during times of sorrow and despair, perhaps after having received news of the death of a loved one or of having tested positive for cancer, that we should kneel to the ground and thank the Lord? How could someone do that and truly mean it? The key is in the phrase itself: “give thanks **in** everything.” Paul is not relaying a command from the Lord for us to be thankful **for** everything, but for us to give thanks **in** everything.

The key to living out this command is to develop an attitude of gratitude for what the Lord has done that survives despite outward circumstances. The first audience to hear this inspired command was “the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ,” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). This congregation was one which knew hard times: “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction” (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

Going back to the account of the establishment of the church at Thessalonica recorded in Acts 17, one finds that after only three weeks “some wicked men of the rabble,” “formed a mob” and “attacked the house of Jason,” one of households that had accepted Paul's teaching. The persecutors of the church were said to have “set the city in an uproar” (Acts 17:5). Summarizing the above persecution and no doubt more that followed, Paul said of the Thessalonians that they had “suffered” at the hands of their “own countrymen” (1 Thessalonians 2:14).

Few American Christians can say they have suffered for their Christianity like the Thessalonians did. Our burdens may seem great, but they are no greater than has ever faced mankind; in fact, American Christians have been greatly blessed, as evidenced by the fact that we celebrate Thanksgiving. Even if we feel that our lot in life is particularly hard, our burdens are certainly not greater than the burdens of our High Priest, Jesus, “who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

In light of a God who has granted us redemption from our sin and a Savior who bore everything in providing a way for that redemption, we cannot help but give thanks in everything. The end of the Christian's faith is the salvation of his soul (1 Peter 1:9). No outward circumstance can change that fact, and therefore ultimately all outward trials are only “light momentary affliction” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Thanksgiving ought not just be a one time a year holiday celebrated with football, friends, and food. Instead, it ought to be the everyday practice of each Christian. We always have something for which to be thankful. We know that he can make it through each trial through God's strength, and we know that our souls were saved when we obeyed the gospel. Riches, fame, health, and all other aspects of life can change in the blink of an eye. However, nothing can take away the Christian's reasons to give thanks in everything. May we learn to do as we sometimes sing: to count our blessings and to name each one. I'm sure we'll find something to be thankful for.