

November

Dear Salem Church Family,

Other than to praise God, there are few things we are called to do more frequently in Scripture than to give thanks. The New Testament speaks about thankfulness 71 times, and the Old Testament even more frequently. But life is fraught with disappointments and frustrations, which make it difficult to give thanks. COVID-19, social problems, and personal challenges we all face have given plenty of reason to grumble, rather than give thanks. And yet, in I Thess 5:18, Paul says explicitly, “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” At face value, this sounds glib -- “give thanks everyone, and oh yeah, put on a happy face.” But why are we called to give thanks in all things and how are we to do it?

In the Old Testament we see giving thanks within the context of acknowledging that God is good, and that his love outlives any circumstance we might face (I Chron 16:34). This is a call to refocus our minds on the certainty of God’s faithfulness even when times are tough. Giving thanks isn’t a polite thank you, or a perfunctory prayer of thanks; nor is it a sappy insincere comment to meet the requirement of Scripture. No, there is a special grace when we are able to give thanks, even when a feeling of sadness, frustration, or even anger remains. No one in Scripture spells this out more explicitly than the writer of Ecclesiastes, “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other.” So giving thanks is to acknowledge what is right and good about our Heavenly father, and to speak that truth to ourselves even when we may not be feeling it. It is to remain confident that God does work all things together for good, even when in the hard times.

In the New Testament, the word for thanksgiving is eucharisteo, which simply means to “give thanks.” You will recognize this word from what Jesus did when he broke bread with His disciples in Luke 22:19, He eucharisteo (“gave thanks”). We are to give thanks when we pray (Philp 4:4-7), we are to give thanks because we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28), and we are to give thanks as we allow the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts (Col 3:15). Give thanks, what a powerful response to life’s circumstances.

Salem, what are you thankful for this Thanksgiving season? What blessings have you experienced for which you thank God? What circumstances have brought you to depend more deeply on God, and on people, for which you are thankful? What adversities have you faced, which while not making you feel happy, have still allowed you to give thanks because our God is faithful and true despite the circumstances? Take some time to reflect on the past year and give thanks.

As elders we are thankful for each one of you who have made Salem your church home. We are a body, and just as a body has many members, so though many, we too are one body (I Cor 12:12). We are thankful for generous donors who have kept our finances stable during a difficult time. We are thankful for all the newcomers who have begun to make Salem their home in the last year. We are thankful for our pastors and staff who serve the gospel and each one of us in a humble Christ-like way. We are thankful for God's guidance and protection during the COVID challenges, and everyone's support and sacrifices allowing us to keep our fellowship strong and our ministries vital. We are thankful for a productive annual general meeting, during which we heard Seth spell out some of his thoughts about the direction of our church. And as elders, we are thankful for the privilege of serving you during this time.

And by the way, medical evidence consistently shows that giving thanks facilitates positive emotions, makes us more resilient, increases long-term happiness, positively impacts psychological well-being, improves our relationships, and even helps us find meaning in our work.

With gratitude,

Mark Strand on behalf of the Salem Elders