

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

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[0 : 0 0] If we are anything as Christians, we are a thankful people.

Our very identity is grounded in grace, in what we have freely and undeservedly received. Giving thanks is what we do.

Giving thanks is what we are. The expression ungrateful Christian is a puzzling oxymoron, and an actual flesh-and-blood ungrateful Christian is beyond puzzling.

But then, if we are honest, and we must be honest, we are often puzzling and perverse characters. And the Apostle Paul can help us.

Paul, in the letter that he writes to the Corinthians, and particularly the verses that we have read, Paul was intent on helping the believers in Corinth both understand the grounds of their gratitude and give them an exultant and abounding expression to their gratitude so that they would know why they are to be grateful, but that they would know also how to give expression to their gratitude.

[1 : 3 1] And in the verses that we've read, we find Paul helping them in this way. And he can also help us. Perhaps we, like the believers in Corinth, need to know and need to be reminded of and need to appreciate how deep and how great and how manifold are the reasons for us to be grateful, and we need to know how we can give expression to that gratitude.

Perhaps if we just give a little context to Paul's exultant cry of grateful praise there in verse 57 of 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

The Corinthians were struggling with the confusion arising from false teaching concerning the resurrection.

We just noticed in this very chapter, in verse 12 of chapter 15, we read, But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

But within their own fellowships, there were those arguing the point. There is no resurrection of the dead. And Paul responds to this. He says if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

[3 : 0 1] And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. So this is what was happening. This is what the believers in Corinth were having to deal with, those within their number, peddling this false gospel.

And it was creating a confusion. It was creating great concern among the believers. What if this is true? What impact does that have on us and on the faith that we hold?

And Paul, as we've seen, and as he continues in the chapter, Paul is at pains to stress the absolute centrality of the resurrection to the gospel message.

In verse 17, he says words that are familiar to us. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. You are still in your sins. In verse 19, if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

So Paul responds to this context in which he finds himself. And then as he develops the theme, he comes to the close of this particular matter, and he erupts in this expression of gratitude, of grateful praise.

[4 : 22] It arises from his own heart. It is his own personal expression of gratitude. But in so expressing himself, so he encourages the believers in Corinth to join with him in the same sentiment, and not only in the same sentiment, but in the same expression of gratitude.

But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. What I want to do briefly this evening is to consider some aspects of this thanksgiving practice by Paul and fitting for all Christians.

The first thing I want us to notice is the context or the backdrop to our thanksgiving. Paul's eruption of thanksgiving begins with the word but.

But thanks be to God. And we know that word but is so often in Paul's writings and indeed beyond a word laden with significance. And on this occasion, it identifies the context or backdrop to our thanksgiving.

Namely, three somber and related realities. The reality of death, this was the great concern of the Corinthians. The reality of sin.

[5 : 43] And the reality of the law as that which condemns us because of our inability to keep it. Let's just think about these three realities that Paul speaks of and makes reference to as he then, in contrast to or in the light of, is then able to cry out, but even though this is all true, even though these realities are present realities that you struggle with and that are part of your experience, but thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

What about death? As we've noted already and already said, this was the great concern of the Corinthians. What happens when we die? What happens when our brothers and sisters in Christ die?

What happens to them? But of course, Paul recognizes that death, though that was perhaps the headline concern of the Corinthians, death in and of itself is not the fundamental problem or enemy.

Rather, it is sin. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin. And the power of sin is the law.

The sting is not in death, but in sin. It is sin that brings death. As Paul states elsewhere as he writes to the church in Rome, the wages of sin is death.

[7 : 15] And sin was, as it ever has been since the fall, a disturbing personal reality for all, for all Christians, for the believers in Corinth, for believers everywhere, for us this evening.

And so this is the backdrop to his cry of thanksgiving, the reality of death, the reality of sin that has as its wages death.

But then also we meet an unexpected ally or bedfellow of sin, and that is the law. Verse 56, the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

Notice how the law is described there on this occasion. It's described as the power of sin. Now, how so? How is the law to be described as or to be understood as the power of sin?

Is the law not a good gift of God? Again, we think of what Paul says on another occasion, writing to the Romans in chapter 7 in verse 12, So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good.

[8 : 28] The law is good. It is God's law. It must be good. It is good. But because of our inability to keep the law, it condemns us.

And in that sense, is our enemy. It is good. But we can't keep it. And as we can't keep it, so it condemns us. As some have put it and expressed it, helpfully, the law makes sinners of us all.

And so, in that sense, it is our enemy, together with death and sin, and the law as the power of sin.

This is the backdrop. This is the context in which we find Paul crying out in thanksgiving. And let's move on then to think about more specifically what we might call the cause of our thanksgiving.

And the cause of our thanksgiving, if we were to summarize it in one word, is victory. But we can think of that victory in different ways. First of all, we can think of victory over. Victory over what?

[9 : 38] What we've already seen, the enemies that confront us. We have powerful enemies. Death and sin and the law. But Paul assures us there is victory over each of them.

Death has been swallowed up in victory, to use language that Paul himself uses in this very chapter. The sting of sin has been drawn, and the accusing and condemning power of the law has been silenced and tamed.

There is victory over these enemies. But then we ask, well, how so? How is it? How is it that victory has been won over these enemies? And that takes us on to another aspect of the victory that Paul touches on here, and that is victory through.

What is it that Paul says there in verse 57? But thanks be to God, he gives us the victory. But then he goes on. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The victory that he speaks of and that is given to us is secured through our Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to what Paul says in his letter to Timothy.

[10 : 49] In 2 Timothy chapter 1 and verses 9 and 10 we read, This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death. And has brought life and immortality to light. Jesus has destroyed death by dealing with the cause of death, our sin.

He has, by his own death, drawn its sting or poison. Victory over death, victory over sin, victory over the law, victory through Jesus Christ.

But then one other aspect of this victory is that it is a victory that is given. And really this responds to maybe the question we could pose. How is this victory over death and sin and the law experienced by us?

How does it become a reality for us? Well, Paul assures us this is a victory that is given to us. It's given to us. God gives us the victory.

[12 : 11] This is not a victory that we secure, but a victory or a gift that we receive. God gives us. God, through his Son, both secures and gives us the victory.

And notice that though Paul doesn't explicitly enter into this in the verses before us, this experience of victory has both a present and a future aspect.

Often in thinking about our salvation, we do use that expression that is often used, and it's helpfully used, of the already and the not yet. That which we already enjoy, that which we already experience, and that which we have yet to enjoy, which we have yet to experience.

And this is true in the matter of victory. In the present, in the here and now, we are granted eternal life now.

Eternal life is not something that we receive in the future. No, we are granted eternal life now, as we are enabled to put our trust in Jesus as our Savior.

[13 : 18] Sin's dominion is broken now. We're still plagued by sin. We still sin, but its dominion over us is broken now. There is now no condemnation.

All of these aspects of our victory are enjoyed and experienced and given to us now. But, of course, we await other elements or aspects of this victory.

We await as a future experience and blessing, physical resurrection, and being granted an immortal resurrection body. Paul speaks of that in the preceding verses.

Verse 51, listen, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. He's looking ahead to the future. We will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound. The dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. And he goes on. This is a future blessing to be enjoyed, a future aspect of this victory that is given to us by God through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ.

[14 : 30] This is the cause of our thanksgiving, victory. But then also, we can say something else, and it seems so self-evident that it almost, you almost wonder, well, do we really need to mention it?

But let me just do so. And I'm thinking of the object of our thanksgiving. Who is it that we give thanks to? Well, of course, our thanksgiving is directed to the giver.

It has to be. But thanks be to God. Could be no other way. We thank the one who has given us the victory. We thank the one who has given us his Son.

We thank the one who has given us eternal life in his Son. We thank God. And it's such a simple truth. It's such an obvious imperative placed upon us.

But it is worth asking ourselves the question, do we? Do we rise in the morning and do we rest at night? Do we, in the course of our lives and duties and activities, do we lift up a word of thanks to God for all that he has done, for the victory that is ours?

[15 : 44] Do we with Paul cry out, but thanks be to God, for he is the one who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So in these different ways, Paul is helping the Corinthians, and he helps us to have a better grasp of the reasons, the grounds of our thanksgiving.

But Paul is not content to simply identify the many reasons we have to be thankful. He goes on to also help us understand and know how we can give expression to our gratitude.

And we move on now to think about what he says in this regard, the expression or the demonstration of our thanksgiving. And this is what he deals with us. In verse 58, he ends this section with the word, Therefore, in the light of all that God has done, in the light of these many and amazing reasons that we have to be grateful, therefore, this is what you must do.

This is what you can do to express your gratitude. The call directed to the believers in Corinth is to demonstrate their thanks in intangible and concrete ways.

[17 : 04] And two demonstrations of thanksgiving are identified and urged upon them and, by extension, upon us. That they, we, would be firm in the faith.

This is the first way in which we can demonstrate our thanksgiving, by being firm in the faith. And also, in parallel, that we would be wholehearted in service.

Firm in the faith, wholehearted in service. Let's think of these two related ways in which we can give expression to our gratitude.

First of all, that we would be firm in the faith. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. This call to stand firm, to let nothing move us, is a call to stand firm in the faith.

What I think this idea of standing firm in the faith involves a parallel, an intertwined call to hold to the faith.

[18 : 10] And there, when we think of holding to the faith, we're thinking of how that word is used to describe that collection of truths that constitute the gospel.

Elsewhere, we read of the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. That collection of truths that together make up the gospel. And of course, central to that in Paul's thinking and concern on this occasion is the truth of the resurrection.

This is an objective truth that we hold to as constituting the faith. And we are to hold firm to the faith in that regard.

But parallel to that, in this matter of standing firm, is the call to remain firm in our faith or trust in God, who gives us the victory in His Son.

Now, these things are very much intertwined. I think we can legitimately distinguish them. Stand firm in the faith. Hold to the truths that you have been taught, that were once delivered to the saints.

[19 : 13] Know them, hold them, publish them, communicate them, stand firm in them. In the face of those who would say, oh, that's not true, or that's not important, or here's something new and novel.

No, you must stand firm in the faith. But also stand firm in your trust in the God of the gospel, as you trust in Him and rest in Him and depend upon Him.

And, of course, this aspect of trust in God flows seamlessly and necessarily from the aspect of doctrinal conviction.

In the absence of doctrinal conviction, in the absence of being persuaded that these things are true, it's so much more difficult for us to trust in the God in whom we believe.

Stand firm in the faith. And, of course, we can only stand firm in a faith that we know. We can only trust in a God that we know. And so the challenge for us is to know ever more clearly and ever more carefully the truth that we have been given.

[20 : 25] We need to study the Scriptures and so secure a solid grip of the faith once delivered to the saints. One of the reasons why we gather together as believers, one of the reasons why God is so ordered that His people live together and worship together and be part of a community together is that together we might learn and discover the faith once delivered to the saints.

And so we do it as we gather, as we do this evening, and as we hear God's Word preached. But we do it as we gather in homes and gather around God's Word to study God's Word. Just in a couple of weeks, we'll be beginning the second half of the study of Romans.

And what a wonderful way that is for us to know better the faith that we hold and so be able to stand firm in it. Because even the desire to stand firm, it will be nothing more than a desire if we don't know what we're standing firm in.

And so we need to know the Word. We need to study the Scriptures. We need to have a grip and a grasp of what this faith is that we are to stand firm in.

And for that, we have to take every opportunity that God gives us to study His Word together, as we gather in God's house, as we gather with other believers.

[21 : 49] Indeed, as we are enabled to study His Word alone also. So this is the first manner in which we can give expression to our gratitude as we stand firm in the faith.

But there's another way in which Paul commends to us our giving thanks to God, and that is by being wholehearted in service.

Then in the same verse, in verse 58, Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm, let nothing move you. And then he goes on, Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

This is another way in which we can show our gratitude by being wholehearted in service. To be wholehearted in service accompanies and flows from being firm in the faith.

Jonathan Edwards speaks of faith in the resurrection, particularly, this is one aspect, one truth that we stand firm in. It's the one that Paul is particularly concerned about.

[22 : 53] But focusing on that particular truth, Edwards says that faith in the resurrection produces, and I quote, A consciousness of boundless and endless power for work.

You see, he doesn't see it as some dry doctrinal matter. Yes, I believe that happened. It's true. And if anybody says it's not true, well, I'll fight for the truth of that. He says, yes, that's true, but it's so much more than that.

It is a truth that as we are persuaded of it, so it gives us fuel for service for our work in the Lord.

And we work in the assurance, Paul tells us, that our labor is not in vain. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

And notice here that Paul isn't telling us that our labor in the Lord is not in vain as being the motivation for giving ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, but an accompanying comfort.

[23 : 57] And I think that comes out perhaps more helpfully in the way in which this verse is translated in the ESV. But rather than translating that second part because you know, it simply translates it knowing.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Our motivation for giving ourselves fully to the work of the Lord is the victory that we have been given, are the truths that we have become persuaded of.

That's our motivation. And so motivated by that, we give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord and accompanying that work is this great assurance and comfort that our work is not in vain.

It might appear to be in vain. It may not seem to give the results or produce the results that we long for or would hope for. We're so conscious of our own limitations and how badly we do what we do and we wonder, well, will anything good come of it?

And Paul says, no, you be assured. Do what you do knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. The Lord will determine how what you do is used by Himself.

[25 : 07] Sometimes you will see what His purposes are. Sometimes you won't. Perhaps only eternity. And indeed, sometimes, perhaps we might say, not even eternity will reveal to us the manner in which God has used our labor for Him.

But the challenge is there for us. Not as some burdensome duty, but as an opportunity for thanksgiving. In this, we can give thanks to God.

If words are not sufficient, then words are not sufficient. Well, we have other ways of giving thanks and this is one of them. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Let's just think as we close about this in terms of the week that has begun. This is the first day of the week. Monday beckons. Now, I don't know if that for you is a very daunting prospect.

Monday. Back to school, back to classes, back to work, back to the office, and you think, oh, I wish the weekend could continue. But Monday does beckon and the week lies ahead.

[26 : 15] And this week that has begun is a week that gives us an opportunity, as every week that begins gives us an opportunity, for us to demonstrate to God that we are grateful for the victory that He has given us in His Son, Jesus.

Well, let us make use of that opportunity of giving expression of our gratitude in the manner that Paul urges us, by standing firm in the faith, by studying and making known God's Word.

And let's do so also by giving ourselves fully to the work of the gospel. But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You. We thank You for who You are. We thank You for what You have done. And we thank You very, especially this evening, for the victory that is ours in and through Your Son, Jesus Christ.

We come and we acknowledge Your generosity in granting to us a victory over death and sin and the power of the law. We thank You not only for what You give us, but we thank You also for the opportunity that You give us to express our gratitude.

[27 : 39] And we ask that we would do so, that we would do so consistently and humbly and seriously, that we would hold firm in the faith and that we would give ourselves fully to the work of the gospel.

And we thank You that as we do so, we can do so with that joy and encouragement of knowing that our work in the Lord is not in vain. Help us in this week that has begun to give You thanks in this manner.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.