

Ephesians 5:20

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you is, so they say, and I'm sure you've heard, one of the magic words. Thank you.

Now, for Christians, it's not only a magic word, it is, more importantly, a spiritual word or a spiritual activity to give thanks to God is at the very heart of our calling as believers.

As we just reflect a little on what we were thinking about this morning, we were confronted with a call there in the words of Psalm 148, a call to praise the Lord. The call, you'll remember, was accompanied by reasons why we ought to praise the Lord. And among the reasons given by the psalmist, there was this great reality that God has raised up for us a horn or a king, a savior.

And he has done this for those who are, in the beautiful language of the psalm, near to his heart. And so, as we consider these reasons that are given for us to praise God, we're convinced that they are indeed good reasons. And God not only calls us to praise him, not only gives us good reason to praise him, but he's also provided the way in which we can express our praise, express our gratitude gratitude. And our thanksgiving, our gratitude, we express as we do praise him. So, gratitude, giving thanks, lies at the heart of praise. So, I want us to think a little bit about this matter of giving thanks to God and to do so in the light of the words of Paul in Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 20.

And we're really interrupting into the middle of a sentence. And we're not going to give really due attention, perhaps as we ought to, the context in which these words are found, though we'll make some reference to it. But simply focus our attention on the words of this verse as it deals with this matter of giving thanks. Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, as I've just said, we're not going to be giving any great thought to what comes before and the context in which these words are found. But we must make reference to one certainly crucial truth that we discover as we look to what has gone before. And it is this, that our own thanksgiving, our giving of thanks, as Paul exhorts us to do, proceeds from, our giving thanks proceeds from, and is evidence of being filled with the Spirit of God. It is God himself who enables us to give thanks.

[3 : 2 0] Not only does he call us to praise, not only does he give us good reason to praise, but he himself is the one who by his Spirit enables us to praise, enables us to give thanks. There in verse 18, be filled with the Spirit. And then there follows the different ways in which that reality will be evidenced. As we speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, as we sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord, and as we give thanks to God. So giving thanks to God is something that we do enabled by God, and the manner that he enables us to do so is as he indwells us by his Spirit.

This is our starting point. Now, we'll return in the course of what we have to say to the work of the Spirit. But what we want to do is focus then on verse 20. And what we're going to do is we're going to pose five questions related to this matter of giving thanks that are answered, certainly in some measure, by Paul in these brief words in the verse that forms our text. The first question that we want to pose is as follows. What is it that we are to do? What is it that Paul would have us do as he speaks to us and challenges us with the words of verse 20? What are we to do? Well, it's very clear.

Always giving thanks. We are to give thanks. We are to gratefully acknowledge everything that we receive from God. Now, this giving of thanks, certainly this giving of thanks in the manner that we ought to give thanks requires that we recognize three realities. Or certainly we're better able to give thanks in the measure that we recognize three realities. The first reality, and it's maybe a very obvious one, but it's one that we do need to be very clear on. And that is that we have to acknowledge that all that we have, we receive. If we fail at that hurdle, then it will be very difficult to give thanks in any meaningful way. Now, you might say, well, that's so obvious. And yet, how often do we fall at that hurdle when we think that what we have is the product principally of our own effort, our own industry, our own endeavor? And so ultimately, we don't really have to give thanks to anybody else.

If we have to thank anybody, then we should thank ourselves. And we might not be so crass as to say that. We might not boast in that way. We might not verbalize that. But how often is it true that we fail to give thanks precisely for this reason, that we don't even acknowledge what we have received, or we don't acknowledge that what we have is indeed what we have received from God. So that's one very obvious or basic reality that we need to have a grip of if we are to give thanks as we ought.

All that we have, we have received. A second reality that, in a sense, follows on from that is that you have to acknowledge that we don't merit or deserve any of what we receive. So we might be willing to say, well, yes, this is something we've received from God, but, you know, we deserve it.

[6 : 52] You know, we try and live a good life. We seek to be faithful Christians. And so, yes, we do receive from God. But there is a sense in which, well, it's something that we deserve. If that is our attitude or if that colors our attitude, then that will impinge on the extent to which we give thanks as we ought. We have to acknowledge that we don't deserve anything. We can't demand of God. God graciously, and the word, or the clue is in the word, it's of grace. God graciously gives us what he does, give us, be it material gifts, be they spiritual gifts. Whatever we receive, it is graciously given by God. We don't deserve them. And then a third reality is simply to acknowledge the extent to which we receive from God. There are so many gifts that he showers upon us day by day and week by week.

He is constantly giving to us good gifts. And as we recognize that, so we will be better able to do what we're being called to do here, which is to give thanks. So that is what we are to do. We are to give thanks. But the second question that we can pose and that is answered here in the verse is, when are we to give thanks? Well, the very first word of the verse answers that question.

Always giving thanks to God the Father. Always giving thanks. And there's really so much that we could think about that is implicit in this one word, always. We can think of the significance of the word in different directions that I hope all connect. In one obvious way that we would understand the word always, or the reason why we're called to give thanks always, is that we are always receiving.

It makes sense. There's a symmetry. We always receive, so consequently we should always be giving thanks. If we weren't always receiving, then perhaps we wouldn't always give thanks. But as we are always receiving, so it's right that we should always be giving thanks. There isn't a day that passes where we don't receive in so many ways. And I don't need to give you a list. You're more than capable of doing that for yourself, of all the ways in which we receive from God. Because we're always receiving, so we must always give thanks. It seems perfectly reasonable, doesn't it, when we think of it in those terms. But as we think a little bit more about this word always, and how we can always give thanks, we can also say this, that we're always able to appreciate and be grateful for past benefits.

Sometimes in the matter of giving thanks, we focus on what we've received. So we give thanks for the food that we're about to eat, or we give thanks for some particular evidence of God's generosity at a particular moment in time. And that's a good thing to do. But what we can do and must do as believers is always give thanks for what God has done for us in the past, even in our own lives and in our own circumstances, but particularly what God has done in our favor to secure for us our salvation. What has been done in the past that has present effects? We think of the saving work of God's Son. We think of what Jesus has done for us in the past. And Jesus is still working on our behalf in the present. But we think of what he has done in the past. And we know that as part of our life as God's people, we're called to give thanks for what he has done in the past. We will be next Sunday morning gathering around the Lord's table. And what will we be doing there? Well, we will be giving thanks for God's great love in sending his Son. We will be giving thanks for Jesus' willingness to hand himself over to death in our place, something that was done in the past. We might even say in the distant past. And yet, it's always appropriate that we would be giving thanks for what has been done in the past for us. And we continue to do so as our appreciation of what God has done in the past is renewed and deepened. But if we're thinking in terms of chronology, we don't only give thanks for what we receive in the present. We can't always, we're not only always able to give thanks for what God has done in the past, but we can also always give thanks for what we have yet to receive from God. The Bible, we know, is full of promises of God, from God, for us. And we can look forward to what the future holds, a great deal of uncertainty.

[12 : 02] But within the uncertainty, there are certain things that are clear and that we can give thanks for, even as we anticipate receiving them from God. So we always give thanks because we're always receiving.

We can always remember and appreciate what God has done in the past. We can always look forward and anticipate what he will do for us in the future. And so, consequently, it is always fitting to give thanks to God. There's never an occasion where it would be an inappropriate thing to do. It's always the right thing to do. It's always the right thing to do. It's always the fitting thing to do. We are to always give thanks. I think also, as we just say one more thing in answer to this question, and as we maybe explore this word always, I think the word always also gives us a hint as to the manner of our giving thanks. If indeed the call is to always give thanks, it seems unlikely that what is expected of us is to limit our giving of thanks to a verbal expression. When we think of saying thank you, we think of it as words that we express to somebody. We say thank you to them. That's how we give thanks. And we do that with God. We give thanks with words as we pray and as we sing. But if we are to give thanks always, it can't be only in the use of words. But it must include the manner in which we live our lives as an offering to God of grateful service. If we are to always give thanks, the only way we'll be able to do that is by the lives that we live. We're always living our lives. And so if we always live our lives in service to God, then in that way we will be doing justice to this call that is placed upon us or this challenge that is given to us, always giving thanks to God. But then let's move on to a third question that we can pose and try and answer with the help of this verse. And that is, for what are we to give thanks? Now we've possibly suggested already one or two answers to that question. But what does the verse say? For what are we to give thanks? Well, it's clear. Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything. For everything. Paul doesn't need to give us a list. Much more sensible to simply express it in this way. Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything. Everything we receive from God. Or in the words of James, every good and perfect gift is from above. And we give thanks for every good and perfect gift. But we can go a little bit further than what even James says, because everything includes everything. It includes benefits. It includes what we might think of as good things.

But it also includes what we receive that is unpleasant. Afflictions that are part of our life. The good stuff and the bad stuff. Paul doesn't seem to allow us the luxury of saying, well, I'll give thanks to God for what I enjoy and what is pleasant. But I'm not going to give thanks for those things that I find difficult and that bring me pain. No, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.

Now here, in acknowledging that that is so, we do need to be a little bit careful. We need to pause a moment and just take some care in what we say. And maybe to illustrate the care that is required, we can do that by asking a question. Are we saying, is Paul saying, or are we suggesting from what Paul says that the bad stuff, or let's call it evil stuff, that may come our way is a good and perfect gift? Is that also what James is speaking about? And we'd have to say, no, God is not the giver of evil. We don't give thanks for evil. But we do give thanks even as we experience bad stuff. So we're not giving thanks for evil that comes into our lives and that causes pain for us and others. But we do give thanks in the midst of that experience. And why do we do that?

Why are we called to give thanks even in the midst of that which is painful and difficult and oppressive? Well, there's a number of reasons why we give thanks in the midst of these things. And that is that God is there and is supporting us in the midst of that which is painful, that which is bad in and of itself. God supports us in the midst of it. We also know in the light of God's Word that God is ordering all of these things for the good of His people, even bad things, even the wicked deeds of wicked men that affect us, that we are prejudiced by. That is ordered by God for our good. God is not the author of it. He is not responsible, morally responsible for these things, but He does order these things for our good. Such is His power over all, over good and evil. And we know also, and this is another reason why we can give thanks in the midst of bad stuff, is that God is working in us through and by the bad stuff to make us more like Jesus. And so often it is at times of pain and suffering that

[18 : 16] God is better able to mold us into the likeness of His Son. That doesn't make it a pleasant experience, but it does make it an experience for which we can give thanks to God.

Now when we're in the midst of pain or suffering or we're the victims of the wicked deeds of others in the cold heat of the battle, it's difficult to give thanks. And we can only do so. And we come back to where we began. We can only do so by the active presence of the Spirit in us, as He enables us to give thanks in and for everything. Let's move on to a fourth question, the penultimate question that we want to pose and try and answer, and that is, to whom do we give thanks? Further, there is an answer to this question also. To whom do we give thanks? Well, what does Paul say? Always giving thanks to God, the Father for everything. We give thanks to God our Father. Now, in recognizing that and in acknowledging that He is the one that we direct our thanks to, that serves to highlight the indispensable need for faith that allows us to know and recognize God as our Father. If we don't know God as our Father, if we don't recognize Him as our Father, then it will be very difficult to give thanks to Him as our

Father. We know that we become sons thanks to, and as we appropriate to ourselves, the work of Jesus on our behalf. And we are able to appreciate and are persuaded of our sonship by the work of the Spirit.

Again, the Spirit's work in this is so essential. We think of the words of Paul as he writes to the Romans in chapter 8 and from verse 15, for you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship, and by Him we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children in order to approach God and to give Him thanks as God our Father. It is necessary that we know Him as our Father, and that we can do only as the Spirit grants us that sense of our identity in Christ, sons and daughters of God. But then there's a final question that we can answer in this matter of giving thanks, and that is, in whose name do we give thanks? And there the answer is before us, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus, we give thanks to the Father. Notice the active work and cooperating work of each person of the Trinity in this matter. It is as we are filled by the Spirit that we're enabled to give thanks. We direct our thanks to the Father, and we do so in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what does that mean? What does it mean to say that we give thanks to the Father in the name of the Son, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? Well, there's a couple of things we could say.

The first thing is that it's a recognition that it is because of what Jesus has done that we are granted the capacity to engage in spiritual thanksgiving. It is only in Jesus and in what Jesus has done that we are able to give thanks at all. And so we give thanks to the Father in the name of Jesus, in acknowledgement of who He is and what He has done for us, and that it is in His name that we approach the Father. We can approach Him in no other name. We couldn't even direct words of thanksgiving to the Father, were it not for Jesus and His role as our mediator. It is because of who Jesus is as our great high priest that we have access to the Father, that we might give thanks. We couldn't even approach the Father were it not for Jesus. So we give thanks to the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, resting on the merits of His saving work on our behalf. But even as we acknowledge this, we're brought back to the importance of the Spirit. Because who is it that grants us this discernment concerning who

[23 : 09] Jesus is and what He has done for us? Well, it is the Holy Spirit of God. And we're back to where we began, noting that giving thanks is evidence of being filled with the Spirit of God. So in whose name do we give thanks? Well, we give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now as we just draw things to a close, let me just leave you with one thought to give attention to or to consider. This morning with the children, I was asking if they were grumblers. And having asked them if they were grumblers, then encouraging them, rather than to be always grumbling, to always give thanks for everything. And we pointed them to this verse that we're looking at this evening. Well, let me just lay out that challenge to you this evening. What about you? What characterizes you? Are you a grumbler? Are you always discontent with the circumstances of your life and always grumbling about things not working out as you would like them or things not happening as you would have preferred? Always something to grumble about.

Life is so much happier when we are so busy giving thanks that we have no time or even appetite to grumble. Life is a much happier experience when we take on board this challenge of the apostle, that we would always be giving thanks to God our Father for everything. It's the right thing to do, but it is also a much happier way to live, to live grateful rather than to live grumbling.

So maybe that's something that we can all take on board as we embark on this new year, to leave aside grumbling and rather to live lives of joyful and humble gratitude to God, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you and we do confess that we are slow to give thanks. We are often proud. We imagine that what we have is the fruit of our own endeavors only. We acknowledge also that we are often dissatisfied, and so what we do receive we think is insufficient, and we would want so much more, and it's not what we had really wanted. We do grumble. We're prone to being dissatisfied rather than satisfied. We're so much more prone to discontentment rather than contentment, and forgive us for that, for that in itself is an evidence of ingratitude, but also it's so foolish. We lose out on a much happier life by grumbling rather than by being grateful. We thank you for the challenge of your word, and we pray that you would help us to take it on board and to respond to it, that we would seek with your help, and we're so conscious of the need of your help, and the Bible is so clear on how much we stand in need of your help, the need that we have of the Spirit of God indwelling us and enabling us and working in us so that we would indeed be able to always give thanks to you, our Father, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. And we pray these things in His name. Amen.