

## **Practicing Gratitude Thanksgiving Day, 2022**

**Philippians 4: 8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.**

Dear Friends in Christ,

A story is told of a three year old girl who woke up in the middle of the night during a thunderstorm. She cried out that she was scared. She sprinted into her parents' bedroom, only to be told by her half-awake mom, "Go back to your room, honey. God will be with you." The little girl stood in the doorway. She thought for a moment, and then said softly, "Mommy, I'll sleep here by Daddy. You go in there and sleep by God."

During that particular storm, it wasn't enough for the little girl to be told that the Lord was near. This morning, we would admit that we've all had those circumstances in life where the simple fact that God is with us didn't seem to be enough. Even though we believe that God is working everything out for the good of those who love him, the anxieties of day to day living often get the best of us. In spite of the fact that our names are written in the Book of Life, we still find ourselves worrying about getting old and dying and what comes next. Even though the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed us from all of our sins, we still find ourselves feeling guilty and stained and soiled.

Occasionally our troubles are major, but most often they are so tiny they are laughable. A McDonald's kiosk that won't cooperate, a strand of lights that won't work, a pile of clutter on the kitchen table, a slow driver on the highway in front of us, a meal that isn't quite right, a bad hair day, our favorite team loses a close one, dog hair all over the carpet, a friend that is hasn't called, a family member that disappoints, and the list goes on. Daily frustrations that all too often put us into the camp of Martha who was scolded by Jesus for being distracted and bothered by so many details in her home that she forgot to pay attention to Jesus the Master Teacher Who wasn't off in the distance somewhere, He was right there!

The Day of National Thanksgiving is all about expressing gratitude to Almighty God for blessings received in both body and soul. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word for gratitude is “recognizing the good. One pastor had this to say , “Practicing gratitude means being fully aware of the good that is already yours. Gratitude also asks us to honor that which is. We don’t become captive to what has already happened in our lives, nor do we solely look to the future. An ancient text asked, “Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot.”

He quoted a statement out of the Talmud, “A person is obligated to recite one hundred blessings every day.” In today’s Epistle Lesson, Paul urges us to be intentional in terms of what we are thinking about. To be thinking about that which is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable and excellent and praiseworthy in our lives, **What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.**

**Two lessons we would learn about practicing gratitude today: *First, it guards against anxiety, and secondly, it teaches us the secret of contentment.***

- Lesson #1 is that *practicing gratitude guards against anxiety.*

Paul’s first purpose in writing his epistle to the Christians in Philippi was to thank them for the gift they had sent him, upon learning that he was under house arrest in Rome. However, he made use of this occasion to fulfill at least five other desires. Desire #1 was to report on his own circumstances. Desire #2 was to encourage the Philippians to stand firm in the face of what would be severe persecution. Desire #3 was to exhort them towards humility and unity. Desire #4 was to warn them against false teachers like the Judaizers who were practicing legalism. And desire #5 in our text for today was to urge them to know the secret of contentment he had learned over the years.

Through Paul, the Spirit of God would teach us the value of being intentional about practicing gratitude. Instead of worrying about the false narratives which so often seem to prevail in our society, we would practice rejoicing that Christ is near and our salvation is secure. Instead of fussing about what is wrong and fretting about all that is impure, we would practice exalting God for all that is praiseworthy and excellent. I don’t know if the old saying “practice makes perfect” is true, but it certainly has the potential to steer us towards a contentment rooted in Christ and Him alone.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who go through the ups and downs of life rejoicing in the Lord always - not because their teams always win, but because the Lord is near. Rejoicing always not because they have their act together, but because Christ had His act together, and therefore their sins of foolishness and self-centeredness have been washed away in the blood of Christ. Rejoicing always not because they never feel lonely or depressed but because the Lord is with them and He is for them and He is alongside them in every circumstance of life, without exception. Rejoicing always not because they never suffer from severe anxiety, but because they know where to take that anxiety. Not because the storms of life never get close to overwhelming them, but because they believe in that God with an army of angels is fighting on their behalf

O give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, and His mercy endureth forever.

Lesson #2 is that ***practicing gratitude teaches us the secret of contentment.***

Dear friends, true contentment has everything to do with the fact that the Lord is near. He is near with a grace that is far more abundant than we can imagine. He is near with a mercy that covers the worst of our flaws and failures. He is near with a simple promise that we can do all things God is asking us to do through Christ Who strengthens us. True contentment has everything to do with who God is, what He has already done, what He is doing in this very hour, and what He promises to do into the future.

The writer to the Hebrews said it this way, ***“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with whatever you have because God says, “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you...We say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”***

Solomon said it this way, ***“The fear of the Lord leads to life. Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.”***

Two stories in closing today about how practicing gratitude teaches us in an ongoing way the secret of contentment. Two of my favorite stories of all time.

***Story #1 about*** a woman who looked into the mirror one morning and saw that she only had three hairs. She smiled and said, “I think I will braid my hair today.” She went out and had a great day. The next day she looked in the mirror and saw that she only had two hairs. She chuckled and decided, “I think I will part my hair down the middle today.” She proceeded to have a lovely day. The next day she looked in the mirror and saw that she only had one hair. She giggled and declared,

I think I will wear my hair in a ponytail today. She enjoyed an amazing day with friends. The fourth day, she saw that she had no hair whatsoever. She grinned, did a fist pump, and thought to herself, “Yes! I don’t have to spend time fixing my hair today!”

Story #2 is about a man named Matthew Henry who got beaten and robbed one day. In reflecting on the incident, he counted four reasons to be grateful. “First, I am thankful that he never robbed me before. Secondly, I am thankful that although he took my wallet, he did not take my life. Third, although he took all I had, it was not much. And fourth, I am glad that it was I who was robbed, not I who did the robbing.”

The kingdom of God is like a small congregation of believers huddled together in the safety of God’s peace this morning. It is a peace that goes beyond the disappointments and the heartaches of the season of life in which they are living, it goes beyond what other people have done to them or are doing, it goes beyond the trends of their society, it goes beyond what they can see and hear and feel all around them. This peace is from outside of themselves. This peace is a gift of pure grace centered in the life, the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of their Savior. This peace is challenged by the darkness of a sinful world on a daily basis, but never overwhelmed. For as often as they are still and know that the Lord is near, as often as they revel in the fact that the guilt and the shame and the power and the eternal consequences of their sins have been washed away in the blood of the Lamb, as often as they rest in the promise of their Savior to prepare mansions in heaven, as often as they spend time in prayer counting what is sweet and salutary in their lives, that often a thankful spirit rises up inside of them and chases away all shades of darkness. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.