

Characteristics of Spiritual Growth

Living a Life of Thanksgiving - 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Introduction: We've been looking the past few weeks at the characteristics of Spiritual Growth. We've learned that a Growing Christian will be confident in their relationship with the Lord; They will have a desire to know and obey the Word of God; they will Love the Church; They will demonstrate Constant Joy; and have a persistent and continual Prayer life.

This morning, we're going to discover another characteristic of a spiritually growing person – They will be able to Live a Life of Thanksgiving. Paul admonishes Christians in **1 Thess. 5:18 (NIV)** to “*give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*”

But I want to share with you this morning that God not only wants us to be thankful in all circumstances, He deserves our thankfulness in all circumstances. He deserves not only our thankfulness for what He does for us, but also, and more importantly, who He is. We should never take that for granted.

If this message on the first Sunday of June teaches us anything, I hope it will remind us that every day, we should take the time to count and re-count our blessings and thank God for everything He does for us and all He is to us. You see, our thanksgiving to God shouldn't be limited to the last Thursday in November. He wants us to continually live a life of thanksgiving.

The Apostle Paul made it clear to the Church at Ephesus that they were to: “*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” **Ephesians 5:19-20 (NIV)**

In other words, Thanksgiving should be a way of life, and ongoing in spite of circumstances, and not only when all is going well. Paul was able to maintain an attitude of gratitude even though he faced some tough and trying circumstances. How? He maintained proper perspective of both God and His circumstances. He knew that God was good all the time, and as a result, he knew that a good God would only allow circumstances that would ultimately result in something good.

His attitude was the same as that of Joseph. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and was ultimately cast into prison in the land of Egypt. Then, through divine intervention, was freed from prison and put in charge of Egypt's agricultural economy and literally saved the land from famine. Then, he encountered his own cruel brothers in a dramatic showdown.

In **Genesis 50:19-20 (NIV)** we find where Joseph was able to say to his brothers: “*Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*”

His and Paul's attitude was that since God is good, then their bad circumstance must be meant to bring about some further good in or through my life, or else God would not have allowed it.

You see, what we have to understand is that all this negative stuff we face in this life, originates from satan,

who intends to harm us. But when God allows it to happen, it can only mean He has something good as an outcome.

In the case of Paul in prison and in the example of Joseph, sometimes the good that God wants to bring through our suffering is intended for someone else. But don't forget, living a life of thanksgiving requires us to maintain the proper perspective of God and our circumstances.

God expects us to live a life of thanksgiving rather than just every once and awhile, and the growing Christian will do that, if he or she doesn't lose sight of God's goodness, and God's hand in everything we face. I want to share with you three reasons why we as growing Christians should live lives of thanksgiving. First, because:

1. The World Is Watching.

How many parents, have ever had to repeat something to your kids because they weren't listening the first time? How many have ever said something that you wished your child hadn't heard, because you knew they would repeat it to others?

It's like the story of the little boy, who goes up to the preacher after the service and tells him, "*When I grow up and get a job, I'm going to give you some of my money.*" The preacher patted him on the head and said, "*That's nice of you son, but why would you want to do that?*" The boy replied, "*Because when you were preaching I heard my daddy whisper to mommy, 'that's the poorest preacher, I've ever heard.'*"

Isn't it amazing how selective hearing works isn't it? The same can be said about the relationship of the believer to the world. While the world seems to ignore the "*good news*" we try to share with them, they seem to be all ears, when something bad happens to us.

It was the same way in Paul's day. But look at how he handled adversity. **Acts 16:22-25 (NIV)** says: "*The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*"

When our circumstances turn from good to bad, and it seems as though God has stopped blessing us, we need to remember that the world is watching our lives. And it's in times like these we have the greatest opportunity to demonstrate real Christianity. I mean, if we're grateful, only when things are going good then how are we any different than the world? What do we have that they would want?

1 Peter. 2:12 (NIV) says, "*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*"

Matthew 5:14 (NIV) says, "*You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the*

house. *In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*”

Do you want to be used of God to bring your unsaved friends to Christ? Then you must let your light shine and continually praise and thank God, even when things aren't going good for you – because that's when you've got their attention. Second, we must live lives of thanksgiving because:

2. Satan Is Watching.

1 Peter 5:8-10 (NIV) says, *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”*

The kind of animals lions most often devour are the weak, the injured and the sick. Well, the devil is like that roaring lion, and we tip him off to our vulnerability when our suffering or our grief, or our hurt has left us weak. When our praises turn sour and our thanksgivings disappears, is when he goes on the prowl.

Peter warns us to be careful, to be on our guard, to watch out for satan's attempts to devour us. That's when we are urged to resist him by standing firm in our faith in God. There's no better way to resist the devil and stand firm in your faith, than to thank God, even when it looks like there's nothing left to thank Him for.

Satan accused Job of only serving God only because God had blessed hem. In fact, he even told God, if He took away his blessings, Job will curse Him. I believe that when satan sees our thanksgiving disappear at the first sign of suffering, that he turns up the heat.

Like a lion listening for the sound of a wounded animal, satan listens for us to gripe and complain, he listens for the sounds of us accusing God of being either unfair or unfaithful because of our circumstances.

Peter also tells us to take heart, *“because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”* You see, satan knows that if he can isolate us in our suffering, or at least make us feel that we're the only ones who are hurting or are in that particular circumstance, then he can begin to choke off our thankfulness.

We must continually offer thanks to God not only because the world is watching, but also because satan is watching and our walk with God depends on it. But finally, we must live a life of thanksgiving because:

3. God Is Watching

2 Chronicles 16:9 (NIV) says, *“For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him...”*

These words were originally spoken to Asa King of Judah, when God wasn't pleased with his actions. King Asa, had been confronted by a mighty army, and rather than rely on God, he had made an alliance with the King of Aram.

What God said was – *“I’m looking for people that I can demonstrate my power and strength through - whose hearts are fully committed to me and trust me through the good and bad.”*

Just a few chapters later in that same book another King Jehoshaphat came along, and he did just that. And when God saw the commitment of his heart, He released His mighty power to deliver Jehoshaphat from his impossible circumstances (3 armies against 1). But listen to what God asked of him: **READ 2 Chronicles 20:17-24.**

Thanksgiving opens the door to God’s power, which opens the door to victory. Again – God is looking for people in whom He can show Himself strong, but those people must be people whose hearts are fully committed to Him. People who are willing to thank Him even when they face difficult circumstances.

Acts 16:25-26 (NIV): *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose.”*

In Paul’s situation, thanksgiving brought them freedom, - suddenly their chains came loose as God shook the foundation of the prison. But as we read on, they didn’t yet get out of prison, - vs. 35 indicates that it wasn’t until daylight that they were actually released from prison. This is significant, because thanksgiving doesn’t always immediately bring an end to your adverse circumstances, but it will always bring an inner freedom in the midst of them.

Paul and Silas served their sentence in prison, but they did so loosed from the chains that had bound them. **Conclusion:** The circumstances won’t end until God has finished the work He has begun, but our inner suffering, in the midst of outer suffering can, as we learn to give thanks in everything.

Philippians 4:4-7 (NIV): *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

I wish that I could say that I’ve always lived a life of thanksgiving in all things, but I have to be honest. As I reflect on my Christian walk, more often than not my thankfulness has been contingent on God’s blessings and not continual. And yet the deeper I go into His Word, the more evident it becomes that I must truly possess and attitude of gratitude. God help us all to not just to be hearers of the Word, but to be doers of the Word, and learn to *“give thanks in all circumstances...”*