

“LIVE GRATEFULLY.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: I Thessalonians 5:12-19

Introduction.

Welcome again to SERVE week. We have been planning and preparing and praying for you for many months.

We started several months ago having prayer meetings for you. Each of you has at least one prayer partner. You will have an opportunity to meet some of them at lunch today. Last Thursday evening there was a special prayer gathering to pray over every area of the church being used for SERVE and for the work sites.

We will continue to be praying for all of you this week and we encourage all of you to enter into daily prayer for what God wants to do in and through you and with all of us together.

The theme of this SERVE week is Grateful.

Grateful.

What are you most grateful for?

To be here, safe travel, no canceled flights (over 2,000 Sat.), good health, a cot to sleep on.

How many of you after one night on your cot are more grateful for your comfortable bed?

Parents who enabled you to be here. Leaders who came along, maybe gave up vacation to make it possible for this trip to happen. Being in the beautiful Pacific NW.

Just to be alive. That you woke up this morning.

And of course, how about technology and social media and the internet and ear buds.

Is anyone thankful for difficulties, challenges, hard times that taught you valuable lessons, that taught you compassion, that taught you the right priorities, that made you stronger?

I want to explore this topic of grateful and living gratefully with you this morning. The theme verse is from I Thessalonians 5:16-18, but I backed up to start at verse 12 because I noticed three things in this larger context have to do with gratitude and living gratefully.

Be Grateful for those who are over us and serve us, vss. 12-13.

Be Grateful for those around us and whom we can serve, vss. 14-15.

Be Grateful for God, for all He has done for us, the ways He serves us in all things, vss. 16-18.

Be Grateful for those who are over us and serve us, vss. 12-13.

12 Respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

God created this world of ours to work best with authority that is a reflection of His authority over all of creation. So God raises up kings and rulers, business leaders and bosses, police and military

leaders, teachers and parents. We take for granted all the leaders and authorities all around us every day that make life work.

There are countries in our world without leaders and I can guarantee that you would not want to live in those countries. Those people live in utter chaos, fear and usually poverty. Those countries don't function well. One of the times Jesus wept on earth was when He saw the people who were like sheep without a shepherd. That is a scary and dangerous place to be.

What applies to our world also applies to the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus raises up leaders, to lead and serve His church. The leaders, pastors, elders, deacons, teachers, Serve leaders, they are His leaders, appointed by Him.

This is who Paul is referring to when mentions those who are over you in the Lord, who are over you by the Lord's appointment.

Of course, it goes without saying Paul is referring to leaders who are good, faithful and worthy of respect and gratitude. In the Lord, also means that those who lead must do so in a manner reflective of Christ's leadership and authority.

A week like this Serve week doesn't just happen. There are months of hard labor poured into this week. Teams of people preparing work sites, praying constantly, gathering supplies and materials, arranging for all your needs to be met, food, cots, shirts, transportation, protection.

Notice why they are to be respected, why we should be grateful for them. Is it because of their title? Because of their age? Because

of their education or intellect? No. It is because of their labor, their work on your behalf, because of how they have faithfully served you.

And notice part of their work is to admonish, to correct, to guide and instruct. There will be many people doing that this week. During worship times, during devotions and small groups, during the time on the work sites, and guiding through all the other activities and plans each day.

So it is an expression of Jesus' love for us that He has raised up and appointed and assigned leaders to us. Receive His expression of love and care with gratitude, gratitude that is expressed with thanks, with prayer, with respect, with esteem, with obedience that makes their work easier and therefore a joy. They are working for you, they are serving you.

Be Grateful for those around us and whom we can serve and serve with, vss. 14-15.

14 We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Paul now turns to all of us and urges all of us to care about the wellbeing and well doing of all those around us. We show our love and gratitude for each other by being involved in each other's lives. Be grateful you aren't here alone, that there are others here with you, and be grateful for the opportunities God has planned for you to serve each other.

Each according to their need, whether idle, fainthearted, weak.

If someone is in sin would you be willing to help them? Wouldn't it be an expression of love and care to say something?

Some may feel timid in some situation, some nervous about some worksite task. Come along side, help them, encourage them, say let's do this together.

Be patient or long suffering with all. Long suffering means slow to anger, slow to become impatient. Paul means for us to do this not just the first time or even the second time, but the third and fourth time as well. In other words, don't grow weary in well doing (Galatians 6:9).

We must not be too high in our expectations or demands.

Be patient with those sleeping in your same room, with cots that squeak, be patient with those taking too long in the bathroom, be patient with those who don't work the same way you do, be patient with those who are not as skilled at some task, be patient with those younger or weaker.

See to it that no one returns evil for evil. Why does Paul have to say this? Isn't it obvious? Well, yes it is obvious, but it is also our fallen nature to want to get even. It is what we do. If someone says something bad about us, we want to say something bad back.

Parents deal with this constantly with their young children. Someone hits so someone hits back. Someone takes something so someone takes something back. Revenge, retaliation, payback is hardwired into our old nature.

But Paul takes it a step further. Don't just do no evil, don't just take no revenge, but actually turn it around. Return good for evil.

The first step is to return no wrong. The second step is to return good, return kindness. Look for ways you can do good to each other.

Be grateful God has created you in a way that you can do good to others, that having been blessed by God, you can be a blessing to others. Be grateful that God has shown His love to you in a way that frees you to be unselfish toward others. Right now you are surrounded by a bunch of strangers, be grateful for each opportunity they are to bless you and be blessed by you.

Be Grateful for God, for all He has done for us and the ways He serves us in all, vss. 16-18.

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Rejoice always because of the grace of God.

Pray without ceasing because of the presence of God.

Give thanks in all circumstances because of the providence of God.

Think about the difference between a Christian and a person who doesn't believe in God.

The non-believing person goes through life and as he does some things happen he likes and some things happen he doesn't like. To him life is just a game of chance, a roll of the dice. When it goes his way he likes it and is happy, when it doesn't he objects and complains.

But when a person comes to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, everything changes. Now he comes to realize God is sovereign, God is in control and God is good. There is no more chance or fate or bad luck. He realizes God is at work and is causing all things for his good based on God's perfect knowledge of what is best and good, even those things he doesn't like or finds unpleasant. He sees God's hand in all things and learns to give thanks for that.

If we truly think about all the benefits and blessings Jesus has poured out on us, then there is nothing in this life so bad that it can rob our joy and the glory to come.

I like the illustration or analogy of the man who received a certified letter in the mail from a lawyer saying that he was to receive an inheritance of one hundred million dollars, and that he only had to appear at this certain address at this certain time to receive it. And on his way driving there his car breaks down so he has to walk the last five miles in the rain. Now do you suppose he complains the whole way about the broken car and the rain, or is he only thinking about the incredible inheritance that is his when he gets to his destination?

Is it so great a burden for us to walk through this life, through the valley of the shadow of death, through whatever trials or troubles or broken cars or broken bodies to get to our inheritance in heaven which is of far greater worth than one hundred million dollars?

Our problem is we don't have a clear enough grasp on what Jesus has actually gained for us and has given us. The forgiveness of all our sins, the perfect righteousness of Christ, the sure and certain hope of eternal life.

But the truth is we all forget, we all fall into discouragement and ingratitude, we forget the inheritance that awaits us when we are slogging through the mud and mire of life, the rain and cold on a journey that seems a whole lot longer than five miles but leads to heaven.

Understanding this Paul offers a remedy for all the things that can disturb our peace and try our patience and make us miserable and steal our joy.

Pray without ceasing. What does praying without ceasing mean? Does it mean that we should do nothing else but pray? Well we know that is obviously not what it means, after all we are instructed in Scripture to do many things besides praying, like work, study, help others, listen.

But there are many things that we do in life, that we can also do with another person, or do while we are talking to another person. Some of you live on your phones and do countless other things while on your phone. So it is that we can do our lives while keeping an open line with God.

On-going prayer actually helps us and doesn't hinder us in doing everything else we are to do.

How do you not run out of things to say? If you see in everything around you reason to give thanks, if you see grace in a thousand small gifts, then you always have something to pray, something to give thanks for, fresh reasons to be joyful.

What if praying without ceasing often just means saying the words, “Thank you, Lord.”

Just a quick comment to clear up possible confusion about *giving thanks in all circumstances*. Some people are quick to point out the word in, not for all circumstances, in the midst of all circumstances.

That is sort of helpful, but not entirely true. We see in Scripture times to even give thanks for all circumstances, as in for afflictions and suffering and hard things.

Paul gave thanks for his thorn in the flesh because it kept him from sin.

The writer of Hebrews points out affliction in the form of discipline shows the Father’s love for us and trains us in righteousness.

Jesus gave thanks for the bread that symbolize His body being given over to death and the wrath of God, because He had His eyes fixed on the joy that was set before Him, the glory that would come out of affliction.

We can give thanks for all things that draw us nearer to God, and more dependent on God.

Notice the phrase this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Giving thanks in all circumstances is only possible in the power of Christ Jesus.

We don't give thanks for evil, but we can give thanks the presence and power of Jesus is with us in the midst of evil.

We can give thanks in the midst of and even for some bad things that are going on that we can't yet see how it could possibly be good. Giving thanks in those times is like giving up our understanding of what is good for the sake of what God calls good.

"In everything give thanks" reminds us of the providence of God in all aspects of our lives and that enable us to live gratefully.

These three phrases are very closely connected. When we make gratitude our default response, when we make thanksgiving a habit, through the constant dialogue with God in prayer, joy is the fruit, the result.

It is by pressing into God that we can quiet our anxious thoughts and anxious spirits especially in challenging and hard times and find His peace and spiritual joy. Do this in your devotions.

Conclusion and application.

The year 2020 was a very hard year for many people, one of the hardest years many of us have ever lived through. Remember March of 2020 when our world was shut down by Covid.

In January of 2020, my wife started reading a book about gratitude. One of the exercises in the book was to write down a thousand things you are grateful for, one thousand gifts of God's grace. So she decided to do that. Three things a day for 365 days.

She had no idea when she started that 2020 would be one of the hardest years of her life. Phama went through two major surgeries that year, one in January and another in September. She spent most of the year in much pain and on top of all that, all the life-altering changes of Covid.

But she did it, through all the worst of it, every day she would look for three things for which to be grateful. Being grateful enabled her to not just endure, but to find joy.

God is so good and gracious and generous toward us that even in our deepest troubles we still and always have good reason to rejoice and give thanks in the midst.

God has done all things for us, He has given us all things. He only does what is best and right and good for us. He cannot do otherwise. He has sent His Son to come and die for us, and if He will go to that extreme, then what else will He not do for us?

Everything from Him is good, and that means everything is cause for giving thanks.

May our confidence in the sovereign goodness and perfect purposes of God be so great that nothing in this earth can make us forget it, or deter us from thinking this way.

Be grateful for the leaders around you who are serving you.
Be grateful for all these fellow Serve students who are here to serve with you, to serve you and whom you get to serve.
Be grateful for God.
Rejoice always because of the grace of God.

Pray without ceasing because of the presence of God.

Give thanks in all circumstances because of the providence of God.

Prayer: We commit to your grace these servants, whom you have set apart for service.

Make all of them salt and light in this community and grant that this week be a week of seeing your glory and fruit from their labors.

Grant them favor where they serve. Protect them from accident and injury, from evil and the evil one. Strengthen and encourage them for the task. Empower and embolden their witness. Give them unity in their service and may all know they are Christians because of their love.

Send a fresh and refreshing anointing of your Holy Spirit upon them, your Spirit of wisdom and revelation that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened so that they may know the hope to which you have called them, and the riches of your glorious inheritance for them and the immeasurably great power that works in them.

Bless them beyond what they could ask or imagine. Bless them with a great blessing and bless them greatly to be a great blessing.

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