2023 Thanksgiving Sunday

**LIVING A THANKFUL LIFE IN CHRIST**

(Colossians 3:15-17)

Happy Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving holiday in the US has deep historical roots. The origins of Thanksgiving in the US can be traced back to the early 17th century. (Pic#1) The most well-known event associated with the first Thanksgiving occurred in 1621, when English Pilgrims and Wampanoag Native Americans shared a three-day feast in Plymouth, Massachusetts, to celebrate a successful harvest. The Pilgrims, who had faced significant hardship in the New World, acknowledged the invaluable assistance and friendship of the Native Americans, without whom their survival in the New World would have been impossible. Thanksgiving centers on the heartfelt expression of gratitude. Families often reflect on blessings from the past year, giving thanks for health, happiness, and the companionship of loved ones. This celebration is a beautiful amalgamation of love and gratitude to God and one another.

Marcus Aurelius, a Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher (161-180 AD), said, *“The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your mindset.”* While Marcus Aurelius didn’t explicitly use the language of gratitude or thankfulness, his teachings emphasize the importance of appreciating life and maintaining inner tranquility in the face of challenges. Expressing gratitude during life’s challenges may be challenging, yet it is precisely in these difficult moments that practicing gratitude can improve our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. We cannot over-emphasize the importance of gratitude. In today’s passage, Apostle Paul imparts timeless wisdom on the secrets of living joyfully in Christ Jesus.

Before delving into this section of the Epistle, let’s consider the context provided by the preceding passage. In Colossians 3:1-14, Apostle Paul advised believers in Colosse to redirect their focus from earthly matters to heavenly concerns. He urges them to embrace Christ-like virtues and foster unity and love, emphasizing the importance of unity despite differences. In verses 13 and 14, Apostle Paul articulates, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Let’s reflect for a moment. Can any meaningful relationship thrive without love? Whether among family members or friends, the answer is no. Without love, unity or a meaningful relationship is not possible. As recipients of God’s profound love, we are called to love one another, a commitment that demands spiritual struggle. These verses underscore the significance of love and forgiving grievances.

Through the study of Mark’s Gospel in 2023, we are reminded that Christ Jesus, who endured suffering and death on the cross for our sins, triumphed over evil with goodness. Thus, he revealed God as the epitome of love and forgiveness. That’s why Paul urged that we let go of grievances as an act of love. Sadly, however, some family members cannot celebrate Thanksgiving together because of unresolved grievances.

Numerous individuals grapple with anger, whether expressed openly or hidden beneath the layers of inner pain and sorrow. Some believe that venting their anger or seeking revenge is the solution, only to discover that such actions do not ultimately diminish the intensity of their anger. In attempting to manage their emotion in that way, many find themselves controlled by it. Even those who try to bury their feelings accumulate bitterness, ready to explode. What should we do? We should forgive. Even we, as Christians, frequently underestimate the transformative power of forgiveness in our lives. Genuine healing and liberation from our emotional bondage are achievable only through the act of forgiveness. During the Thanksgiving holidays, may we forgive one another.

Yet, the practice of forgiveness is more challenging than discussing its merits. Is it possible? The question of how our souls can find contentment during life’s challenges and grievances is daunting. Surprisingly, however, the answer is simpler than we can imagine. In Colossians 3:15-17, Apostle Paul presents his solution to this question. Let’s read these verses once again. And I want you to find Paul’s answer while reading. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Did you figure out what Paul’s solution is? He seemed to say many things, but his answer was simple. Can someone tell me what Paul’s solution is? Yes. We should cultivate thankfulness. In these verses, Apostle Paul issues three imperatives: *[1] to allow the peace of Christ to govern our hearts (15), [2] to let the message of Christ be richly present among us (16), and [3] to conduct all our endeavors in the name of Christ Jesus (17).* However, we notice each imperative concludes with the words ***“Be thankful,” “With gratitude,”*** and ***“Give thanks.”*** It’s interesting. Apostle Paul believed in the power of gratitude, so he urged his readers to cultivate thankfulness in all circumstances (1 Thes. 5:16-18). The power of darkness cannot crip in those who know how to give thanks in all circumstances. Let’s explore the significance of cultivating gratitude.

***Firstly, thankfulness is the foundation of peace (15).***  Look at verse 15. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.” While we were once without peace due to sin and unbelief, our faith in Christ has restored our relationship with God, granting us peace with God. We are forgiven. However, it’s essential to recognize that peace with God doesn’t automatically guarantee inner peace, the peace of God. *So, how can the peace of God rule in our hearts?* One way to achieve this goal is by cultivating a spirit of thankfulness in all circumstances. Sometimes, we don’t feel like giving thanks. But if we force ourselves, it eventually becomes our habit, and the power of the Holy Spirit transforms us.

Let me share the story of a young man named Alex. Alex has faced various ups and downs in life, including personal and professional setbacks. Despite significant setbacks, instead of dwelling on the difficulties, Alex chose to focus on the things for which he is thankful: elements like good health, simple joys - like beautiful sunsets, fresh air he breathes, a good book, supportive relationships, and career opportunities. By intentionally embracing gratitude, the peace of God began to rule in his heart.

It reminds us of Philippians 4:6-7, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, and with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Developing a grateful attitude requires intentional self-discipline. It’s not easy, but it guarantees life and peace.

***Secondly, cultivating gratitude allows the rich dwelling of God’s words in our hearts (16).*** Let me reread verse 16. “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” In the midst of life's distractions and the hustle and bustle of daily life, intentional management of our minds and hearts is crucial.

Sandra, a young woman, was overwhelmed and anxious due to the work pressures, strained relationships, and health concerns. In her quest for peace, Sandra decided to cultivate a spirit of gratitude intentionally. She would start each day with mindful reflection on God’s words, like Psalms or other readings, acknowledging simple blessings. This included expressing gratitude for her health, the support of friends, and the opportunity for personal and professional growth. She also began keeping a gratitude journal, recording at least three daily things she was thankful for. Again, it was not easy. She often failed but never gave up. Eventually, this practice shifted her focus from what was lacking to the abundance of positive elements of life. Sandra’s spirit of gratitude increased her resilience and impacted her struggling relationships.

***Thirdly, a spirit of thankfulness should permeate every aspect of our lives (17).*** Look at verse 17. “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” This verse advocates for a comprehensive approach, integrating both words and deeds. We often take the love and support of friends and family for granted. But we shouldn’t take them for granted. Regularly expressing gratitude verbally – saying *“thank you!”* to family members, colleagues, and superiors in the workplace – is essential. Eckhart Tolle, a German spiritual teacher, said, *“Acknowledging the good you already have in your life is the foundation for all abundance.*” (pic#3)

Additionally, we should practice generosity by sharing our *resources* with those less fortunate and extending kindness and compassion to those around us. We can show empathy through active listening and giving a helping hand. Most importantly, we should exemplify gratitude for God’s forgiveness by extending forgiveness to others and seeking reconciliation and healing in relationships. Integrating words and deeds in expressing thanks enhances relationships and fosters a positive mindset, contributing to a culture of gratitude in every aspect of life.

Let me close the sermon. Many things about thankfulness are said. The spirit of thankfulness is a healthy mindset that God’s children and citizens should cultivate. Thankfulness is the foundation of a healthy and happy life for every individual. Conversely, ingratitude represents one of the most unhealthy and self-destructive mindsets. Ingratitude is a bad attitude, an attitude similar to a flat tire. (Pic#2) *“A bad attitude is like a flat tire. You can’t go anywhere until we change it.”*

It reminds us of what Apostle Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Recently Msn. Jackie Kim’s father had surgery. Despite knowing that his time was limited after surgery and facing pain, he didn’t complain about his distress and inconvenience. Instead, he exhibited surprising gratitude to God for everything. His face radiated the grace of God, accompanied by a peaceful smile. Looking at him and his wife, I felt like I saw angels from heaven. *“A thankful couple, a happy couple!”(Pic#4)*

It seems that unhappiness may not solely stem from external circumstances but rather from a negative attitude. Let’s practice thankfulness until it becomes a habit. Let’s appreciate even the minor things, such as the beauty of sunlight and the gift of fresh air. There are countless reasons to be thankful. May the Lord help us rekindle the spirit of thankfulness in all circumstances. Happy Thanksgiving!

Dear Heavenly Father, As we reflect on living a thankful life in Christ, we thank you for the wisdom given through the words of Apostle Paul and the lessons we’ve drawn from the Scriptures. Lord, please help us to cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving in all circumstances. May the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, the message of Christ dwell richly within us, and my everything we do be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, with hearts overflowing with gratitude. As we enter this Thanksgiving season, we pray for the strength to forgive, the courage to express gratitude, and the wisdom to integrate words and deeds in the spirit of Thanksgiving. Bless us with a mindset of gratitude. We lift up those among us facing challenges, illnesses, and difficulties, asking for your healing touch and comfort. Lord, we thank you for the countless blessings in our lives. In Jesus’ name, we pray.