

Fil-Am Community Church
Pastor Rolly Estiballo
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Key verse: 1 Thess 5:18

LIVING THANKFULLY

HAPPY THANKSGIVING! Thanksgiving is still a few days away but as we've practiced in the past, we're celebrating it today because we want to give thanks ahead of everybody else. So, we're saying to God, "Thank you in advance, Lord." But the thing is, one of the reasons we celebrate it ahead of time is that we want to celebrate it as a church family together. As you know, some people usually go on a long weekend and so we won't be able to celebrate with them.

Today is actually a double celebration because we're also remembering the day this church was started. To be exact, it was five days ago, Nov. 17, 1996, when Fil-Am Church was born in Springfield VA. So, you can greet one another "Happy 19th Birthday!". And remember, next year will be a more grandiose celebration because we'll be 20 years. I hope you all will still be here next year.

And make that a triple celebration because today is also the birthday of Ate Norma. Ate Norma, are you 19 too or 90?

Now, the message I'm going to share with you this morning is a continuation of our series on the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous (in God's eyes)". If you're a Christian, you're rich in God's eyes because the Bible says in Ephesians that you are blessed "*in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*" (Eph. 5:3) Like forgiveness, peace, joy, and so many other things but most of all, eternal life. You have eternal life right now.

Then, also you are famous because God knows you personally, by name. He loves you in a personal, intimate way. In fact, as Zephaniah 3:17 says, he takes

delight in you and rejoices over you with singing. That's how famous you are in his eyes.

So, in this series, we're looking at how we can live our lives that is worthy of our calling as Ephesians 4:1 says. Our calling to be light and salt in the world. A life that will make others take notice and give glory to God because of our attitude, our behavior, our words, our way of thinking. We've looked at what it means to live positively, to live lovingly, to live generously, and today we're going to look at what it means to live thankfully.

Let me tell you the story of a man who learned to say "Thank God!"

This man was lost and walking in the desert for about five days...he comes to the home of a preacher. Tired and weak, he crawls up to the house and collapses on the doorstep. The preacher takes him in and nurses him back to health. Feeling better, the man asks the preacher for directions to the nearest town. The preacher tells him the directions, and offers to lend him his horse to make it. The preacher says, "However, there is a special thing about this horse. You have to say 'Thank God' to make it go and 'Amen' to make it stop."

Anxious to get to town, the man says, "Sure, okay" and gets on the horse. He says, "Thank God" and sure enough, the horse starts walking. A bit later he says louder, "Thank God, thank God," and the horse starts trotting. Feeling really brave, the man say, "Thank God! Thank God! THANK GOD!" and the horse is soon up to a full run!

About then he realizes he's heading for a huge cliff and yells "Whoa!" But the horse doesn't even slow! It's coming up REAL QUICK and he's doing everything he can to make the horse stop. "Whoa, stop, hold on!" Finally he remembers "AMEN!!!"

The horse stops a mere two inches from the cliff's edge, almost throwing him over its head. The man, panting and heart racing, wipes the sweat from his face and leans back in the saddle. Gasping for air he says with relief, "Thank God."

And this leads us to our verse for this message *“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”* (1 Thess. 5:18)

Note that this verse doesn't say “Give thanks FOR all circumstances”. It says, “IN all circumstances”. In other words, you don't give thanks to the things that happens to your life but despite of what happens to your life. You don't say, “Thank you God for a disobedient child. Thank you God for a philandering husband. Thank you God I lost my job.” That is foolish. You thank God because despite the pain, despite the sorrow, despite the confusion, you know he is looking after you. So, whatever circumstance you're in, whether it's a happy circumstance or an unhappy circumstance, you will thank God for his goodness to you.

The second part of the verse says, “this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”. When you're giving thanks to God, you're pleasing God because you're doing his will. You may not understand what's going on in your life but by being thankful, you're submitting your life's control to God. You acknowledge that he knows more than you do. You realize he is in control.

God wants you to have a thankful heart because he knows it will do you good. He knows there are benefits to having a grateful heart.

This morning, this is what I'd like to share with you. I'd like to talk about what happens when you live thankfully. And then the second part of the message is how to develop a thankful heart. So, let me share with you three things that happens when you make giving thanks in everything a way of life.

For one, being a grateful person will

1. INCREASE YOUR PERSONAL HAPPINESS.

Most of us think that our happiness is determined by our circumstances. If I asked you, on a scale of one to ten how happy you are right now, you might say, “Well, I’m about a 2 on the happiness meter because of my circumstances.”

We’ve been taught that our happiness is somehow dependent on how well things go for us. But really our happiness is determined by attitude. It is really in how we see things. The apostle Paul wrote these words from prison (yes prison). “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” (Philippians 4:4). Paul was happy despite being in prison and how he learned to thank God in everything he did. It was really his perspective on life that made the difference.

A young woman wrote her mother from college: "Dear Mom: Sorry I haven't written sooner. My arm really has been broken. I broke it, and my left leg too, when I jumped from the second floor of my dormitory...when we had the fire. We were lucky. A young service station attendant saw the blaze and called the Fire Department. They were there in minutes. I was in the hospital for a few days. Paul, the service station attendant, came to see me every day. And because it was taking so long to get our dormitory liveable again, I moved in with him. He has been so nice. I must admit that I am pregnant. Paul and I plan to get married just as soon as he can get a divorce. I hope things are fine at home. I'm doing fine, and will write more when I get the chance. Love, Your daughter, Susie.

P.S. Mom, none of the above is true. But I did get a "C" in Sociology and flunked Chemistry. I just wanted you to receive this news in its "Proper Perspective!"

Happiness is really determined by our perspective in life not by circumstances. If we learn to be grateful people despite circumstances that will greatly improve our happiness.

Being a grateful person will also

2. ENHANCE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.

There is one thing I notice about some married couples. After a while many of them become ungrateful and unappreciative of their spouses. Over time they take each other for granted.

Somebody described the first few years in a marriage this way. The husband seeing the wife has a cold, says, "You don't look good. You should go to the hospital. I have already arranged it. I know the food is bad there, but we are going to have meals catered in."

The second year he says, "You don't look so good. I have made an appointment with the doctor. I will drive you there. Then, I'll pick up the kids from school and come back for you."

The third year he says, "You know you are not looking so well. When you are done feeding the kids and cleaning up the kitchen, you ought to go lay down." The fourth year he says, "Would you quit walking around here barking like a seal? You're going to give me your cold!"

The longer we become familiar; the less thankful we are for each other.

But husbands imagine about how much your marriage would improve if you came home one day with some flowers and just told your wife how thankful you are for all she does. You might give her a heart attack.

Wives, just think about how much your marriage would improve if you told your husband how much you appreciate him once in a while.

This is true in all of our relationships. A word of thanks will always be appreciated. Especially if it is said thoughtfully or sincerely and not just automatically.

Do you know how the apostle Paul began most of his letters in the Bible? To the church in Rome he wrote. "*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.*" (Romans 1:8) To the church in Corinth. "*I always thank my God for you*" (1 Corinthians 1:4). To the church in Ephesus, "*I have not stopped giving thanks*

for you; remembering you in my prayers.” (Ephesians 1:16). To the church in Philippi, *“I thank my God every time I remember you.”* (Philippians 1:3).

To the church in Colossi, *“We always thank God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.”* (Colossians 1:3).

Paul made sure that he let people in the churches know that he was thankful for them. Imagine how much better our church and our relationships would be if we expressed our thanks for each other.

Having a grateful heart will increase your personal happiness. It will enhance your relationships and thirdly, it will

3. SOLIDIFY YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

Which is the top benefit. Someone once said that God lives in two places. He lives in heaven and in a humble, grateful heart. Hebrews 12:25 says, *“Let us please God by serving him with thankful hearts.”*

You know what I have found to be true in my life? I have found that I have an overwhelming need to give thanks. Ever since coming to the US in '92 he had given me blessings and changed my life. It was here in the US when I came to learn how to drive a car. I was a nervous person. In the Philippines, my grandpa lent me his minica, a small car, and told me “Look for someone who can teach you to drive and you can use that car to go to your office”. I found someone, our office driver, and he tried to teach me. We went to an empty lot near the Meralco Theater and we went round and round until I felt a loud thud. I hit the curb and we found out there was a big dent on the right side of the car. That was my first day. There was no second day because I was so ashamed and scared I didn't even tell my grandpa about it. I think that was the time I became so prayerful. “Lord, please don't make him discover the dent. Please make someone borrow his car and for the car to hit the curb.” Of course, he discovered it a few days afterwards.

And I never tried to learn again until I came here and lived in New Jersey. Anyway, I finally learned. And, I think, I'm still learning, just ask my wife.

And my wife, I have to thank God for her. I finally found someone who likes me. You see, I was a nervous person. Did I tell you that? My grandpa always told me to find a girl I like and he would give me the minica to use for our date. Until the minica got dented. No, I was just kidding. My grandpa had nothing to do with my love life. After the minica accident, he didn't want to have anything with me anymore.

So, I met my wife, of all places, in the church. Divine appointment, don't you think so? Although for her, maybe, it was divine disappointment. But God worked in her heart. While I tried to work in her heart too. I was the pastor of the church and I always visited her telling her I was doing a newcomer follow-up. The follow-up was every week. Sometimes we go out on a ride. Sometimes we had dinner. She must be wondering why I came often. Until she came to church regularly because of my follow-ups. Until she realized after a year that we were engaged. And the rest is history.

And that history includes having three lovely children who I always miss during the week. I'll never exchange them for the world. That history also includes coming to a church and serving a church who likes me. I may be a nervous person but when you smile at me it takes all the jitters away. Last week I said we are a happy church. Last night, we were all happy. And that happiness showed every time you smiled. I was happy even when you teased me by saying, "Let my people go". (That's Cleopatra beside me) Honestly, that smile is what makes other people feel comfortable and keep coming. So, keep smiling.

Anyway, my point is, after that long story, all these things that God has blessed me with, it makes me feel close to God. So that even when I feel down, when circumstances are not the best, I know that he still cares for me. When people

reject me and make me nervous I know God accepts me. I don't have to be famous before people, I'm famous in God's eyes. And let me give you a tip.

When you feel that God is far away, just think of and reflect on what God has done for you. It always helps me. I replay in my mind, like a movie that has been rewound, the wonderful episodes in my life which I know God orchestrated and then a feeling of thankfulness fills my heart. And I say, "Lord, thank you that now I can drive, you have steadied my nerves. Lord, thank you that now I have a wife and children despite marrying late, you have steadied my heart. Lord, thank you that now you have given me this church to serve, you have steadied my faith."

Do you want to have a steady life? Make sure first that your relationship with God is steady and solid. And the first step is to have a grateful heart. God will honor that because that's his will for you. Being thankful will help to solidify your relationship with God.

Those are the benefits. But how do you develop a lifestyle of thanksgiving? Let me share with you the following ways.

First, if we want to be thankful,

1. Remember that EVERYTHING WE HAVE IS FROM GOD.

Acknowledge that everything we have is God's and not ours. Psalm 24:1 says, "*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.*" When we do this, it reminds us that it is a privilege that God has loaned us everything we have. 1 Corinthians 4:7 says, "*What do you have that you did not receive from God? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*"

Everything we own, we ultimately received from God and we owe him thanks. James 1:17, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting sand.*"

Secondly, if we want to be thankful we need to

2. AVOID COMPLAINING.

Dr. Dale Robbins, founder and president of the International Prayer Network says, “I used to think people complained because they had a lot of problems. But I have come to realize that they have problems because they complain.” Complaining makes us miserable. Psalm 77:3 says, *“I complained and my spirit was overwhelmed.”*

Complaining is the archenemy of thanksgiving. The two cannot co-exist in the same heart. And so I challenge you to try to quit complaining for a whole month. Just try it. When you feel tempted to complain, instead of filing your complaint, file a praise. It will change your life. Philippians 2:13 says, *“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.”*

One last thing we can do to produce a spirit of thanksgiving is to
3. DEVELOP THE DAILY DISCIPLINE OF GIVING THANKS.

In order to be thankful people we need to start to give thanks every day. Not just once a year on Thanksgiving. We need to discipline ourselves to find something each day that we should be thankful for and express our thanks to God. Perhaps create a journal or a file on our computers where we list the things God has done for us. Call it a praise file. Thanksgiving must become a daily habit.

Ephesians 5:19 says, *“Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.”* Always is the key word. Not just on Thanksgiving. Everyday.

In Daniel 6 we read that Daniel got down on his knees three times every day and prayed and gave thanks to his God. And how many of us do that? Perhaps, the only time in our lives we give thanks is when things are going well, or when we receive a gift or someone has done us a good favor or on Thanksgiving Day because the government mandates it as a holiday.

Remember the old hymn? “When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed, when you are discouraged thinking all is lost. Count your many blessing, name them one by one. And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.” Thanksgiving is a daily discipline.

I read recently that if you own one Bible, you are abundantly blessed, because a third of the people in the world do not have access to a Bible. If you awoke this morning with more health than illness you are more blessed than 1 million people who will not survive the week. If you have never experienced the danger of war, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation you are more fortunate than 500 million people on earth. If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, twenty dollars in your pocket and a place to sleep you are richer than 75 percent of the world. May God forgive us for whining.

I found this list of questions you can ask to test whether you are a grateful person or not.

1. Which do you tend to talk about more – your blessings, or your disappointments?
2. Are you a complainer, always grumbling, always finding fault with your circumstances?
3. Are you content with what you have, or always dissatisfied and wanting more?
4. Do you find it easier to count your blessings, or is it easier to count your afflictions?
5. Do you express thanks to others when they help you, or do you just take it as your due?
6. Would others say that you are a thankful person?

This power of thanksgiving is amazing. There's miracle-working power in the power of praise and thanksgiving. There's a great story in Acts 16 where Paul and Silas had been out talking about the Lord and they were thrown in prison in Philippi. They're in this dark, dank dungeon of a jail and in the middle of the night, at midnight, they decided to start thanking God in their circumstance. They start singing and praising God and God does a miracle.

He sends an earthquake the earthquake is so powerful that it rattles all the jail doors loose. The jailer goes, "I'm going to kill myself because all the prisoners are loose now and they'll kill me." Paul says, "No, we're all here." The jailer says, "What kind of prisoners are you?" "Christians," Paul says. So the jailer takes Paul and Silas to his home and they pray and they bind up their wounds with bandages and Paul tells them about Christ, how Christ died for them and and was buried and was raised again on the third day, and that night the jailer's whole family accepts the Lord and are all baptized that night. They were all saved in an instant. They didn't have to go through religious rituals, they didn't have to do good works. They trusted Christ, put their faith in Christ, and their lives were changed. When Paul and Silas praised and thanked God, the prison doors were unlocked and brought those who were really in prison to freedom.

What prison are you in this morning? An emotional prison? A financial prison? A relational prison? Are you locked up with guilt? Are you locked up with worry? Are you locked up with discouragement and disappointment? Are you locked up in a habit that you can't break loose from? Conflict? Whatever it is, start thanking God. And watch the prison doors open wide.