

Give Thanks in All Circumstances

In the name of him in whom we are richly blessed in every way, dear friends in Christ: Ever since the Lincoln administration our nation has celebrated a solemn festival of Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November. These days it's a holdover from an era in which the federal government could actually encourage the citizens of this land to give thanks to God for his bounteous goodness to our country and its people. Not anymore. Now it's called "turkey day". It's about football and parades and the economy, stupid, by which I mean the all important opening of the holiday shopping season (you'll notice that I didn't say the *Christmas* shopping season). Oh, and, on a whim, if you feel inclined to do so, sometime tomorrow before, during, or after you eat yourself into a coma cramming your maw with the traditional holiday fare, pause for a moment to be thankful – to no one in particular; just be thankful.

Fortunately we are under no such constraints here. We can recognize the Lord our God from whom all blessings flow and direct our thanks and praise to him for his gifts and benefits, which we have in overflowing abundance. There's no denying it. Yes, it's true that in the past few years we've been in the throes of a financial crisis; but even when times are tight, we still live in lavish luxury compared to most of the world's population. I'm pretty sure that we are the only nation in history in which obesity and income are inversely related; that is to say if you are an American, the poorer you are the more likely you are to be overweight. Friends, that doesn't happen anywhere else in the world. And regardless of income, the typical American family throws away more food in week than most families consume in the same period. Mind you, I say this not so much as a critique of our cultural excess (well, maybe I am a bit); but more as an indicator of just how generous God has been to us. The fact of the matter is that we want for nothing – not really. What we consider necessities are items most people think of as frivolous and impossibly out of reach. And it's not just our cars, fine homes, electronic gizmos, and other personal possessions; no, also our medicine, our education, our technology, our national security both internal and external, our personal freedoms and the justice of our laws – all these and more are the envy of the world. If ever there were a people with ample reason to thank God for his material blessings, it's us.

And that's even more the case for people like you and me who have been gifted by God with not just mere material prosperity, but also with eternal treasures that can never spoil or fade. I speak of our spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus and the rich heritage of our Lutheran Confessions that help us to understand and receive these blessings like no other system of theology on the planet. Obviously the pagan religions and cults are spiritually bankrupt. There's no truth or substance to them. But even in the broad scope of what can properly called Christianity, there is immense poverty: an almost endless array of theological beliefs that either subtract from God's free grace in Jesus or that add heavy burdens to the backs (and souls) of God's people. And again, I say this not to boast, but rather to give glory to God for his grace to us: but no one receives the truth of Christ crucified for sinners, and his free gifts of forgiveness and salvation by grace alone through faith alone like we do. Thus, we are doubly blessed. If there are any people on earth with reason to thank God, that would be us. Conversely, if there were any people on earth who would be most guilty of the sin of ingratitude for not giving thanks to God, that too would be us.

And speaking of the sin of ingratitude – something for which we'd all do well to examine ourselves and repent – this evening I'd like to do an Emeril Lagasse on you and kick it up a

notch. As I've indicated, it's more than clear that we should be grateful for all the good things both temporal and eternal that God has given us; but in the passage I read from Thessalonians, Paul exhorts us to give thanks in *all* circumstances: not just when times are good and blessings abound; but also when times are lean, when resources are few, when disaster strikes, when there's oppression and sickness and suffering and death. We are to be grateful to God even in the midst of our afflictions.

And maybe that doesn't sound very reasonable. I mean, if you're like me, you're already negligent in thanking God for the good you receive from him. None of us appreciates the Lord's gifts as we ought; but I'm willing to bet that with respect to the things we would call bad that come our way, there ain't nobody raising prayers of heartfelt gratitude. "O Lord, thank you for this terrible problem, loss, sorrow, pain, or injury. It's just what I always wanted!" No, instead, when such things happen we're asking, "Why, God, are you doing this to me? Why are you allowing it to happen?" And we're praying to be delivered from whatever it is. For pity's sake, if I thank God when things go wrong like Paul says, maybe it will only encourage the Lord to send me more of the same. That's the last thing I want. No thank you, very much.

Now *that's* reasonable – but unfortunately, also completely faithless. It reveals doubt that the Lord truly has your best interests at heart. It reveals fear that he's unloving or uncaring, or that he's really out to get you. It shows that you don't trust his fatherly divine goodness and mercy for you in Christ Jesus – and that when all is said and done, you believe that God is your enemy—which is exactly what Satan would have you believe.

That's what he tries to do with Job: through affliction and loss Satan thinks he can get him to doubt God's love. But Job doesn't fall for it. He's amazingly faithful. Even when he loses everything in a matter of moments, he praises God for both giving and for taking away. Later, when his health is also taken from him in a second round of testing leaving him covered in painful sores, Job's wife says, "What's wrong with you? Are you still trusting in God who allowed all this to happen? Just curse him and die!" Job responds to her, "Stop that. You're talking foolishness. Shall we accept only good from the Lord's hand and not also the trouble he sends?" You see, Job understands and trusts in God's character. He's saying, "I don't have to understand it. All I have to know is that the Lord is good, that he loves me, and that he means only good for me. If he sends trouble to me, then he must have a good reason for it – good reason that will, in the end, prove to be of benefit to me."

And this is the key to understanding how it is that we can and should give thanks to God in all circumstances. We know his loving character. We also know that God can and does work for our good in all things – both those we call good and the things we call evil. The cross of Jesus demonstrates this most clearly. There we see the full extent of God's love for us in giving us his Son. There is nothing more precious he could have sacrificed for you—that's how much he loves you. And there on the cross we see the greatest good being accomplished for us – our salvation and the forgiveness of our sin – through what can only be described as the most heinous and evil crime in history: the torture and murder of God incarnate by sinful men.

So look: since God works for our greatest good through the worst of all evils, we can trust him to work for our good through the lesser evils we face. He knows what he's doing – even when we can't see it. Although sometimes we can: we know that it's through suffering that we learn compassion for others who are suffering. It's by experiencing loss that we learn how to comfort those who mourn. It's by being sinned against that we learn the virtue of forgiving others. It's by being alone and lonely that we learn to reach out and include others who need fellowship and inclusion. It's by being frustrated and failing that we learn patience.

It's by being tempted that we learn to resist. It's by being humiliated that we lose our pride. It's by being weak that we learn to find our strength and hope in God. It's by dying to sin and self that we learn to rise and live in Christ.

The things we call evil, God means for our good. Therefore it's only right that trusting in his perfect wisdom and his infinite love for us in Christ Jesus that we give thanks to him in all circumstances. Think about that when you pause to count your blessings tomorrow – and in all the days and circumstances that follow.

And now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria!