

Sermon – August 9, 2020
“An Attitude of Gratitude”
Crown of Life Lutheran Church
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our resurrected Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

"And now Lord, open my mouth so that I can speak. Open our ears so that we can hear. And open our hearts so that we can change ... and truly experience peace through your grace, Amen."

Have you ever heard of the game Hide the Thimble? A sewing thimble is pretty small, about the size of the tip of your index finger. Here's how the game works ... one person hides the thimble and everyone else looks for it.

But here's the catch, as the finders get further and further away from the thimble the hider will begin to say, "You're getting colder." In the opposite way, as the finders get closer to the target the hider says, "You're getting warmer." And eventually, they get "hotter," until the thimble is found. Now, hold that thought for a moment, and I will come back to it.

An author (Aiden Wilson Tozer) once made a profound observation: "What comes to mind when you think about God ... is the most important thing about you."

I think he's right, but here's the challenge. In the beginning, God created us in His image. But I wonder if we have been creating God in our image ever since.

When we project our inclinations, our imperfections, our idiosyncrasies onto God, what we end up with is a small-g god, who looks and acts and talks and thinks a lot like us. Of course, it is a false image and a false idol.

Now, let me cut to the chase ... what comes to mind when you think about God? What is God's posture toward you? What expression is He wearing on His face? What is the tone of His voice?

If God has a frown on His face, I think you're getting colder and colder. If God has smile lines around His eyes, if God is reaching toward you with arms wide open, I think you're getting warmer and warmer.

And if God's posture is one of blessing, if you are the apple of God's eyes, if you can hear the pride in God's voice as He speaks over you, "This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased." Now you are getting hotter and hotter!

We are in a series called Double Blessing and today's sermon is titled, *An Attitude of Gratitude*. But first, let's pick up where we left off last week.

Original came before original sin.

That sequence is significant. Blessing is God's most ancient instinct. God won't bless greed or pride or laziness. We have to position ourselves for blessing, but God's default setting IS blessing.

It is who God is. It is what God does. God wants to bless you beyond your ability to ask or imagine.

Now, let's turn our attention to today's lesson from I Thessalonians. Paul planted the church in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey.

He's writing this letter a few years later, around 51 AD. The church finds itself in some challenging circumstances, so Paul offers these teachings starting in 5:16, "Rejoice always", "Pray continually", and "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

If we were to play a little word association game, and I said, "discerning the will of God," I'm guessing that most of us would be thinking WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and HOW.

But discerning the will of God is really all about decision making. It's about making the right move at the right time. God is ordering our footsteps. God is preparing good works in advance. God is setting up divine appointments, and we need to obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

That being said, the will of God is a lot less circumstantial, and a lot more attitudinal, than we might think. In fact, you already know the will of God. We just heard it from the Apostle Paul ... God's will IS that you "rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in ALL circumstances".

Many of us are way too worried about making mistakes or taking wrong turns. We are afraid that one mistake could bring down the whole house of cards. Let me RELIEVE a little pressure.

God wants you to get where God wants you to go ... more than you want to get where God wants you to go.

And God is awfully good at getting us there.

One of the mistakes we often make is defining our choices too narrowly. It's thinking in EITHER/OR categories instead of BOTH/AND.

It is thinking TRUE/FALSE when God is offering us MULTIPLE CHOICES. Obviously, narrow thinking tends to put constraints on God.

This leads me to my premise that the will of God is less circumstantial and more attitudinal than we think. What I want to do today is to talk about Cultivating An Attitude Of Gratitude.

So, let's start with another premise "Whatever you...

1. Don't turn into praise, turns into pride."

James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights."

This is the genesis of gratitude - it's ALL from God, it's ALL for God. And it's NOT just what we perceive to be blessings. I'm not sure we KNOW enough to always know whether something is a blessing or a curse UP front.

What we perceive to be blessings can actually backfire, if we don't steward them the right way. And what we perceive to be a curse, may be a blessing in disguise, if it is God's catalyst for growth.

James said it this way...

“...the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” James 1:3-4

Way too many prayers revolve around personal comfort rather than character development. According to the Talmud, the Jewish commentary on the Old Testament, “A man embezzles from God when he makes use of this world without uttering a blessing.”

In other words, if you enjoy something without giving thanks, it's as if you have stolen it from God. Anything less than gratitude is grand larceny!

An observant Jew would pronounce one hundred blessings per day. They would offer a blessing before meals, like many of us. But they would also bless God during the meal for the double blessing of different tastes, different smells.

But, why one hundred blessings? During the days of King David, a devastating plague is said to have claimed the lives of a hundred Israelites every single day. That's when a council of Jewish rabbis prescribed the practice of reciting one hundred blessings per day to counteract the plague. According to tradition, the plague stopped immediately.

Now listen, I can't promise that gratitude will cure whatever ails you, but it is an all-purpose antibiotic! And that's where the double blessing begins. Whatever you don't turn into praise, turns into pride. My second point is to...

2. Praise God for partial miracles

In the Gospels, there's a two-part miracle that I find fascinating and encouraging. Jesus lays hands on a blind man, and this man experiences a partial miracle. His sight is restored, but not completely. People still look like trees walking. Perhaps it would be like 20/100 vision.

This is where many of us would doubt God INSTEAD of praising God for the partial miracle. This is where many of us give up because we didn't get the whole miracle.

Some miracles happen in stages. These are the moments when we need to double down with prayer. All too often, we withhold our praise for partial miracles, and then we wonder why the whole miracle never happens.

Why not praise God every step of the way, even if it is two steps forward and one step back.

My third point is your...

3. focus determines your reality

This is what Paul is saying in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.”

Many years ago, a study was done with college students that consisted of two questions ...

1. How happy are you?
2. How many dates did you have in the last month?

The researchers found a WEAK correlation between the level of happiness and the number of dates. Then they flipped those questions ...

1. How many dates have you had in the last month?
2. How happy are you?

All of a sudden, there was a STRONG correlation. What changed?

Well, the sequence of questions made those students focus on their dating status or lack thereof. Psychologists call this the Focusing Effect.

One of my all-time favorite studies involves Olympic medalists.

The study determined that bronze medalists were quantifiably happier than silver medalists. But that makes no sense to me. Silver medalists beat the bronze medalists, which means they should feel better about the outcome than those who lost to them.

But here's what the study found ... the silver medalists tended to focus on how close they came to winning gold so they weren't satisfied with silver. Bronze medalists tended to focus on how close they came to NOT winning a medal at all, so they were just happy to be on the medal stand.

The technical term for what's happening with those Olympic medalists is called a Counterfactual. And there are two kinds of counterfactuals, upward and downward.

An upward counterfactual is focusing on how things could be better, like winning gold instead of silver, and it produces feelings of frustration.

A downward counterfactual is focusing on how things could be worse, like not winning a medal at all, and it produces feelings of gratitude.

Here is a fictitious letter, written by a college student, that illustrates this idea perfectly.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I have so much to tell you. Because of the fire in my dorm set off by student riots, I experienced temporary lung damage and had to go to the hospital. While I was there, I fell in love with an orderly, and we have moved in together.

I dropped out of school when I found out I was pregnant, and he got fired because of his drinking. So, we're going to move to Alaska, where we might get married after the birth of our baby, your loving daughter.

P.S. None of this really happened, but I did flunk my chemistry class and wanted to keep it in perspective.

Let's get back to Philippians 4 where Paul wrote ...

"...if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things."

His point is Joy is NOT GETTING what you want,
Joy is APPRECIATING what you have.

Later In Philippians 4:11, the Apostle Paul says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." What makes this really remarkable is the fact that Paul wrote this particular letter from prison.

Paul's point is that Contentment is NOT circumstantial. It is attitudinal. Hence, your focus determines your reality.

I want you to really hear what I'm about to say because it can sound really confusing ... you can be STRESSED and BLESSED at the same time. I said it last week ... blessing is not problem free. In fact, the blessings of God will complicate your life, but they will complicate your life in the ways it should be complicated.

At the end of the day, there are two ways to process the things that happen to you. And it is a FOCUS ISSUE. Either your theology will conform to your reality, or your reality will conform to your theology.

Let me say it this way ... don't let what's wrong with you ... keep you from worshipping what's right with God.

If you are looking for something to complain about, you will always find it.

If you are looking for something to be grateful for, you will always find it.

In a way, we don't see the world as it is. We see the world as we are.

The key to seeing things the way God does is to make a beeline for the cross. No matter how bad our circumstances get, you are worth the cross to Christ. Your sin is nailed to the cross. The curse of sin is broken. And according to Ephesians 1:3, every spiritual blessing is ours in Christ.

Our reality check isn't our circumstances. Our reality check is the character of God. And God is good, all the time.

In fact, "...no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless." (Psalm 84:11)

Isn't it logical that we have got to identify what's RIGHT before you deal with what's WRONG. Again, we should never let what's wrong with us keep us from worshipping what's right with God.

The last time I checked, we enter His gates with thanksgiving. You don't even get in the front door without the attitude of gratitude.

May we GROW every day in the grace of gratitude. Amen