

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
November 21, 2021

In Everything Give Thanks

Psalm 103:1-22 (NIV)

- 1 Praise the Lord, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.*
- 2 Praise the Lord, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—*
- 3 who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,*
- 4 who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,*
- 5 who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

- 6 The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.*

- 7 He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:*
- 8 The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.*
- 9 He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;*
- 10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.*
- 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;*
- 12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

- 13 As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;*
- 14 for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.*

15 *The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
16 the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
17 But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—
18 with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.*

19 *The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.*

20 *Praise the Lord, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.
21 Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.
22 Praise the Lord, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.*

Praise the Lord, my soul.

Philippians 1:3-11 (NIV)

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! Way back in January I told you that it was my conviction that this year was going to be the year of the Lord's favor for our church. All year long, we've been thinking about the goodness of God, what it means to know God, to be his people, what it looks like to live as his people in the blessing of God. As we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this week and start Advent next week, whether your holidays are "normal" (for you) or you've had to adjust because of Covid or something else, it is my fervent hope that you and your family will know the fullness of the blessing of the presence of God as you come together; and that you can rehearse with one another the ways in which you have seen the faithfulness and goodness of God this year.

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Fall is a great time of the year. It's my wife's favorite season. She loves the colors, putting on a jacket when you go outside, coming in from doing yard work and curling up under a blanket. She's not alone in that feeling: this time of year is special for lots of people and lots of reasons. And there are lots of unique or characteristic things that are associated with this season of the year.

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At our house, fall is *The Season for Catalogues Coming in the Mail*. We get all kinds of catalogues. Probably because at one point in our lives we made the mistake of ordering something from a catalogue. And once you do that, it's all over. Now you are stuck getting that catalogue for the rest of your natural life. Plus you get catalogues from all of the businesses that bought that company's mailing list, including businesses you've never heard of. We get catalogues sent to people who don't even live with us. My mother-in-law gets so many catalogues: apparently, they can't send them all to her, so we get catalogues at our house that are addressed to her. We regularly get catalogues for Donald Foster, Patty Foster, and random people who supposedly live with us. It's just nuts. I'm just happy we have a big recycling bin. At least we're keeping the post office in business.

Well, last week I was glancing through one of these catalogues, and I noticed that it had a lot of T-shirts with funny sayings on them. So, I thought, I should share these with you. Even though it's been a good year, it's also been a tough year. We could use a few laughs as we head into the final stretch. Here we go: my "top ten" funny T-shirts from the mail catalogue.

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Number ten: *I hate it when people accuse me of lollygagging when it's quite clear I am dillydallying.*

Number nine: *Nurse: The first person you see after saying, "Watch this!"*

Number eight: *The three hardest things to say: 1. I was wrong. 2. I need help. 3. Worcestershire sauce.*

Number seven: *Meddle not in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup.*

(Here's a similar one that I actually saw at a store in Alaska when we were on vacation.) Number six: *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Except bears. Bears will kill you.*

Number five: *Sometimes I talk to myself, then we both laugh and laugh.*

Number four: *Ever notice how many towns are named after their water tower?*

Number three: *I sometimes wonder what happened to the people who have asked me for directions.*

Number two: *My nickname is Mom but my full name is Mom Mom Mom Mom.*

Number one: *I want the job where I push scared skydivers out of planes.*

(And a bonus: *In my defense, I was left unsupervised.*)

If anyone wants to order some of those, I've got a catalogue you can have.

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My problem with catalogues isn't only that we get so many of them. I understand that they have provided an important service for both businesses and their customers. But the problem with catalogues is really a problem with our hearts. Catalogues provide a visual stimulus that stirs up our natural tendency to desire what we don't have. (That's why I call them "covet-books." And by the way, the old-fashioned mail order catalogues aren't the only versions of "covet-books" out there: nearly every website on the internet is a digital version of a catalogue.) They don't stimulate us to give thanks for all that God has given us; they encourage us to drool over what the manufacturers want to sell us.

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In fact, one of the ways in which America has led the world is in the perfection of marketing. We do it better than anyone else and we've taught our lessons to the rest of the world. This year, the estimated total revenue for American advertisers will top \$276 billion, more than triple that of China, which is second in advertising revenue. Advertising agencies are able to make that much money because what they do works. What they do is sell us the illusion of fulfillment based on consumption and the procurement of stuff. And what they do works because we all want what we don't have.

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God has a better solution to our problem, a better way of dealing with our tendency to look for fulfillment by chasing after what we don't have. It's called giving thanks. Giving thanks is one of the chief vaccines that protects us against being infected with covetousness.

Our first passage that we read from Scripture this morning is Psalm 103. Like many of the psalms, Psalm 103 encourages us to thank and praise God for all that he has done for us. The psalmist rehearses the benefits that come to us from God, the good things that come from being part of God's covenant people, including such things as: forgiveness of sins, healing of our diseases, experiencing his goodness, receiving his love and mercy, knowing his justice and redemption. He reminds us of God's track record of faithfulness as a way to exhort God's people to take up the posture of being thankful.

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We could have picked any one of at least twenty different psalms that would have similarly reminded us to be thankful to God. But Psalm 103 is notable in this regard: the psalmist makes a special point of reminding us to recall what God has done. Instead of focusing on what we think we need (or what the advertisers tell us we need)—what we lack—he insists that we should recall, bring to the forefront of our minds, the variety of good things that we have experienced from the hand of God, the specific ways in which he has shown us his blessing and his goodness.

You may be familiar with the chorus from an old hymn: "*Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your many blessings, see what God has done.*" There's something that happens inside us when we pause from our endless coveting after what we want and complaining about what we don't have and focus instead on what we already have. Saying out loud what God has given to you, and thanking him specifically for whatever that is, will change your attitude, change your outlook, change your entire day, maybe even your life.

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Let's do that right now. Take a moment and think about what God has given you. It doesn't have to be the greatest thing he's given you; just something. Say it out loud. If you're married and sitting with your spouse, tell your spouse what it is that God has given you. If you're sitting with a friend, tell your friend. If you're by yourself, just say it out loud. Go ahead. *[Pause]*

Now take a moment and thank God out loud for what he has given you. *[Pause]* What you're going to find is that as you start thanking God for specific things he has done for you, given to you, blessed you with, more things will start

to come to your mind. As you begin to recall and recount what God has done, that little stream of thought that started so slowly will become a torrent of thanks that will move you out of coveting and into a state of humbled gratefulness.

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That's one of the reasons I love Thanksgiving Day so much. (That and the chance to feast on what is unquestionably one of my very favorite meals of the year.) The act of giving thanks is a great spiritual habit, and it is one of the best and easiest ways to get out of a funk, to break the hold of depression and self-pity, and to start walking in a life that is filled with the goodness of God.

Giving thanks is a great reminder of the bounty that we enjoy. We may not have everything we want; maybe not even everything we need. But we have a lot. You'll hear it over and over in the coming weeks; you will probably say it yourself more than once: "*We have a lot to be thankful for.*" If you live in this country, that is unquestionably the case—no matter how awful or desperate your situation may be. And if you know the Lord, it is even more true. For all that we have, all that we enjoy because of the goodness of God, the proper response is to give thanks.

But there is something that is even deeper that we need to grasp this morning. For that, we need to look at the opening to Paul's letter to the Philippian church, along with a short visit to an earlier century in the history of the church.

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In verses 3-4 of the first chapter of Philippians, notice the extravagance of Paul's words: "*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . .*" Do you hear it? *Every* time I remember you (the original text is "*all* my remembrances of you"); *all* my prayers (or, in *every* prayer); *always* praying with joy (i.e., at *all* times, or in *every* circumstance); for *all* of you (concerning *all* of you, *all* of your needs and situations).

"*I'm always thankful, always joyful, always grateful, when I pray for all of you.*" Paul's language goes beyond what we consider normal thankfulness. Yes, he has a specific thing in the back of his mind that starts the ball rolling, as it were—he is grateful for their participation in the gospel. Paul is reminded (and is reminding them as well!) that the Philippian church had been a key supporter of his efforts in spreading the gospel from the very first time they heard the message of Christ. They have been the most faithful givers to his ministry efforts—they've sent him financial support a number of times. But Paul's not just thinking about the blessing he has as a result of their giving. There's something deeper going on.

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How do we know that? There's a clue in the passage we read, and if we were to read the rest of his letter, it would become clear. You see, Paul is writing this letter while he is a prisoner in chains. It's not clear whether he is in an actual Roman prison or merely under house arrest. But he is bound by chains, with a Roman soldier standing guard over him—all day, every day.

Paul's situation is not one that leaps to mind as an example of experiencing the blessing and goodness of God. It's an example of deprivation. His freedom has been taken from him. The only food or clothing he is given is what he can procure at his own cost (for which he must depend upon his friends and associates). Every day, all day, he suffers physical strain and considerable pain from the chains that bind him. Even more than the pain and discomfort is the indignity and shame of being considered a criminal, one of the most shameful things that could be said of someone in a culture where everyone understands that avoiding shame is an unquestionable obligation. Every day, all day, Paul has a constant reminder of the unfair accusations against him, the public shame of being associated with criminals, and the assumption by all who see him that he is guilty. (We must remember that in the Roman Empire in the first century, there was no presumption of innocence for those accused of a crime. In fact, if you were a slave, or a non-Roman, or poor, you were presumed guilty when accused.) On top of all of that, the chains constantly remind Paul that he is charged with a capital crime; the threat of death hovers over his head from the moment he wakes up until he goes to sleep.

And in that situation, with those constant pressures and daily pains, Paul's attitude is one of gratefulness. His heart is joyful. He is always giving thanks for the Philippian church, always praying with joy for all of them, despite his suffering. Why? How?

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There is an interesting story from church history about Patrick, who lived in England in the fifth century. Patrick was captured by raiders who took him from his home and sold him into slavery in Ireland. Eventually he managed to escape, found Christ, and years later returned to Ireland to bring them the gospel. One of the local chieftains sent his servant as an envoy to Patrick with a gift of a copper pot (a fairly expensive gift at the time). When his servant returned, the chieftain was eager to hear how this Christian priest had responded to his generosity. "*He said, 'Thank you.'*" replied the messenger.

The chieftain was enraged, and took Patrick's response as an insult. "*That is all he said? 'Thank you'? Go back to him and take back the pot.*" So the servant returned to the priest, demanded the pot back, and took it back to the chieftain.

“Well, what did he say this time?” asked the chieftain.

“He said, ‘Thank you.’” replied the servant.

The chieftain was completely perplexed. “He said, ‘Thank you,’ when you gave him the pot? He said, ‘Thank you,’ when you took the pot back? Go, and take the pot back to him and let him keep it.”

Patrick wasn’t being clever or silly. He wasn’t indifferent about the gift that the chieftain sent him. He was genuinely grateful for the gift of the copper pot. But his gratitude was tied to something deeper than whether or not he had a wonderful utensil that made his life easier. He could be genuinely thankful, even when a gift that was a blessing was taken away—because being thankful wasn’t just a response to getting a gift, it was a settled condition of his life.

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Both Paul and Patrick had learned something—they had learned to be thankful for the blessings that God gave. But they had also learned the secret of giving thanks—to God. We see this in Philippians—it looks like something we could just skip over, but it’s actually crucial. Paul says, “*I thank my God every time I remember you.*” “*I thank my God*” is the crucial part of that statement.

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The secret of giving thanks is more than remembering to say “thank you” when you receive a gift. That’s an important lesson that we teach our children, and it matters a lot; manners matter a lot (that’s a sermon for another day). But just remembering to say a certain phrase is not the same as giving thanks. And it certainly isn’t the same as giving thanks *to God*. If all you are doing is politely acknowledging that you were given something (something that you may not want or see as valuable), saying “thank you,” isn’t really meaningful. Even when your “thank you” is genuine, a heartfelt expression of gratitude because you really like the gift, that in itself doesn’t bring us to true thanksgiving. It’s a good start—and it can help us get there, but it’s just the beginning.

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You see, it is one thing to be happy because you have received a toy or a benefit or some other gift, something nice that makes you feel good or makes your life better. You can be very happy and genuinely grateful for the gift, and still not understand the secret of giving thanks. Again—it’s an important first step on the right road. But as long as your expression of thanks is wrapped up in the benefit you are receiving through the gift, you haven’t really stepped into the fullness part of thankfulness. There’s a greater good that God has for you still further down that road.

The point of giving thanks is the recognition of the love and kindness of the *person* who showed love to you, not just being glad for what you were given. Giving thanks is what we do when we understand that the gift is not just a nice thing that dropped into our lap, but a token of something much larger. The gift represents the expression of an invitation to a personal relationship; it is the person giving the gift that really matters. Giving thanks shows that I recognize that *the gift comes from someone*, and that the value of the gift depends upon who gave the gift. I recognize the invitation that is inherent in the exchange; to receive the gift is to agree to enter into the relationship (or to continue on a deeper level).

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Paul was thankful for what the Philippians gave him, the financial support, because he understood that the gifts represented their partnership with him, their relational connection. What made him burst with thanksgiving and joy was not that the money had finally arrived, but that he was reminded of the people who cared about him, with whom he had become connected through the gospel. And he expressed his thanks to God, because he recognized that some of God's best gifts are not things, but people. On both levels—his relationship with the Philippian church and his relationship with Jesus Christ—Paul understood that the gifts were expressions of love from a person (God) or persons (the church). They were a reminder that God had saved him and brought him into his family. They were an invitation to keep pressing deeper into the love that God had shown him in Christ. And the way to signal his recognition and his acceptance of the invitation was to give thanks. Not just a polite expression (“*Yes, I got the gift.*”), but a deep, personal outpouring of gratitude for all that came along with that gift—a relationship with God, and with his people. And because Paul had come to that recognition, giving thanks in every circumstance became his settled way of life.

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One of the tell-tale signs of a genuine Christian is this: he or she is quick to give thanks and praise to God. It comes easily and naturally, once you have come to recognize the depth of your own sinfulness and the magnitude of his love and grace. When you grasp what it means that God has forgiven your sins, at the cost of the death of his Son, in order to show you kindness instead of wrath, then praise and thanksgiving flows out from you. It might look different from person to person—some of us are more expressive and some are more demure. Some are quick to sing out their praise to God, and some speak quietly. Some are more verbal and some display their gratitude with acts of service. But sincere thanksgiving and praise flows out from the redeemed.

Someone who is just religious, on the other hand, who has no real experience of the goodness of God in salvation, no recognition of his or her need, no sense of the grace of God—well, for them, praise and thanksgiving isn't a part of their vocabulary or their conversation. In fact, they often feel uncomfortable around people who express their praise publicly.

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Now, it's possible that someone can genuinely be a believer in Jesus Christ, but never learned to praise and sing and rejoice. Perhaps they were taught that church was a place to be quiet, that "reverent" meant being silent and stoic and still. But the presence of God is full of joy says Psalm 16. Praise and thanksgiving are normal and natural in the kingdom of God, because the redeemed know what they have been given. They are grateful for deliverance; for the blessings that are so rich and so undeserved. They are quick to give thanks for all that God has done in bringing them from death to new life. So, if you were taught that reverence meant being quiet, let me help you put that to death. There is a time to be silent and even to be somber, to be sure. But most of the time, what needs to fill the house of God is not silence, but heartfelt, joyful giving of thanks for all that God has given, for all that he has done, for all that he is for us. As the new song says, "*There's joy in the house of the Lord, and we won't be quiet.*" Or, in the words of an older song taken directly from the psalms, "*Let the redeemed of the Lord say so*"—loudly, and gladly; gratefully, and often.

Let's thank our God; even more, let's let giving thanks become our default setting, our settled way of life as followers of Christ. Let's celebrate Thanksgiving with great joy this week, and every day—giving thanks to God for all that he has done, especially for the gift of reconciliation and a new life in relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ.

[Slide 20]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership