

WHEN YOU'RE GIVEN CANDY

Hebrews 13:5 - Topic: Giving Thanks

You've probably seen those college entrance tests for star football players. They have questions like, "What religion is the Pope?" and "what language is spoken in France?" Or this one, "What are coat hangers used for?"

I have a quiz like that for you today. Here are the questions: How long did the Hundred Years War last? Which country makes Panama hats? From what animal do we get catgut? In what month did the Russians celebrate the October Revolution? The Canary Islands are named after what animal? What was King George VI's first name? Seems easy to pass that test, doesn't it? It turns out it's not quite as easy as you might think. The Hundred Years War actually lasted 116 years. Panama hats are actually made in Ecuador. Catgut comes from sheep and horses. Because the Russians used a different calendar, the October Revolution was celebrated in November. The Canary Islands' name is derived from the Latin word Canaris, which means dog. They are actually the Dog Islands. King George VI prior to becoming king was named Albert, but out of respect for Queen Victoria's wish that no future king would be named Albert, he took the name George.

Here's one more question: name one simple thing you can do that will have enormous positive impact on the health of your soul and the quality of your life. Surprisingly, the one simple thing I have in mind is to give thanks to God, the very thing we have a holiday specifically aimed at this week. This is a big emphasis in the Bible. Psalm 100:4 says we should enter God's hares with thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:20 says if we are being filled with the Spirit we will be "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." The message is we should be grateful to God, giving thanks to him always. Why is this God's will? One scholar wrote that giving thanks is synonymous with the Christian life. Why is this so important? It is always good to remember why God gives us commands. He doesn't do it just so he can watch us jump through hoops. He doesn't do it because he wants to trip us up or to make life more onerous or tedious for us. God gives us commands, including the one that we should always give thanks, because he loves us and wants the best for us. Obeying his commands are the way to experience life to the fullest. Here's why.

First, because it is essential for being rightly related to God. You cannot be in a right relationship with him without gratitude being the crucial foundation. In Romans 1:21 Paul wrote about what has gone wrong with people in the world. "Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and

their foolish hearts were darkened.” The whole problem of the human condition begins with the failure to honor God and give thanks to him. That is the departure point.

There is a whole genre of movies made on the theme of mistaken identity. The idea is someone is misidentified early in the movie and the error results in chaos. The movie considered the classic of this genre is Alfred Hitchcock’s *North By Northwest*, starring Cary Grant. In it Grant plays an executive Roger Thornhill who is mistaken by a cell of spies for a government agent named Mr. Kaplan. This leads to a series of attempts to kill him and a total disruption of his life. The spies go off in completely the wrong direction because they started with a wrong belief as the basis of their actions. In the end their wrong assumption leads to the deaths of several of them and the arrest of the head of the spy ring.

That’s kind of what happens when we approach anything in life with an attitude other than giving thanks to God. Everything that follows will be a mistake. If we are going to live in connection to God, it starts with giving thanks to him. Furthermore, the motivation for everything we do as followers of Jesus is gratitude. No matter what we do, if the driving force behind it is not to thank God, there will be something off about it. It will create false religion and it will exhaust our souls.

A second reason giving thanks is so important is the fact that giving thanks is crucial to living a joyful life. The New Living Translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 reads, “Always be joyful; never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you.” That command to always be joyful seems almost unreasonable. Who can always be joyful? How are we supposed to do that? I recently went to see the doctor because there was a spot on my forehead that caused me some concern. He examined it and said, “I think we’d better do a biopsy on that.” I was not thrilled. Then as they were doing the biopsy he said, “Yeah, I think this is probably skin cancer.” This is not a huge deal. But it did mean I was going to have to have it cut out and would have a scar there. I was not really all that joyful about it. Who would be? But Paul said we should “always be joyful,” even when stuff like that happens. We do that by following the next two instructions. Never stop praying and be thankful in all circumstances. Yes, the circumstances sometimes will be hard or painful, but in the difficulty of it all you still have much to be thankful for. Instead of focusing on all the negative and complaining or wallowing in self-pity, focus your mind on thanking God for who he is, for his love, for all he has given you. The more you give thanks the more joyful you will be.

Writer Jess Wisnewski says, “If joy has evaded you, there is a good chance you’re going after it all wrong. You see, the pathway to joy is easily overlooked. It’s a trail often covered by the weeds of materialism, the lust for success and a lack of awareness...What is the hidden way to experience joy? In short, it’s thankfulness.”

I cannot stress enough how crucial giving thanks to God as the foundation of our approach to everything in life is. It will determine how closely connected you are to God and how much you love him, and it will determine how full of joy and peace your life is. But what are some things we should give thanks for, especially when our circumstances are not especially enjoyable?

One thing that tends to be characteristic of all of us is that when life doesn't go the way we wish, when something we care about goes wrong, or at least feels like it goes wrong, it colors how we see everything. We see the negative, the disappointment, and it seems so consuming that we can see little good. On Josh Groban's Christmas CD he has a song called "Thankful." I was listening to it yesterday and was struck by the last line of the song. It is, "There's so much to be thankful for." It hit me that this is absolutely true. I think sometimes it is helpful to see life through the eyes of a child. Recently we were with our granddaughters, Ella and Cara. Laurie has a necklace with a pendant that has some phosphors in it, so after it has been exposed to the light. Laurie demonstrated this to three-year old Ella, and that precocious little girl was utterly delighted by it. She loved seeing that thing glow in the dark. It filled her with wonder and joy and she wanted to see it over and over. It occurred to me that there are countless things like that, things that actually are delightful wonders, that I don't even notice and just take for granted. How much more full will our lives be when we receive every little moment of grace, every small wonder with delight and gratitude to God. But to help us remember some of those wonders I want to point out some this morning. Let's consider the implications of just one verse, Hebrews 13:5.

The verse says, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" We have reason to be content in life, not driven by the pursuit of the dollar or anything else. That reason is that God has promised that he will never leave us. That gives us powerful reason to be at peace wherever we are, and to give thanks regardless of what is going on in our little corner of the world.

GOD WILL BE WITH US IN DEATH

When God promises he will never leave us or forsake us, that means that he will be there with us in the most dire circumstance we will ever face. That circumstance is death. Romans 8:38-39 contains a beloved and familiar promise. "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Notice that first phrase. Neither death nor life can separate us from God's love. He will be with us, loving us, comforting us, even in death! He will be right there with us when that time comes. Many are as afraid of the process of dying as they are of death itself. We are told this horrifying process is the ultimate in loneliness because we can only go through it alone. But for followers of Jesus that's not true. God will be with us through the process. This is the God who is called "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort," in 2 Corinthians 1:3. In verse 5 Paul said comfort abounds to us in Christ. But God being with us in death has some other big implications for us.

Recently in our men's Bible study I asked our brother, Bill, how he was doing. He has fought Parkinson's disease with remarkable persistence, strength and determination for 18 years. The disease is inexorable and relentless, but Bill has made it fight for every inch it has taken. But that morning was during a tough time for Bill. He said he was discouraged because he was losing ground. Then he said over the years he has had many friends who have succumbed to that disease. He has seen how it goes, and he dreads going through it.

That deeply saddened me. I wished there was something I could do to help him, to stop that process, but that is not in my power. But later I was thinking about what he said. I realized while it is not quite as immediately obvious, I'm in a similar situation. I've had friends succumb too. I've seen how life ends. While Bill's situation is more apparent and more immediate, I also am heading toward an end I would rather avoid.

If God is not with us in death, if this life is all we have, then life is unbearably tragic. There is so much about life that we all love. There is beauty, so many things that bring us joy. There are times with our loved ones that are so full of life and joy that it feels like our hearts are going to explode. And death is going to take all of it away. We will lose everything beautiful, enjoyable, everything and everyone we love will be gone forever. What despair!

But the incredible significance of God being with us is that we have victory over that despair. We will not lose all the beauty, the joy, the love we have in this life. It will not just be restored to us; it will be magnified. In Acts 3:21 Peter was talking about Jesus the Messiah who had risen from the dead. He said, "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." Jesus is going to come back and restore everything. Restore it to what? It's original intended glory. When you restore a classic automobile you fix it up so it is like brand new. That is what God will do with everything in creation.

In Revelation 21:5 John wrote, "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'" You can bank everything on this. God will make everything new. Everything you

think you will lose when you die will be restored and will be like original, mint condition. We went to see the movie *Midway* this week. Dennis Quaid is an actor we have liked. He appears in that movie playing the part of Admiral Bull Halsey. Laurie commented to me, “Man, he looked really old.” I’ve noticed this in some commercials I’ve seen him in. She then said, “It’s sad what age does to people.” It’s so true. You see Hollywood stars who in their youth were beautiful and glamorous. As old people they are now neither. They’re just old. She could have been talking about me! Talk about worn and old. It happens to everyone. Here’s the incredible news. God is going to make everything new, including me! We lose nothing, and we gain everything! That is reason to give thanks every day of our lives.

Not only that, but as you get near the end you realize that none of what we do here, if God is not in it, really means anything. I like to think that maybe we make a difference by loving our families. And we do. But I was thinking about this recently and realized again that I do not even know the names of my great grandparents. My parents obviously had a big impact on my life and that of my kids. But my grandparents had only relatively minor effect on me. At least, though, I knew their names. There was Cecil and Maggie Myatt on one side and Eugene and Bessie Wood on the other. But that is as far as things got. I don’t know the name of even one of their parents. I really have no idea who they were. And I know that will also be true of my great grandchildren. That means that I have had an effect on my kids, and right now am having some effect on my grandchildren, but their children likely will not even have a clue who I was. My impact will be forgotten very quickly. With no larger, eternal reference point, our lives here really have no significance.

We’ve had some coyotes around our neighborhood recently. We see signs of them almost every time we go for a walk and quite a few of our neighbors have seen them. A couple of years ago I saw one at the entrance to our neighborhood in the middle of the day as I was driving out. He just stood there calmly as I drove near him. It felt like he was saying, “What are you looking at” as I drove by. I thought about that animal. He lives in the hills, scrounging for food. What does his life mean? Honestly, it doesn’t mean anything. He just lives to get food to eat so he doesn’t die, and he fights that battle every day until he does die and that’s it. Without the eternal reference point having God with us for eternity, we are basically the same. We struggle to survive until we die. End of story. It means nothing. It’s totally empty.

Because God is with us, and because he will be with us through and after death, everything we do has an eternal and an infinitely big reference point to it. It matters infinitely because it matters to God! Phillip Pullman, who wrote the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, is an opponent of the Christian faith. He is quite adamant about that. But he sees some things very clearly. He wrote, “We need to actively cultivate a sense that we’re...connected to the

universe...Religion, the religion that's now dead (he means our faith), did give us that in full measure. We were part of a huge cosmic drama involving a Creation and a Fall and a Redemption, and Heaven and Hell and a Millennium. What we did mattered, because God saw everything, even the fall of a sparrow." He's right that we need that connection to the cosmic drama, to the eternal so that things in our lives matter.

Knowing that God is with us and will be with us even into eternity actually connects us to the infinite. It fills our lives with meaning. One Sunday morning Laurie and I came into the chapel and it was a total mess with many more chairs up than we needed and they were in total disarray. I knew there wouldn't be a lot of people here at church that morning. But we set about trying to bring some order to the room. As I was putting chairs away I got pounded with the enemy's doubts. You're moving chairs around, that's all you're doing. And there's going to be a handful of people here so all this work is pointless. In fact, all your efforts are pointless. Then it hit me. It is not pointless, it's eternal. Just being faithful to God, even if it is a small thing the world will never notice, has eternal significance. It is not just big, it's huge, because it is for God and it will last forever. And that is reason to give thanks, because without it we are empty and the emptiness is unbearable.

GOD WILL BE WITH US IN LIFE

God is with us and will never leave us. That's comforting, for we know that we are never alone. He is always there protecting and providing for us, giving us the strength we need when we depend on him. But that is not all it means.

It also means he is with us, guiding us through life. He's not just walking along with us as a witness to what we're up to in this world. He is actively carving out a path for us. At one point we took our kids to visit Washington D.C. when they were young. We saw the usual sights, the monuments, the Capitol, the Smithsonian, the Air and Space Museum. We also got to go to the White House. Yes, we were invited by the President to come visit him. It's true. Of course it was the same invitation given to 300 million Americans. I figured they owed it to me. After all, by my understanding I own 1/300 millionth of that House. So we took the usual White House tourist tour. We had a guide. The guide showed us where we could go and where we couldn't go, and explained the significance of what we were seeing. God being with us means He is kind of like that. He is guiding us. He is leading us through life, taking us to the right places, showing us the way, explaining much of what is going on and steering us away from the places that will get us into trouble.

Proverbs 16:9 says, "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." Wow, have Laurie and I found that to be true. We plan our course. But we've noticed the oddest thing. Over the 40 years we've been married at various times we have made plans for where we are going in life. Almost every time within weeks of us getting a

plan in our minds, it starts going off the rails. It's actually kind of funny, but generally the whole plan blows up in relatively short order. I know there are many people who make plans and seem to be able to follow their plan perfectly. For whatever reason God seems to want to make sure that we know we humans plan in our hearts, but God determines what actually happens. We are left with just following and trusting him as our only option.

You can see God directing people through life in several places in the Bible. The obvious one is Joseph. He had a plan in mind for how he was going to be the head of his family. He had dreams where all of his brothers would bow to him. That ultimately did happen, but the journey to that outcome was a winding, difficult one he would never have imagined. His own brothers initially wanted to kill him out of jealousy, but then decided to go easy on him and sold him to human traffickers. He ended up as a slave in Egypt. He excelled as a slave, but then his owner's wife, an early member of the Me Too movement, claimed he assaulted her sexually, though what actually happened was he rejected her advances toward him! He landed in prison, where he languished for several years. I am certain that during that time he asked, "God what happened to the dream of me being the head of the family? What's going on? Where are you?" None of this was in Joseph's plan. But it was all in God's plan for him. You know how it turned out. Because of all the terrible things that happened to him Joseph ended up being the second most powerful man in Egypt, one of the most powerful in the world. It would never have happened had it not been for the slavery and imprisonment. In that position he was able to save his family when they were seriously in danger of starving, and in the end they all did, indeed, bow to him. Joseph had a plan for his life, and what happened was not it. But God directed his steps. Through all of the awful events of his life God used Joseph to play a key role in protecting God's plan to rescue the human race!

David was told by God's man, Samuel, that he was going to be the next king of Israel. That was the plan for his life. Then he spent years running and hiding from an irrational King Saul who wanted to kill him for no good reason whatsoever. What happened to the plan to make him king? Eventually that did happen. But along the way during those dark times David wrote songs that we call Psalms. Aren't you glad that God led him down that difficult path?

Paul knew for certain that God had made him the apostle to the Gentiles. He was one of the greatest church planters of all time. That was what God had told him to do, and that was his plan for his life. Then he was thrown in jail after being falsely accused, and spent years incarcerated, unable to carry out the plan for his life. This was not according to his plan. But God established his steps. It was according to God's plan. There he sat in prison, unable to follow what seemed like the God given plan for his life. Yet God was directing his steps. Planting those churches was very important. But because he was in prison and could not

visit the churches he wrote them letters. It turned out that writing to the Ephesians, the Colossians, and the Philippians was some of the most important work he did in his life.

In my life, God has done some unusual things. At one point over 40 years ago I met this young woman that was like no one I'd ever known. She captured my heart, but it just wasn't to be. We came to a point where we realized there was no place for us to go together and that we needed to part ways. We made our plan to go our separate ways. We made our plan, but God directed our steps. In a dramatic fashion he brought us back together, and that incredible woman became my wife, despite it being the most unlikely thing I could imagine. Nothing in my life has had as much impact and brought as much joy as that one work of God. While I was in grad school and people would ask me if I was doing to be a pastor, I consistently answered no. I didn't think I was cut out for the job, and I didn't want the job. I had my plan. But God directed my steps. Even after 40 years of ministry as a pastor there are times when I think, "Are you sure this wasn't a mistake, Lord?" I have seen God work in my son's life.

At every moment of your life God is with you. He never forsakes you. There will be moments when it feels like it. It must have felt like that for Joseph in prison, David, hiding in a cave, and Paul in chains. It certainly felt like it for Jesus when he was on the cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But God was working his good plan in all those situations. So even in your hardest times you have reason to give thanks because God is with you.

IMPLICATIONS

PRACTICE THE PRESENCE OF GOD

God is with you every moment of every day. What a loss for us when we fail to live in that reality! When life is hard and we become frustrated or wallow in self pity, we are stating that we don't believe God is with us. When we live fearful of what the future might bring, we are living as though God is not directing our steps. What we lose is peace and joy!

Francois de Fenelon, a 17th century saint, wrote, "Accept what God chooses for you. This is more important than what you choose for yourself, for you are much too easy on yourself. Day by day give yourself to God. He carries you in his arms like a mother carries her child."

I've seen vivid reminders of that last statement of late. Our daughter, Carissa, was pretty close to giving up on the desire to have a child. It seemed like it just was not going to happen. And then she got pregnant and gave birth to little Wesley. She and Michael refer to him as their miracle baby. It is a beautiful and powerful thing to see her holding Wesley.

She is tired, taking care of an infant is demanding because they have constant needs and you're never totally sure what the little one needs. But Carissa holds that little baby with joy and delight. She showers Wesley with love and tenderness. She would go to any lengths to protect him and care for him. And that's how God cares for us.

To practice the presence of God is to rest in his love and care for us. It means not giving in to doubt or frustration or self pity when life does not go the way we want, because we know God is with us, caring for us, guiding our steps, protecting us, providing for us. It means not giving in to fear of what might happen in the future, for that is questioning God's leading and care for us. It means remembering that he is always seeking our best, so doing what he tells us to do is always for our good.

PURSUE A GRATEFUL HEART

This means seeking to become a person who is grateful for every good thing we are ever given. Rooted in our confidence in God's goodness, love and provision, we should be grateful for every blessing, and even for every trial, knowing that God will use it to draw us more into his presence.

Having a grateful heart means at every moment we are thankful for God's grace in our lives no matter what our circumstances might be. Last month I had a bout with some sort of stomach virus. Could have been food poisoning, could have been some other virus, but it was the worst I've had in decades. It was miserable. Let me restate that. It was MISERABLE! It only lasted for 3 days, but it felt like 3 years. At one point I was in the bathroom in the middle of the night yet again for another episode of Atomic Diarrhea, and I said, "Lord, why have you forsaken me?" I couldn't sleep because about every 10 minutes it was time for the latest installment in the series. I complained to the Lord about his mistreatment of me. I mean, is it too much to ask to just not have that happening to you? But at one point I realized that though I didn't understand why this was happening, I actually had the privilege of complaining to God. I knew he was with me. I knew that he loves me, and that even in this I had reason to thank him. Not for the ongoing Nuclear Colon Cleanse itself, but for the fact that God was there, has given me hope, meaning, and eternal life, and that he loves me when I absolutely do not deserve it.

PUBLICLY THANK GOD

I came across something very curious. A recent study revealed that more than 90% of people in our nation believe that expressing gratitude consistently makes people happier and results in a more fulfilled life, yet less than half of people regularly express gratitude! Doesn't it make sense that we should choose to be in the half that does life expressing continual gratitude?

We were at Michael, Carissa and Wesley's house on Halloween. Michael and I talked about the fact that "kids these days" can sometimes be annoying. There were a number of teenagers that showed up at their house to get candy, dressed as...teenagers. These kids were just wearing their regular clothes. I had to bite my tongue. "Wow, what costume store did you find that outfit at?" "Such creative costumes. Did your mommies make those for you?" But the ones that irked us most were the ones who did not follow the script. When you open the door they just stick their bag out, expecting candy. No, "trick or treat," just a bag. Now perhaps they are just trying to be authentic. Maybe they don't say the traditional, "trick or treat" because they know aren't going to unleash some devilish trick on you if you don't give in to their extortion attempt and they want to be honest about it. However, the worst are the ones who, upon receiving the expected tooth decay bomb, just turn around and walk away. They don't say "thank you." It's like you were obligated to give them candy. I can understand it with some of the really little ones because in many cases they don't know what's going on. They just know that Mom and Dad dressed them up as a hot dog and sent them to some stranger's door with a bag for some reason. But there were some who should have known better, and it irked me that they didn't have the civility when someone gave them something out of kindness, to say a simple thank you. There is something right, healthy and needed when someone has done something kind for you, to thank them. It properly acknowledges what has happened and orients everyone rightly.

In Christ, God has given you the most valuable gift you could ever be given. He has given you his presence, now and forever. He has given you eternal life in him! Can you think of anything that even comes close to comparing to that gift? If you didn't have it your life would be chaotic, confusing, meaningless, empty and unspeakably tragic. And your future would be worse! God's gifts are truly priceless, the best gifts anyone ever has or ever will receive. We should be ever full of gratitude and thanks for his gifts, no matter what else may be happening in life.

When you came in this morning you should have found a pack of candy corn on your chair. Laurie insisted I tell you this is for your good because this week she read a story on a report that said eating sugar, like candy, at breakfast is good for you. I believe the report came from the Grace L. Ferguson Storm Door and Nutrition Company. But the point of that is to serve as a reminder to all of us that in Christ we have been given candy, and the right response is to give thanks.

The amazing thing is that giving thanks is transformative. It reminds us of the truth. It humbles us before God and brings us back to him. It changes our mindset. It is truly a crucial element for peace and joy. So make your attitude in everything to be grateful, and express your thanks to God. So by faith, give thanks always, for this is God's will for you.