



The
Sacrifice
Of
Thanksgiving

"Always giving thanks for everything"

Ephesians 5:20

John Matthews

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Obedying the Lord is sometimes misunderstood. We usually think of our behavior, whether we are doing something good or something bad. But many of the issues of obedience and disobedience are matters of the mind and heart, not just what is seen as outward obedience. Consider the following:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding..." Proverbs 3:5

This is a matter of the heart, a commandment of the Scriptures for sure, but one that is internal obedience more than an action to be seen by others. And another:

"Fear not..." This commandment is repeated many times in the Scripture. It is a matter of the heart and mind. To fear not is to be obedient to God. To be afraid is disobedience.

So, consider thankfulness. Hundreds of Scriptures exhort us to give thanks to the Lord. Did you ever think of thankfulness as a command, as much as any command of the Word?

Thankfulness is not an option. It is not a suggestion. It is not a nice thing to do when you feel like it. In fact, it could be discovered to be one of the most basic and pervasive commandments of the Word, equaled only in frequency of repetition by the commands to praise Him and to rejoice!

The Bible gives many examples of thanksgiving, and describes many situations in which to give thanks. But to get right to the heart of the issue we need only look at two Scriptures:

"...in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1 Thess 5:18

"...always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father..." Eph 5:20

The pointed commandment is this: in everything and for everything we are to give thanks to God in the name of Jesus.

Why are so many people unhappy? Why are so many confused? Why are so many without peace of mind? The key may be in Romans 1:21: *"For 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. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools..."*

The Living Bible makes it even more clear: *"Yes, they knew about him all right, but they wouldn't admit it or worship him or even thank him for all his daily care. And after awhile they began to think up silly ideas of what God was like and what he wanted them to do. The result was that their foolish minds became dark and confused. Claiming themselves to be wise without God, they became utter fools..."*

The simple fact is this: ungratefulness and refusing to honor God will rob you of your peace of mind and make you a fool. If this has been true for you, take courage. Honoring God and giving Him thanks brings you out of darkness, settles your mind, heals your emotions and erases your stupidity. Your intelligence will rise, along with your emotional and mental well being.

One of the biggest lessons of my life has been about thankfulness. It has been more of an unending class than just a lesson — maybe because I'm a slow learner. I've also at times been an unwilling student of thanksgiving, feeling it had not been my choice to even sign up for the class. Perhaps you have a clue why I say that. Some of the lessons have to do with a sacrifice — a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Sometimes His teaching me about thanksgiving seemed not so much a class as a jail sentence. Locked up by God, it seemed, until I offered up a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Actually I believe I had locked myself in that cell. It was a prison of resentment, anger and self pity. The key to get out was thanksgiving. A sacrifice of thanksgiving. I learned to use this key of thanksgiving to open up the prison cell of my own making — this prison of self pity and resentment — and go free!

Jonah ended up in the belly of a fish at the bottom of an ocean. He was running from the presence of God. Why? He was full of resentment and he was angry. He was mad at God for calling him to the Ninevites, whom he hated. (They were the terrorists of his day.) He was mad because God called him to prophesy judgment to them, and he knew God would forgive them if they repented, and then they wouldn't be destroyed, and then he'd look like a false prophet. (see Jonah 4:1) His resentment and rebellion brought judgment to the ship which he had boarded to escape God, and at his suggestion was thrown overboard. He almost died. It is more than coincidence that Jonah had to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving in order to get out of the fish's belly!

*"But I will sacrifice to You
With the voice of thanksgiving.
That which I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation is from the LORD."*

THEN the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land."
Jonah 2:9-3:1

Sometimes life brings us to the place where we feel like we are as bad off as Jonah, at the end of our rope, in the valley of the shadow of death, in the belly of the whale. Perhaps we must do what Jonah did: offer up the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and return to "the presence of the Lord".

There was a time I thought thanksgiving to be unreasonable, even dangerous. How can God expect me to give thanks for ALL things? I had the feeling that if I gave thanks for unpleasant things, God would misunderstand and think I liked them!

How can one give thanks for ALL things? Some of us don't do so because we are mad at God, thinking He caused something bad to happen, and now we are supposed to thank him for the evil favor! But the Bible is very clear that God is not the source of evil, and He is not in the business of thinking up bad things for your life. He is in the saving business!

Yes, there is the truth that God disciplines us as His children (Hebrews 12), and can allow certain things to happen due to our disobedience (such as the storm that came due to Jonah's disobedience) for our ultimate good. Thank God that He does discipline us! Repentance brought salvation to Jonah and to the sailors, and so it will for us. God is in the saving business even in the matter of discipline of His children. Furthermore, the truth may be that we simply are reaping a bad harvest from serving our flesh. (see Galatians 6:8)

Being thankful for all things and in all things is not to say that God is the source of everything that happens. It is clear from the Word as a whole that everything that happens is

NOT the will of God. The will of God is clear: it is that all men be saved, that all men be set free from sin and from Satan's power. This is a real war, a conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, and the earth is the battleground.

The will of God is not automatic. His will is in His Word, and it must be heard, believed, responded to, and prayed in, as Jesus said to pray *"Let Your will be done on earth..."* Where the gospel is not preached, where people are not believing, praying and obeying, many things that happen are not the will of God. They happen because of sin and because of Satan's evil influence and it is wrong to blame God for them!

Yet we are clearly told to give thanks FOR ALL THINGS in Ephesians 5:20. It says the same thing in every translation I have read.

I Thessalonians 5:18 says, *"In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God..."* It doesn't say that everything is the will of God. It says that TO GIVE THANKS IN EVERYTHING IS THE WILL OF GOD.

Romans 8:28 sheds light on why we are to give thanks in everything: *"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose."* This verse does not say that God causes everything. And it does not say that everything is good. It says that God causes all things TO WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD... therefore even those things that are bad, those things that were not the will of God, those things caused even by our own sin or stupidity or by others' sins or even the devil's work...

Not automatically, however. Some people naively quip "Oh, aren't you glad everything works for good?" The Bible does not teach this. Many things are working for bad. People are suffering, dying, without God and going to hell. This is not good, and the Bible does not say it is good.

God causes everything to work together for good FOR THOSE WHO LOVE GOD AND ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE... If someone hates God, things are not working for good. They are working for bad, and that person is on the way to hell.

I have found that one of the best ways to love God is to continually give Him thanks. It is an expression of love to Him.

And being called according to His purpose? Romans 8:29 explains this, the verse that follows the one we just mentioned: *"For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son..."*

Being called according to His purpose is to be apprehended by God for the express purpose of being made like Jesus in every way; to be conformed to Him. This is the ultimate good, and the ultimate purpose of God. When we line ourselves up with this purpose, God can begin to use everything to change us to be like Jesus.

When I realized this, I saw how even bad things can be used for my ultimate good if I will let God do His redemptive work in me. It is not so much what happens to me that determines the course of my life. It is MY RESPONSE TO THOSE THINGS that will determine my course. Everything does not have to go well, I don't have to win every victory, in order to become like Christ. What is important is how I respond to what happens to me. If I respond in anger and resentment, it is a door for the devil to continue to work havoc in my life. But the sacrifice of thanksgiving stops the flow of evil and puts the circumstances of my life into the hands of God. My thanksgiving is the way of honoring Him and appealing to Him and acknowledging His overriding and superabundant power to take my life out of the hands of Satan and use it for good, to use everything and anything to bring about His divine good purpose in my life.

Thanksgiving turns the evil tide. Thanksgiving opens the doors for miracles and change and deliverance, and for God's power of good to come into what might have been a dark and evil corner of my life.

Sometimes the things that happen to us aren't all that bad, but we think they are bad, because they do not meet our expectations. This commonly happens in families, with our spouse or our children not meeting our expectations. They may not be acting evil, but they don't meet our standards. Life itself can produce the same response. We had an expectation for our future, and it didn't turn out. Long range or short range plans may fail. What we had hoped to achieve in life seems to be slipping through our fingers. This can especially affect older people. Disappointment, regret or resignation can set in, rather than a thankful heart. Then our inward resentment becomes self fulfilling, as we increasingly expect bad to happen because of our ungrateful and unbelieving heart.

Life may have disappointed us, but the Word of God says, "*Whoever believes in Him shall not be disappointed.*" (Romans 10:11) A most difficult thing for some people is to get past disappointments. Others seem to shake them off and go on. God has the means by which any of us can get beyond our past and get on with living. Forgiveness plus thanksgiving add up to a new beginning. Forgiving others may be hard, but it is harder if you don't. The hardest person for some of us to forgive is ourselves. The hardest part of thankfulness for some of us is to thank God for ourselves.

It is not godly to hate yourself anymore than to hate another person. Self hatred is not humility. Yes, Jesus said we should deny ourselves, even hate our life to follow Him, but this is not the sickness of self loathing that drives some to depression and suicide. It is a complete relinquishment of our natural life and a yielding up to His life within, laying down our rights to give Him all the rights to our life. This is not the suicidal hopelessness of self hatred but the faith filled revelation of Jesus Christ that makes us hate living in the natural. We have seen the King in His beauty and realize that the only life worth living is to lay our life at His feet and let Him live through us.

This losing of our life to follow Jesus does not come out of bitterness, self pity, grumbling, or nursing our regrets and disappointments. It comes only by taking our whole life to the cross, laying at His feet all that we are, all that we were, all that has ever happened to us. It is handing over to him in the sacrifice of thanksgiving, the evil, the tragedy, and the destruction of wasted years. It is believing that He will take the mess of our lives and put it through the miracle of His blood and bring a wonderful result for eternity and for His glory.

On the other hand, it may not be failure for which we need to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving. It may be success. We may think that our victory or blessing is the result of our efforts and forget that every good thing comes from God. We cannot take the credit for our success. Pride can produce as much unthankfulness as humiliation.

Thankfulness is an ongoing act of humility and submission to God. Saying "I did it myself!" is to tell a lie. Everything we have, all skill and talent come from God. All success must be laid at his feet, like the elders in heaven cast their crowns before Him. Gratefulness in the heart to God is the only valid response to our blessings. Otherwise, the blessing of success will keep us out of God's presence as much as regrets for our failures. For some who tend to take the credit themselves, thanksgiving for blessings may be as large a sacrifice as thanksgiving for difficulties!

Thanksgiving for everything starts a miracle of His redemptive power changing us, and it is the choice which takes our soul out of darkness into the light of His presence. "*Enter into His gates with thanksgiving...*" (Psalms 100:4) means there is no other way to enter. Either we come with a thankful heart or we cannot enjoy His presence at all.

Recently, in my heart I heard a whisper so soft I could have ignored it, yet so clear that I could not ignore it. **"You've been ungrateful."** I knew it was the voice of God. I chose to pay attention to it, and it was like a veil was removed from an area of darkness in my soul. I began to see that I had stopped being thankful for my life, stopped being grateful. It was embarrassing to me, since thanksgiving has been a life lesson from God to me, and a repeated subject of my teaching.

But there it was, clear as a bell...an ungrateful heart. As I thought about this, the Holy Spirit took me back four years to a set of difficult circumstances where I could see I began to be ungrateful. I had become blinded to it because I was focusing on my failures and the failures of others, and had entered into regret. Remember, the Biblical command is to give thanks IN and FOR everything. I had stopped doing that. It took me several hours to get up to date with God about those last four years, offering up the sacrifice of thanksgiving for a long list of frustrations and disappointments. The hardest part was thanking Him for my own failure. This seems unreasonable to the natural mind and to the religious mind. Why give God thanks for what I did wrong? Why? Because He said to give thanks for everything. So I did. It was like letting God in the dark room where I was regretting all my failures, and making myself miserable. My thanksgiving in the name of Jesus (Eph. 5:20) brought everything under the blood, and I released the burden of everything to God.

Recently I asked God a question, as I was meditating on the blood covenant. "Lord," I asked, "Have you obligated yourself in the blood covenant to clean up my messes?" I don't know why I even asked such a question. I was a mess when God found me, and the whole gospel is about cleaning up the mess that we have made of our lives. And having been saved, the fact is this: apart from Him we can do nothing. He is the Savior. We cannot save ourselves...ever!

I guess I asked God that question because it seemed to me, after many years as a Christian, I should know better about life and doing things right and doing things wisely. But still I fail. I make messes that need to be cleaned up. And sometimes they are too big for me to clean up! After confessing my own sin in those messes, and forgiving others who may have sinned, I found myself saying these words:

"Thank you, Lord, for even the ways I have failed. It isn't your fault, and you didn't cause me to do those stupid things. Yet you forgive me, and you have said to give thanks for everything. I can't handle the burden of my own failure, anyway. So I give you thanks, and thank you for the wonderful blood of Jesus that forgives me, and that somehow you can turn the tide even of my own mistakes and my own stupidity and do something through it for Your honor and glory. Furthermore, Lord, I thank you for all the ways I have succeeded. I can't take credit for any of the right things I have done, but all the glory and honor goes to You, for Your life is the good life within me, and only by Your grace does anything turn out right!"

The Bible teaches that whatever we sow we reap. (Galatians 5) Sow to the flesh and reap corruption. Thanksgiving is not a protection from the law of the seed. But offering up the sacrifice of thanksgiving for everything is sowing a new seed, a seed of the Spirit, a seed of obedience to God. It is a beginning point of stopping our sowing to the flesh, and a beginning point of sowing to the Spirit. And the harvest of God's Spirit in our lives can interrupt the harvest from our years of sowing to the flesh. It is only because of the blood redemption in Christ!

Thankfulness is first to attribute to God the righteousness of His character and the goodness of all His ways. He has never done anything wrong and never will. There is nothing wrong with God. There is no evil in Him. There is only goodness. We always say to Him, *"God, You are righteous in all Your ways as concerns us."* Giving Him thanks for the hard things, the disappointing things is not an acknowledgment of Him giving us a hard and disappointing life. It is a yielding up of our mistakes and even the evil of the world and Satan that has touched our lives and putting it all at His feet through honoring Him and giving Him thanks. It stops the flow

of evil in our lives and begins the flow of good, even into that which up till now has not been good. It is stopping our habit of self effort and ceasing of our habit of self pity and interrupting our habit of resenting our lives, resenting others, or resenting God. It is a welcome mat for the Holy Spirit to come into our lives to turn things around for God's glory and our highest good.

Sometimes in dealing with troubled people I have led them through a prayer of thanksgiving for their lives. I usually start with their family, with mom and dad. Mom and dad may not even be living anymore, but the memories of them are quite alive. Usually before we finish leading them through thanking God for the members of their household we find the problem. Some people begin to cough and hack when they try to speak out thanksgiving for their dad or mom or brother or sister. They can't get the words out, because they are so angry at them. Sometimes thanksgiving stops at their boss, or a teacher, or a neighbor, or a church. And then there are some who cannot honestly thank God for anything, because they wrongly see Him as the cause of their evil. *"If God loves me, how could he let this happen?"*, some say. They blame God for the evil.

Satan works hard to give us a distorted view of God. He creates havoc and then gets us to think God is behind it. Many people attribute everything that happens to God's will. This is not Scriptural. It is more Hindu than it is Christian. The Hindu mind is one of resignation to what is. A good Hindu can step over a broken person on the road with little emotion, feeling that such a person should be "happy with their lot in life". God is not like that. He hates evil, and is grieved over the suffering caused by sin and Satan's hold in the world.

Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. (I John 3:8) It is a real war. Evil things are not the works of God. When Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and set people free, He said it was the finger of God. Acts 10: 38 says Jesus went about doing good and healing those who were *"oppressed by the devil."* It doesn't say they were oppressed by God! God is in the healing and saving business. He doesn't need to design trouble for your life. You and others and the devil can cause enough trouble. Jesus said we have trouble because we are in the world (a world in rebellion against God.) God is not the author of all our problems and tragedies. He is the One who comes along side to be the helper, the advocate, the intercessor, and the deliverer. Don't blame God.

A bitter heart can lock us into evil circumstances. Many, when they realize God is not the source of their problems, begin to turn from bitterness and find the courage to give thanks. Freedom comes. How about you?

"Lord, I thank you for my life, just the way it is. I thank You for Your goodness and for Your wonderful plan. I thank you for the redemption in Jesus. I thank you for everything that has ever happened to me, for everyone that has come into my life – not because it was all good, for some of it was bad, and not because You caused it all to happen, for some was my fault, some was the sin of people, and some was the devil's doing. But I give You thanks for it all because You said I should. So I do.

Furthermore, I give You thanks for everything, because You said you would cause all things to work together for good to those who love You, and I love You. You said you would cause all things to work together for good to those who are called according to Your purpose, and that's me. You have saved me and called me to Your ultimate purpose of making me like Jesus, and I agree with Your purpose. Thank You, God, that You can somehow turn everything in my life to this grand purpose.

Thank You that I don't have to win every battle, and that I don't have to get my way to become like Jesus. Thank You that I can be a winner even when things go wrong, and even when tragedy happens. Thank You for the way of Jesus, for the cross. Thank you that I can commit my soul into Your hands just like Jesus did, even when He was abused, rejected, accused

and mocked. Thank You for Your glorious ability to bring me to complete victory, even through the valley of the shadow of death.

Thank You for Your presence, even when I don't feel it. Thank You that You were present even in my darkest hours, not to make them darker, but to bring me comfort and help, even if I didn't know how to welcome Your presence at the time.

Help me to have a grateful heart, and to respond in thanksgiving through all things, so that You can do a good work in me. For only this is worthy of Your person and Your covenant and Your promise to never leave me or forsake me. Thank You God that You and I can go through anything with victory, even if outwardly it looks like defeat.

Thank you for my successes and my blessings as well, for I know that all my ability and all the good in my life comes from You. I yield up my life with thanksgiving to Your faithfulness to accomplish all things that concern me."

Thankfulness (mixed with repentance, confession, receiving forgiveness, and forgiving others) paves the way for closeness to God, waiting on God, and learning from His word — all of which lead to understanding, revelation, faith and a new beginning. Thanksgiving is the atmosphere in which you can hear from God. It is the atmosphere for the Holy Spirit to fill you fresh, and make you ready for the next chapter of your life.

Thanksgiving enables you to close the book on the past, leaving at the cross both failures and successes, and to look ahead with hope and faith. It is the turning point from the old to the new. With a grateful heart you will not be bound to your past, or to self pity or resentment or confusion. Your past will be put under the blood, and your expectancy for God's goodness and mercy to be shown in the days ahead will get stronger and stronger.

May the Lord give you the understanding that **you have the ability and grace to give Him thanks in every circumstance and for all things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.** (Eph. 5:20) By giving Him thanks in the name of Jesus, we are using the authority of that name to transfer all our troubles and broken dreams out of the kingdom of darkness into His marvelous light. The rest is in God's wonderful hands to bring a hope and a future in keeping with His goodness and His glory!