

## We Give Thanks

Do you spend much time wondering about God's will? It seems to me to be one of those questions that might reveal what each of us thinks about God... and what we think He thinks of us.

Perhaps you don't really believe that there is such a thing as God's will for *your* life. I suppose that could be because one doesn't really believe there is a God... and if there is, does a God worth worshipping bother with the minutia of a will for any one life?

Or perhaps you are on the *other end of the spectrum* and you are *obsessed* with God's will... so much so that every choice is an agonizing moment of trying to discern God's will... big choices (like careers and spouses and such) and even tiny choices (like what should I wear today; I clearly didn't pray about this).

It might even be that you've determined that there is no escaping God's will... that everything is predetermined and controlled by God in such a way that you really don't have any choices at all. For those that hold such a position, I wonder... if God wants to have a personal relationship with us, but we have no will or choice or initiative at all on our own, what does that say about God?

See what I mean? This matter of God's will, and our perception of it, reveals a lot about our faith... our relationship with, and understanding of, God.

I used to think about (perhaps even *worry* about) God's will a lot more when I was younger. That seems natural. When we are young we are faced with choices that shape the rest of our lives: what to study, who to marry, where to live, what career to pursue. These are the kinds of things that, if God has a plan, we'd like to know what He is thinking. Remembering my days studying for ministry at North Central University (it was Bible College back then), it seems that most students were fairly occupied with discovering, understanding, and pursuing God's will. Now 30 years later... it seems that I did okay, or God did okay, or we did okay together.

All that to say... I have news for us today. God **does**, indeed, have a will for us. God has a will for you, and me. Our God is worth worshipping precisely because God is so big that He has the capacity, both in His desire and His ability, to care for you, and me, and each of us. God has a will, and it does matter.



Would you like to know God's will today? Be careful... there is responsibility that comes with knowing God's will. If we know God's will then we have the responsibility to do God's will, don't we? If we know what God wants and don't do it... do we really want to put ourselves in that position?

Let's go for it. Here's God's will for you and me, clearly stated in His Word:

<sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. <sup>1</sup>

What is God's will, what is God's plan, what does God want from us? **Thanks.**

I don't mean to, in any way, minimize the idea that God cares for our plans and choices and behavior and such; He does. God cares about our choices and guides our steps. He cares about **what** we do... but God cares most about **who** we are. Thankfulness is a powerful indicator of who we are.

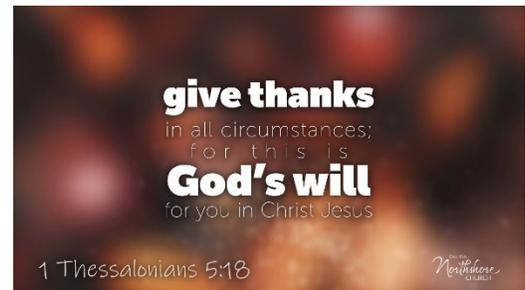
This is, of course, not merely a matter of **saying** thank you... not merely a matter of manners or behavior. We appreciate politeness and work to instill habits of politeness in our kids. We tell our kids to say *thank you*, and that is a good thing.

The meaning here is clearly a matter of **being** thankful; not just saying thank you, but being thankful... not merely what we say or even do, but **who** we are.

I want to drill down more on the implications of all this... but before we do, let's consider this *one verse* in its context. I take the Bible pretty seriously, and one of the first rules of taking the Bible seriously is to always consider the context.

This New Testament Book of 1 Thessalonians is another one of those letters from the Apostle Paul to a church... this time to encourage the new church in the Greek, port-city of Thessalonica.

This verse is among the *parting remarks* of the letter. The last words we share together, whether in person or in some sort of long-distance communication (like a letter or phone call) are often important. These last words are the kinds of things we want someone to remember. When parting from those most dear to us, we might finish by saying "I love you." When others leave us, we may want to give an instruction that we want to be sure they remember.



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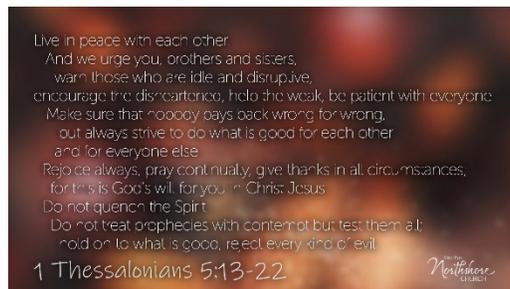
<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Th 5:18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

For example... more often than not, as long as I can remember, when finishing up a conversation with my dad (in-person or on the phone) his last words are “stay out of trouble.” I was rarely in trouble, nor do I tend to find myself in trouble these days, so I’m not sure why he often told me that. Perhaps that is **why** I am rarely in trouble because Tom Neary said so. I know that I’m not all that good; I’m not free from trouble because I am so wonderfully pure and sinless. I suppose I’m generally not in trouble because I’m pretty good at not getting caught.

So what we have at the end of 1 Thessalonians is Pastor Paul’s “stay out of trouble,” starting with this:

Live in peace with each other.

First off, we are reminded that God calls us to community, so living in peace with one another is the highest priority. What follows are instructions that, when followed, foster peace.



<sup>14</sup> *And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*

Be patient. There is little in our culture that encourages patience. We want it now. We are an instant culture... and that even comes to our expectations of one another. We may want patience for ourselves, but we often aren’t so instant in our giving of patience.

Who knows... in the family gatherings in the coming days, there may be an opportunity with patience for one another. Perhaps we should prepare ourselves today, asking God to give us gifts of patience.

Help the weak. Encourage the disheartened... and warn those who are idle and disruptive. Isn’t it interesting how Paul pairs idleness with disruptiveness? He is *spot on* with that, isn’t he?

Consider a hypothetical situation. Perhaps it is a busy kitchen (not hard to imagine in this season; I love a busy kitchen). Let’s say something goes wrong. Something isn’t done enough, or maybe it is too done. Perhaps an ingredient was forgotten. Or it could just be one of those *crunch times* when everyone has to spring in to action. In this scene there are those who jump in, help, and problem solve... and then there are those on the perimeter (the idle ones). Which of these are likely the disruptive ones? The ones working to solve the problems, or the ones merely pointing out what is wrong from the perimeter?

Let's watch ourselves to be sure we are not the idle ones on the perimeter, adding nothing but disruption. It takes so little to stand idly by and criticize; let's be part of the solution.

<sup>15</sup> Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

What is another way to say this? **Forgiveness.**

Forgiveness is a key ingredient for peace... a **major** ingredient; there can never be too much forgiveness. Forgiveness and thankfulness seem to go hand in hand.

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

This may be the most important bit of *context* that goes along with the verse we started with. It turns out that God's will is presented as **three** parts here:

- Rejoice always (v.16)
- Pray continually (v.17), and
- Give thanks in all circumstances.

We're going to focus on giving thanks (because, well, it **is** Thanksgiving). Nevertheless, God's will for us includes all three.

He desires a people who rejoice always. There it is again: **joy**. If you are keeping track, we are currently in a series from the New Testament Book of Philippians that we are calling *Joyride* because joy and rejoicing are such a prominent theme in that book (and throughout the New Testament). Joy... a sense of contentment, satisfaction, and cheer that is rooted in knowing God. Joy always... not merely derived from our circumstances, but rooted in our being.

Pray continually... there *that* is again. We also have a series going from the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah and we are seeing Nehemiah as an example of one who prays continually. Not that Nehemiah spends *every waking moment* in some sort of prayer meeting, but rather his approach to his work and life is constantly seasoned by and marinated in prayer. We have said **pray now** in response to the pattern demonstrated by Nehemiah. When faced with challenges, opposition, and even opportunity, we can follow Nehemiah's example and include prayer as naturally as breathing.

Finally Paul says:

<sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not treat prophecies with contempt <sup>21</sup> but test them all; hold on to what is good, <sup>22</sup> reject every kind of evil. <sup>2</sup>

Allow the work of the Holy Spirit; make room for and respond to the Spirit. When one is working to speak on behalf of God (even like I am now), be open to what the Spirit is saying. Make room; do not quench. And, knowing that we're all merely human (even though God chooses to use us, flaws and all) we are encouraged to *keep our wits about us*. We are charged to test what others say (and do) on behalf of God. Test, consider, even judge... but not with contempt. With an attitude of openness and willingness to hear and see God at work, we test, consider, and guard, holding “on to what is good” and rejecting “every kind of evil.”

We've heard it said: Eat the meat; spit out the bones.

With a few minutes left, let's go back to where we started and again consider verse 18.

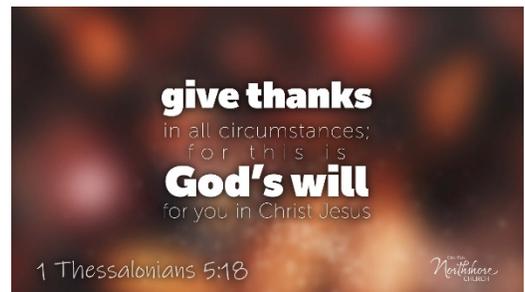
<sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. <sup>3</sup>

I hope you have a great Thanksgiving. It will be pretty easy for me to give thanks on Thursday. We'll have it pretty good.

While Shannon has been part of the family for a while now... this will be the first holiday when she is officially Shannon Neary; that's a lot of fun for us.

I don't know how it happened; but both of our sons (Alex and Donny) have managed to bring women into our family who do not have conflicting family celebrations of their own, at least not this Thanksgiving. Both Shannon's family, and Lauren's family (Donny's girlfriend) are celebrating on different days. We get to have everyone with **us** on Thanksgiving... a miracle that I certainly appreciate.

We'll gather together with Laurie's family; all three of Laurie's nephews are out of state for college... yet they will all be with us Thursday. We are blessed.



<sup>2</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Th 5:13–22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Th 5:18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And, of course, there will be a **feast**... the sort of thing that, again, makes it very easy to be thankful. It will be a matter of everyone contributing something; and it will be awesome.

Here's how great I have it. Yesterday morning, before rolling out of bed, I was scrolling through my Twitter feed and a post caused me to remember that for some it is traditional to have macaroni and cheese as a side dish at Thanksgiving. I think it is a *Dixie thing*, a common side in the South. It hasn't been part of *our* tradition... but I sure like macaroni and cheese (and Laurie has a *killer* mac and cheese recipe). So, I wandered downstairs and merely mentioned the idea... to which Laurie quickly looked up from whatever she was reading, and said **done**. I love my life! It will be so easy to give thanks on Thanksgiving!



But the text doesn't merely say give thanks on a special day with a special celebration when it is easy to give thanks. It says:

<sup>18</sup> give thanks in **all** circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup>

All circumstances... everyday... good days and bad days.



I proclaimed these words on a special evening not too long ago:

for better and for worse;  
for richer, for poorer;  
in sickness and in health;

Sound familiar? On that joyous, hope-filled day, these were not words of grim fate, entreating the bride and groom to **buckle-up** and endure. These were vows in the midst of celebration of love and lifelong commitment, a proclamation that this love and commitment would sustain them through all times, and a proclamation that “what God has joined together” would be durable.

This is what God desires for us and our relationship with him. In **all circumstances**, we are not called to merely *endure*, but to be **thankful**.

- We thank God for saving us, and keeping us.
- We thank God for using us.
- We thank God for teaching us.

<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Th 5:16–18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

- We thank God for what He has done, is doing, and will do.

*In all circumstances* certainly includes all seasons of life. Think about the youngest among us... as well as the oldest among us.

I suppose thankfulness looks a bit different on the ends of life, near the beginning and end. For the young, thankfulness might be a bit shallower... but it is often forward looking (thankfulness for opportunity). For the old, thankfulness should be richer and deeper... but it is often backward looking (thankfulness for what is now in the past).

Perhaps the old can learn from the young and remember that God is not finished with us. Of course we should be thankful for what God has done, but let's not forget to be thankful now for what He is doing, and what He will do in the days and years ahead.

We can also be reminded that **thankfulness is contagious**. We who are older have a responsibility to demonstrate thankfulness to those who are younger. Do the younger see us as voracious consumers, demanding satisfaction, critical when we are not satisfied? Or do they see us a thankful community?

Thankfulness is a disinfectant. When we find ourselves unsatisfied, critical, cranky, down, or even mean... try thankfulness. When we find ourselves not being treated fairly, by others, or perhaps we even feel that God isn't treating us fairly... try thankfulness. Thankfulness disinfects us from disappointment and dissatisfaction.

Give thanks... for this is God's will. Here's an obvious, yet critically important thing about thankfulness: Thankfulness requires receiving God's gift.

It must be tough being an *atheist* at Thanksgiving. Who does an atheist thank? I suppose we can be thankful to one another, thankful to our employers, and even thankful to our government who so wonderfully provides answers to all of our questions and provision for every need. All of that is good and right, I'm certainly thankful for one another... but the core purpose of Thanksgiving is to be thankful to God.

God does not demand our thankfulness for His benefit; He wants us to be thankful because we have truly received His bounteous gifts.

give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you **in Christ Jesus**.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Th 5:18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Thankfulness requires receiving God's gift... and,  
Thankfulness is a **result** of receiving God's gift.

Allow me to get at it with this question: Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

When it comes to being a Christian, I think people often get it wrong. Are people Christians because they are thankful, or are they thankful because they are Christians? It seems that folks think that churches are a place where generally decent, thankful people gather. This sort of attitude is revealed when I hear someone say that someone *would make a good Christian...* as if someone is *pretty close*, they just need to be a *little bit* better, slightly perfected in a church, in order to fit in. They are close, but just need to be *christianized*.

There were a couple of solid attempts to *christianize* me in both my elementary and teen years. I appreciate the efforts; they came from honorable motivations. But it didn't work. I didn't merely need to be a little bit better; I needed to be transformed. I didn't need to be *christianized*; I needed to be transformed by the Gospel.

Perhaps you are here today, sort of on the outside looking in, and you have determined that this idea of "giving thanks in all circumstances" is ridiculous... a silly notion for people who are not serious... or at least have not really dealt with the real difficulties, sorrows, and disappointment that life can bring. If "giving thanks in all circumstances" seems impossible to you, good. You are getting it. It would take a miracle... and that is just the miracle that God is offering.

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you **in Christ Jesus**.<sup>6</sup>

*In Christ Jesus* is the key. That is the miracle required to experience this truly miraculous thing of giving "thanks in all circumstances."

If you are finding the Church to be a place of thankfulness, know that it isn't merely a matter of thankful people gathering here today (and in places like this around the world) but rather the Church is a place of thankfulness because of the power of the Gospel. Thankfulness is a **result** of receiving God's gift.

When we believe in Jesus, it not only changes our eternity since Jesus is the Way to live with Him forever. Believing in Jesus, receiving the Gospel, changes our today and every day. We can be transformed... and that transformation is evidenced by thankfulness.

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<sup>6</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Th 5:16–18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Receive God's gift today.

To receive this thankfulness, may I suggest that we start with thankfulness?

Thanking God acknowledges God; it is a simple, yet profound, statement of faith.

Thank God with us today... and in so doing, believe.

Thank God with us today... and in so doing, receive.

Father, we give you thanks. Thank you. By thanking you we declare that we believe. By thanking you we receive that which only Jesus can provide. Give us gifts of patience and grace. Call us to prayer. Thank you for the joy you embed in our hearts.

