



How to be Thankful (*Eucharistos*) (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Introduction

Do you ever focus on the negative at the expense of being thankful? The problem lies in the eyes of our hearts. Anxiety focuses on the negative, making it the antithesis of thanksgiving, which is a very joyful attitude that occurs through prayer when our hearts are fully focused on God in Christ (Philippians 4:6). Anxiety is a divided inner being, one where our hearts attempt to focus on the circumstances at the expense focusing on Christ. This halfhearted attempt at getting through conflict deters us from giving thanks to God. Yet Paul encouraged God's people to "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18; cf. Ephesians 5:20; Colossians 3:17).

Paul's challenge can be pictured in the image of a magnifying glass that enlarges its focal point, while the images around it become fuzzy. When presented with conflict, we either focus on Christ or our circumstances. When we focus on Christ, our circumstances become fuzzy. However, when we focus on our circumstances, Christ becomes fuzzy. This foolishness of the heart darkens our divine focus (Romans 1:21) and leads to foolish, negative talk that flows from an ungrateful heart (Ephesians 5:4).

An example of anxiety stemming from the focus of the eyes of the heart occurred with Jesus' disciple Peter. During the late night as His disciples sailed on the Sea of Galilee to Gennesaret, Jesus had finished praying in solitude on a mountainside near Bethsaida where He had fed five thousand men (Matthew 14:23). When a storm hit, His disciples' boat nearly capsized as it tossed a considerable distance from shore (Matthew 14:24). Amidst this conflict is precisely when Jesus walked on water to their boat (Matthew 14:25). When the disciples saw their Master, they experienced tremendous anxiety, thinking that they had just encountered a ghost (Matthew 14:26). Jesus identified Himself and told His pupils to take courage and not be afraid (Matthew 14:27). After confirming Jesus' identity, and with not only the eyes of his head, but also the eyes of his heart focused on Christ, Peter jumped out of the boat and walked on the water too (Matthew 14:28-29). Then Peter did something foolish. He shifted his focus from Christ to the stormy circumstances, once again experiencing such anxiety that he cried out in fear (Matthew 14:30). Immediately, Jesus reached out His hand, catching not only Peter's body, but also his heart with these words, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31). When they climbed into the boat, the wind died down, and the disciples worshiped Christ in thanksgiving for who He was, God in the flesh (Matthew 14:32-33).

We can learn a valuable lesson from Peter's story. When we focus the eyes of our hearts on Christ, our circumstances become fuzzy, and we can be thankful in worship of who He is. When we focus the eyes of our hearts on our stormy circumstances, Christ becomes fuzzy, and we experience anxiety, a halfhearted attempt at getting through conflict. Whether we are thankful or anxious depends on the focus of the eyes of our hearts. Consequently, when we are tempted to be ungrateful, we must ask God to realign our focus 360 degrees: the *downside*, *upside*, *inside*, and *outside*.

Downside (It could be worse)

First, we must look at the *downside*. Regardless of our circumstances, it could be worse. This is hindsight that is mindful. In a cry for help, David thanked God for His strength



and protection, “The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song” (Psalm 28:7). David recognized that apart from God his circumstances could have been worse. Confirming that he could not have ministered without God, Paul informed Timothy, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service” (1 Timothy 1:12). In other words, left to himself, Paul would not have been strong enough or faithful enough to be appointed to God’s service. He was thankful for God in all circumstances.

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

What are your stormy circumstances? They might include a marital trial, debt, disappointment from a loss, an estranged relationship, a tragic accident, a lawsuit, or perhaps tremendous success that has translated into busyness. Where is your focus? Do you fix the gaze of your heart on Christ or the circumstances? Look at the downside. It could be worse. Consider journaling your choices, thoughts, prayers, and feelings as you recognize God’s provision and protection. Write down how matters could be more severe. Then thank God for being your strength and shield.

Upside (It can and will get better)

Second, we must consider the *upside*. In stormy circumstances, it can and will get better. This is foresight that is hopeful. While in prison, Paul called those in Christ to devote themselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful because God would advance His kingdom through them (Colossians 4:2). Circumstances would get better. The writer of Hebrews looked at the upside of God’s kingdom with thankfulness, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Hebrews 12:28-29). David wrote his *Psalm of Thanks* when the Ark of the Covenant was returned to Jerusalem, recognizing that God’s blessings would follow (1 Chronicles 16:7-36). He thanked God for His righteousness that would prevail over the wicked (Psalm 7:17). The psalmists penned songs expressing their thanks to God for His continued deliverance (Psalm 100, 118, 136). In spite of rebellious circumstances, Isaiah gave thanks because salvation would come through the Messiah (Isaiah 12:4). Daniel gave thanks as he looked at the upside of Babylonian captivity when interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Daniel 2:23). He continued to give thanks on his knees in prayer three times a day under yet another foreign regime, even though it would lead him to the lion’s den (Daniel 6:10). Nehemiah’s two large choirs gave thanks for the upside that God would provide after rebuilding the Jerusalem wall (Nehemiah 12:31, 40). The prophetess Anna thanked God for the redemption He would provide through the infant Jesus when He was dedicated in the temple (Luke 2:38). The upside in our circumstances is that God will advance His kingdom through us when we focus on Christ, not the circumstances.

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Look at the upside. Your circumstances can and will get better. Read Psalm 118 and Psalm 136. Then make a list of how your storm can improve by God advancing His kingdom through you. Thank God for what He will do. Memorize Psalm 100. Storing these five small verses in your heart will equip you with a powerful resource to recall as you look at the upside and become thankful in all circumstances.



Inside (We can ask the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts)

Third, we need to peer into the *inside*. We can ask the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts. This is insight that is worshipful. Our circumstances are not always the cause for our anxiety; rather, it is often our beliefs about our circumstances that create our emotional consequences. When we experience anxiety, we should pray a thank offering of our hearts to God (Philippians 4:6). The Old Testament writers saw a thank offering as worship, or a surrendering of the heart (Leviticus 7:12; 22:29; Psalm 116:17; Jeremiah 17:26; 33:11; Amos 4:5). Giving thanks is an act of worship where we focus on Christ, not the circumstances. David said that a thank offering fulfilled his heartfelt vow to God (Psalm 56:12; cf. Psalm 50:14). We can worship God because He is deserving of our praise. Hezekiah's thank offering came after repairing the temple (2 Chronicles 29:11). We can worship God when He makes things new. Manasseh prepared a thank offering after restoring Jerusalem's outer wall, removing foreign gods and images from the temple, dismantling all the pagan altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem, and restoring the temple altar (2 Chronicles 33:16). We can worship God when He triumphs in our hearts. A thank offering honors God by not forgetting Him and prepares the way for us to find salvation (Psalm 50:22-23). The psalmist thanked God for salvation (Psalm 116:12, 13, 17). Paul called us to be thankful for the peace of Christ in our hearts (Colossians 3:15). Jesus thanked the Father for salvation evidenced in communion (Matthew 26:26, 27; Mark 14:22, 23; Luke 22:17, 19). Thankfulness comes from joy because God's unfailing love endures forever in our hearts (Psalm 107:1, 22).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Peer inside and ask the Holy Spirit to examine your heart. How do you need to grow internally? Pray David's refining prayer of *search* and *surrender* (Psalm 139:23-24). David was thankful in all circumstances by asking God to search and help him to surrender any anxiety inside his heart, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24). As God reveals areas of needed growth, write them down as an act of surrender. Then write a prayer of thanks to God for saving and growing your heart.

Outside (We can encourage others)

Finally, we must focus on the *outside*. Regardless of our circumstances, we can encourage others. This is oversight that is helpful. Jesus thanked the Father for listening in order to encourage others to do the same (John 11:41). The Levites thanked and praised the Lord every morning as an encouragement to God's people (1 Chronicles 23:30). Paul was notorious for thanking God in order to encourage others. Paul thanked God for the Roman church's faith (Romans 1:8). Paul thanked God for the grace given in Christ to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:4). Paul thanked God for Titus (2 Corinthians 8:16). Paul thanked God for the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 1:16). Paul thanked God every time he remembered the church at Philippi (Philippians 1:3). Paul thanked God for the church at Colossae (Colossians 1:3, 12). Paul thanked God for the church at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2:13; 3:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 2:13). Paul thanked God not only for strength to serve, but also for Timothy (1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 1:3). Paul thanked God for Philemon (Philemon 1:4). Thanksgiving was a staple in Paul's letters, except for Galatians when he was angered at those who were adding religious barriers to God's grace in Christ. Paul told Timothy that we should make requests,



prayer, and intercession in thanksgiving for everyone (1 Timothy 2:1) because God wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). Amidst his fellow stranded travelers, Paul thanked God for His protection and provision during their shipwreck, recognizing both the downside and the upside from the inside (Acts 27:35). His gratitude affected the outside. They were all encouraged (Acts 27:36). Paul lived a life of 360-degree focus on Christ.

Paul said that generosity leads to thanksgiving (2 Corinthians 9:11). The poor are thankful and encouraged, not to mention that God sees it as a righteous act, when we are generous with the those in need, returning the quintessential cloak put up in pledge for a loan (Deuteronomy 24:13). Jesus encouraged others with His generosity and thanksgiving. When He saw five thousand hungry men, Jesus thanked the Father for His provision before He multiplied the five loaves and two tidbits of fish that left all of them encouraged (Matthew 14:19; 15:36; cf. Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; John 6:11, 23). He did the same when feeding the four thousand (Mark 8:6, 7). Jesus thanked the Father for His provision before opening the eyes of the two on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30-31). They left encouraged (Luke 24:31). God created everything in order to encourage us. Paul told Timothy that everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:3-5).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Focus on the outside. Amidst your stormy circumstances, encourage others by thanking God for them. Write in your journal the names of people for whom you are thankful. Include why you are thankful. Pray for God to bless them. Then send at least one of them a hand written note expressing your gratitude in Christ. Both you and they will be encouraged.

Conclusion

When faced with stormy circumstances, we are called to focus on Christ. Magnifying Him in our lives makes our circumstances fuzzy. When we are anxious and tempted to be ungrateful, we must ask God to realign our focus 360 degrees by surrendering the downside, upside, inside, and outside to Him. Giving thanks in all circumstances is God's desire for lives in Christ. It is His hindsight, foresight, insight, and outsight that provides us with the supercharged joy of thanksgiving that is mindful, hopeful, worshipful, and helpful.