

**Living Biblically:  
LIVING THANKFULLY**

**Philippians 4:4-7  
I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Scripture leads us to live with gratitude.*

A sermon preached by  
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We are talking in November about living Biblically, and part of living Biblically is living thankfully. And since it's Thanksgiving week coming up, I thought we could get into the Thanksgiving spirit with some thank-you notes from Jimmy Fallon.<sup>1</sup> (video)

The idea for "Living Biblically" came from a book by A. J. Jacobs called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*.<sup>2</sup> Jacobs described himself as an "agnostic Jew," and his attempt to follow every commandment in the Bible literally ultimately failed. But just trying to live Biblically had a profound impact on Jacobs' life. In the end, he had several commandments or principles that he learned from his year with the Bible. One of them was "Give thanks." He said that reading the Bible and praying the prayers of thanksgiving that are contained in Scripture led him to develop an attitude of thankfulness. He began to notice the many things every day that he had to be thankful for: food, a safe commute to work, nice weather, multiple blessings every day. Jacobs found that an attitude of gratitude became a key to happiness, and the more he gave thanks, the better he felt.

Living Biblically is living thankfully. Thankfulness or gratitude is a pervasive theme in Scripture from beginning to end. I went to my Bible dictionary to get an overview of the Scriptures about gratitude, and this was the sentence that began the article: "No motif more adequately reveals the nature of biblical faith than does gratitude or thanksgiving."<sup>3</sup>

Thanksgiving began as early as Abel, the son of Adam and Eve. Abraham and Jacob offered sacrifices of thanksgiving. Kings David and Solomon and Hezekiah all had designated priests to give thanks to God continually. A phrase from King David's own psalm of praise became a watchword for Israel: "*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.*"<sup>4</sup> That verse is repeated 11 times in the Old Testament. The Book of Psalms mentions "thanks," "thankfulness," or "thanksgiving" 55 times in 150 songs. It's a big deal.

In the New Testament, the attitude of thanksgiving continues, although in addition to thanks toward God for our blessings, now we

also have Jesus to be thankful for. In our two Scripture texts today, Paul encourages his readers, “*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God,*”<sup>5</sup> and “*give thanks in all circumstances.*”<sup>6</sup> Not just on the happy, sunny days when everything is going right, but in all circumstances—even when we struggle, even when we face tragedy or conflict or hardship—because even then we know that “*in all things God works for good*” and that “*nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”<sup>7</sup>

All the way to the end of Scripture, the Book of Revelation pictures the souls of the redeemed gathered around the throne of God worshipping and singing, “*Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.*”<sup>8</sup>

Thanksgiving is due to God because of what God has done—in creation, in the Law, in the blessings of seedtime and harvest, families, love, meaning and purpose, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that brings us salvation. We give thanks in response to a good and loving God. Again to quote my Bible dictionary, “Gratitude lay at the heart of biblical faith because it formed the only proper response to that which had happened in history—namely, God’s salvation of [God’s] people.”<sup>9</sup>

Thanksgiving has a significant place in the DNA of the American people. The earliest Anglo settlers on our shores were Christians, and they brought with them the habit of giving thanks. Helped by the Native Americans, the Pilgrims were able to survive and gain a foothold on a new continent. Early in the game, days were set aside for thanksgiving to God in both Massachusetts and Virginia. When the new nation formed 150 years later, proclamations of thanksgiving to almighty God were issued by the President from George Washington on. A particular day of Thanksgiving was established first by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. It was the last Thursday in November.

The American day of Thanksgiving stayed the last Thursday in November until 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt, under the influence of the founder of Macy's Department store, got Congress to pass a new law to make Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday in November. So whenever November has five Thursdays (like this year), Macy's can have their parade and start the holiday shopping season a week earlier.

Nowadays, Thanksgiving comes with the shadow of Black Friday hanging over it. Get the kitchen cleaned up so you can start Christmas shopping, right? I avoid Black Friday with a passion. Give me a football game and "postprandial somnolence" (the scientific name for a food coma) any day.

Many people see Thanksgiving as a day to remember our mistreatment of our Native American peoples, without whose help we never would have had even the first Thanksgiving. And the abundance of food on most of our tables reminds us of the many who struggle to have enough food, even in our land of plenty. So Thanksgiving becomes a mission opportunity, and many churches, our own included, feed people who are lonely or hungry on Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is more than a holiday. It is a constant attitude and a daily opportunity to thank God for our abundant blessings. There was an old gospel hymn that we used to sing in Sunday night church that went, "Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessings, see what God has done."<sup>10</sup> Each one of us can make our own personal list of blessings—family, wealth, home, community, work, and so on. I want to share with you today how thankful I am for our church. I find it to be an honor and a privilege and a delight to be associated with you people. We have a great church at First United Methodist of Fort Smith. I am grateful for the staff and leaders and members who produce the ministry we do. I am thankful for strong programs of ministry with children, youth, and adults. We get to touch the lives of hundreds of people every week. We have a tremendous outreach into the community of Fort Smith, particularly in the area of

food insecurity. In addition to our Thanksgiving meal, we have Pack Shack, school partnerships, Food at First, Sack Lunch Program, Red Shield Diner, Community Rescue Mission, and backpacks for kids through the Community Clearinghouse. I'm so grateful for your ministry.

I'm thankful for the way you support the church financially. This year we have had a very successful capital campaign that resulted in this beautiful new facility. Then when we followed that up with another campaign for our regular annual giving, you stepped up again: an increase in the number of families making commitments to give, and an increase in the amount we expect to fund our ministries for next year. That shows a tremendous outpouring of faith and love, and I thank you for that.

Gratitude gives us cause to celebrate, and it gives us strength for our times of trouble and hardship. It's no accident that Abraham Lincoln set up an American Day of Thanksgiving in the middle of the most devastating time in our nation's history. That is when we need to remember how blessed we are. It's good to remember how good God is especially when circumstances are not good, when we are suffering, when we need help. Gratitude is an attitude of faith and strength.

Multiple studies have been done by psychologists trying to understand gratitude, and every one comes out with the same conclusion: People who give thanks are happier, less depressed, stronger and more resilient than those who don't. Shawn Achor, a psychologist who teaches at Harvard, suggests that we can train our brains to become more grateful by setting aside just five minutes a day for practicing gratitude. He did a one-week study in which people were asked to take five minutes a day, at the same time every day, to write down three things they were thankful for. They didn't have to be big things, but they had to be concrete and specific, such as, "I'm thankful for the delicious dinner I had last night." Or, "I'm thankful that my daughter gave me a hug." Or, "I'm thankful that my boss complimented

my work.” The participants simply expressed thanks for three specific things at the same time every day.

At the end of one month, the researchers followed up and found that those who practiced gratitude—including those who stopped the exercise after just one week—were happier and less depressed. Remarkably, after three months, the participants who had been part of the one-week experiment were still more joyful and content. Incredibly, after the six-month mark, they were still happier, less anxious, and less depressed. The simple practice of writing down three thanksgivings a day over the course of a week primed the participants’ minds to search for the good in their lives.<sup>11</sup> Maybe that is worth a try.

Oprah Winfrey did an interview once with Elie Weisel, survivor of the Holocaust, human rights activist, Nobel Peace Prize winner. His memoir *Night* is a harrowing tale of the utter humiliation and contempt for humanity that was endured by the Jews in the Nazi death camps. But for all that Weisel went through in his life, he remained a very thankful person. Oprah said, “There may be no better person than you to speak about living with gratitude. Despite all the tragedy you've witnessed, do you still have a place inside you for gratefulness?”

Weisel replied, “Absolutely. Right after the war, I went around telling people, ‘Thank you just for living, for being human.’ And to this day, the words that come most frequently from my lips are, ‘Thank you.’ When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude.”

Oprah asked, “Does having seen the worst of humanity make you more grateful for ordinary occurrences?”

Elie Weisel said, “For me, every hour is grace. And I feel gratitude in my heart each time I can meet someone and look at his or her smile.”<sup>12</sup>

Living Biblically means living thankfully. Living thankfully means taking action to express our thanks. We can act on our gratitude in many ways. Many of you already do. You are active in ministry—helping

others, giving to the church, using the gifts you've been given to make the church and the community and the world a better place. Those kinds of actions are often generated by gratitude. There are many ways to live thankfully.

I want to leave you with one very simple and practical suggestion today. In September a group of us went to Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City for their Leadership Institute, and one of the things their pastor, Adam Hamilton, said struck me. He said that each week he writes a number of personal thank-you notes (I forget what number he said) to staff people, church members, and people in the community that he thinks need a pat on the back. Maybe they sing in the choir or work with children or were in the news advocating for some good thing. As busy as he is, Adam takes time to write them a note, and he said it's amazing how powerful those notes are for the people who receive them. I know if I got a thank-you note from Adam Hamilton, I would probably frame it.

That tidbit had sort of slipped my mind until I read this week that Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, recently took on a personal challenge to write one thank-you note per day, not only to encourage others, but to develop within himself a more positive and thankful attitude.

I'm kind of old school on this. I believe the best thank-you notes are hand-written, instead of an email or a text. If you want to go electronic, that's fine, but to me, hand-written says heartfelt. I do this often, but I don't do it enough. I want to challenge myself and you today to express our gratitude by writing five thank-you notes a week to people—folks that have done something good or performed well or that mean something special to us. Five notes a week—260 times in a year you will brighten someone's day and make them feel appreciated. I don't pretend that a thank-you note from me or you will have the impact of a note from Adam Hamilton or Mark Zuckerberg. But I believe you might be surprised what a difference it will make for your colleagues, friends and family. Are you willing to try that with me?

Living Biblically is living thankfully. You can't read the Bible without running into thanksgiving. You certainly can't live the Bible with being grateful. We have so much to be thankful for, and so much to do to show our gratitude. I hope you have a great Thanksgiving this week, but more than that, I hope you find a way to make thanksgiving your outlook on life, to make gratitude your fundamental way of being. Living thankfully will give you the strength, whatever comes your way, to live victoriously every day of your life.

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmy Fallon, "The Tonight Show," NBC.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgYHc\\_9jlc4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgYHc_9jlc4)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2fKS\\_IXP1g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2fKS_IXP1g)

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth R. Achtemeier, "Gratitude," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), Vol. 2, p. 470.

<sup>4</sup> I Chronicles 16:34.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 4:6.

<sup>6</sup> I Thessalonians 5:18.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:28, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 7:12.

<sup>9</sup> Achtemeier, 471.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson Oatman, Jr., "Count Your Blessings," 1897.

<sup>11</sup> Ken Shigematsu, *Survival Guide for the Soul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), Pages 114-115.

<sup>12</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 44.