

Editorial: Give thanks in all circumstances?

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Paul instructed the Christians in Thessalonica to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Did he really mean *all*?

I think he did, but that’s not really the issue. The issue is there are circumstances that don’t elicit gratitude in us. Well, they don’t in me.

I’m wrestling with this question, because Thanksgiving is only a couple of days away, and I’m supposed to say something about it. But what?

This year’s been tough. My father-in-law endured a year of pancreatic cancer treatment. My wife endured her own cancer treatment at the same time. Both are cancer-free now, for which we are profoundly grateful. But we are not yet in any way grateful they experienced cancer. In *all* circumstances?

These are just two circumstances from the last couple of years. I’m certain we all have our own lists.

I could do what so many of us do for these anchor holidays; I could write on autopilot about Thanksgiving. But I don’t want to waste your time or mine.

Since I’m wrestling with the question of giving thanks in all circumstances, I don’t have a polished argument or answer for this editorial. Time is ticking, and the calendar is full. I have to put something in writing, and all I’m doing to this point is avoiding the answer.

Are we supposed to give thanks in *all* circumstances?

What's in a word?

What does “thanks” even mean? As much as we use the word, surely, we know. But I wonder if it’s become so ubiquitous that we’ve lost the meaning.

[Merriam-Webster defines “thanks”](#) as “kindly or grateful thoughts,” “an expression of gratitude.” Nothing particularly profound there. Also, nothing that gets us closer to Paul’s meaning or helps us feel better about its scope.

Since I want to know what Paul meant, I need to look at a different type of dictionary. Specifically, I need to look at a Greek dictionary—since Paul wrote in Greek. When I do, I find something interesting.

ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε τοῦτο γὰρ θέλημα Θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ εἰς ὑμᾶς

Yes, it’s Greek to me, too. Thank goodness for Greek scholars and Greek dictionaries.

Here’s the English: “In everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus toward you.”

I’m not a Greek scholar—perhaps stating the obvious—but I’ve seen enough Greek to know the English transliteration of εὐχαριστεῖτε—eucharisteite—could change everything about how we understand “thanks.”

Eucharisteite. Anglican and Episcopal, Presbyterian and Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox Christians will see Eucharist, what many Christians know as Communion and what Baptists know as the Lord’s Supper.

The Greek word—in its verb form, no less—Paul used for “thanks” is the same word many Christians use to name the Lord’s Supper. How does that fact alone change our view of that ubiquitous word “thanks?” This is well

worth pondering.

But there's more.

The depth of thanks

Beyond the connection between the Eucharist and giving thanks, there are the parts of the word itself—εὖ and χάρις, or *eu* and *charis*. Here again, I'm thankful for Greek dictionaries and enough theological education to know what *charis* is.

Eu means “good.” *Charis* means “grace,” “the unmerited favor of God.”

I hope that stopped you like it stopped me.

Just as God's grace toward us in Jesus Christ is at the core of the Eucharist, grace is the core of the Greek word we translate into English as “thanks.”

In other words, Paul the Apostle of grace is telling us—and, yes, I do think his instruction is as much for us as it was for the Christians in Thessalonica—God has poured and is pouring out so much grace on us that we have more than enough to give a little back to God. What's more, God has given us so much grace that we have enough to give some back *in all circumstances*.

Darn it, Paul. I hear you.

Coming to terms

Are we really supposed to give thanks in *all* circumstances?

I understand the meaning of Paul's words taken individually, but the circumstances of life are such that I want to argue with Paul about the circumstances.

Paul, do you mean we are to give thanks to God *for* all circumstances or *in* all circumstances? That's one question.

Paul, do we have to *feel* thankful to give thanks? That's another question.

And "give" is a verb, which means I'm supposed to *do* something to demonstrate my thanks. But what?

In Leviticus 7, the thank offering involved a gift of food given to God and God's priest. This offering was to be completely consumed the day it was given.

Though Paul was intimately familiar with the Levitical law, I don't think he intended for us to give a food offering in all circumstances. I think Paul's instructions to the Christians in Rome shed some needed light here.

On the heels of Paul proclaiming "all Israel will be saved" as an act of God's mercy, he breaks into doxology, which concludes with:

"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:35-36).

Then Paul writes, "Therefore, in view of God's mercy, I urge you to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1).

This living sacrifice is acted out in humble service and love, as Paul explains immediately after.

Actions versus words

In whatever circumstance we find ourselves on Thanksgiving Day this year,

we likely will think or say a word of thanks. But I wonder how many of us will feel—much less be—thankful. Some of us won't feel an ounce of gratitude—either because we're overwhelmed with hurt or numbed by apathy. That's a tough place to be, I know, and I bet you do, too.

I want to get past that tough place.

As I try to get to the end of this editorial—which is more Bible study than op-ed—I can't get away from, I'm captured by *eucharisteite*—the action of God's good grace, because I know that in all circumstances, God's good grace is God's good gift to me and to you.

And I also know when I'm overwhelmed with God's good grace, giving thanks comes naturally—even in some of the worst circumstances.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com. The views expressed are those solely of the author.