Today’s sermon text is a portion of Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica, a seaport city of about 200,000 people, the largest city in Macedonia. Paul preached to the Thessalonians during his second missionary journey but was only able to stay about three weeks before being chased out of town. Chapters 4 & 5 are primarily instructions on living the Christian life. In order to give you the context for the verse we will be studying, I will begin reading in chapter 4, and then skip down to the middle of chapter 5.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2; 5:14-24  NIV

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Somebody shared a video on Facebook from the Forest Hills Church in Charlotte. The caption said, “Be grateful for what you have.” The clip opened with a young man sitting up in bed yelling “I’m alive! I’m alive!” Only it was not what I expected to see; the guy was all covered up in Christmas wrapping paper! And his wife was wrapped up too! He jumped up, tore the paper off himself, and began to run around the house. Everything was wrapped up like Christmas presents. He exclaimed with delight with each gift he found: His wife, His children; his shoes; the light switches; the water faucets, the shower head, the breakfast, his briefcase. Even the car was covered in wrapping paper.

He was giddy with excitement and gratitude for all the ordinary things that we take for granted. The video ended with the words: “This Christmas – be grateful for all the gifts around you!”

Of course, that applies equally at Thanksgiving time – Give thanks for all the gifts you already have!
The apostle Paul is an amazing example of someone who was able to give thanks for all things in his life. He had a dramatic, amazing conversion experience, and then spent the rest of his life traveling around the Middle East preaching about Jesus Christ. Some people liked what he had to say, and became Christians and started churches. But most of the time he was thrown in prison, flogged or whipped. Several times the crowds tried to kill him by throwing stones at him. He was shipwrecked three times, in danger everywhere, hungry, thirsty, and cold. He worked constantly at two jobs – one to earn a living, and the other traveling all over preaching, teaching, and starting churches.

As he traveled Paul wrote letters back to his friends in those new churches. He wrote to the church in Philippi:

*Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say, rejoice!*  

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*  

*I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*

Paul wrote to the Colossian church: “Be thankful… sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Paul was thankful even when he was in prison, because it gave him the opportunity to reach people who otherwise would never have heard about Jesus. One night, Paul and Silas were arrested and beaten and thrown into prison. They sat on the floor of the cell in chains praying and singing hymns to God. Through their testimony, the jailer and all his household became Christians.

Paul demonstrated all his life what he wrote to the church in Thessalonica:

*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

How is it possible to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, or to give thanks in spite of your circumstances?

Let’s start with rejoicing. Paul tells the new Christians “be joyful.” The source of temporary happiness may be a relationship or material possessions or a great job or good health. But the source of our unending joy is the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

The book, *Then Sings My Soul* tells the story of the hymn writer Helen Lemmel, who was born in 1863. Helen studied vocal music in Germany, where she married a wealthy European. He left her when she became blind, and Helen struggled with many heartaches during mid-life.

At age 55 she wrote the hymn “*Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his Glory & grace.*”

Helen Lemmel was blind, living on government assistance in a sparse bedroom, and had only a plastic toy piano on which to compose her hymns. Yet her life was full of joy and enthusiasm. When asked how she was doing, she’d reply, “*I’m doing well in the things that count.*” She wrote nearly 500 hymns before she went on to glory at the age of 98. Helen Lemmel was able to live a life full of joy because of her strong faith in Jesus Christ.
Jesus left his position on the throne of heaven to come down to earth as a human and live among us. He preached and taught his disciples. He healed the sick. He died on the cross to take the punishment we deserved for our sins. Jesus was buried and then rose from the dead, victorious over sin and death. Jesus reigns in heaven, and has gone to prepare a place for all who believe in Him. Soon he will come again, and take all believers home with Him.

We are able to rejoice in spite of our suffering because of the hope and promise of resurrection and eternal life.

Next Paul instructs the Thessalonians to pray constantly or continually, to pray without ceasing.

Constant prayer is the habit of sharing with God every joy and every concern, praying for those you meet, thanking God for his blessings, asking for help or guidance, acknowledging that you are totally dependent on God for everything. Remember to pray in the good times too, not just when you need something. Paul instructed the new believers to pray for one another. Pray for healing. Pray for those who preach and teach, that they may proclaim the Word of God boldly.

Paul prayed for people in the various churches by name. He prayed that they would grow in their faith, that they would be protected from false teachings. He prayed that their love for one another would increase and that the name of Jesus would be glorified in them.

Dr. Graham Standish, in his Tuesday evening class on “Living a Grace-Filled Life,” told about praying often for a member of his church who was dying of cancer. I don’t remember their exact conversation, but Rev. Standish asked the man how he felt since their prayers for healing were apparently not going to be answered.

The man corrected him, saying that he and his son had not spoken to one another for many years. But as a result of this diagnosis of terminal cancer, they had been reunited. The son came to visit, and their broken relationship had been healed. The man said that was the greatest healing, and the best answer to all their prayers.

Paul wrote the Thessalonians, “Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances…” Notice that little preposition “In.” Paul does not tell us to give thanks for all circumstances. We are not expected to be thankful for drunk drivers or cancer or bankruptcy. Paul says, “be thankful in all circumstances,” in spite of what might be happening right now.

The only way you will be able to do that is if you have been practicing what Paul said earlier in the verse – rejoicing because of who Jesus is, and building your relationship with God through prayer. The only way you will be able to give thanks in all and any circumstance is if you know God well and trust Him completely.

It is God who created you. He knows you by name, and has a plan and a purpose for your life. All that we experience God permits and uses in our lives to change us and mold us toward being like Jesus. The Bible says that God is at work in our lives so that we will “be transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.”

The more we believe in God’s great love for us, the easier it becomes to trust him and be patient during the difficult times of life. When we accept that God knows what is best for us, and that his end goal is our transformation into the likeness of Christ, then we will be able to thank God in our circumstances, knowing that the best is yet to come.
On Thanksgiving Day, instead of sinking in despair and grief after the massacre last month of 11 worshippers and the wounding of five police officers by an anti-Semitic gunman, Rabbi Daniel Schon and his congregation chose to give thanks and demonstrate gratitude to the officers and first responders at Zone 4 Police Station. Less than a month after the massacre, Rabbi Schon said, “There is a tremendous amount of gratitude we have toward our first responders, who really stepped up big time.”

He talked about cultivating gratitude “for the little blessings we get every day.”

He recommended looking at this tragedy as “a springboard and a catalyst to be more tolerant, to show more love, to be more engaged in our Judaism. We have to show how much love can do.”

When the Jewish children were done making thank you cards for the officers, about 40 men women and children drove down the street to deliver cards, 4 turkeys, 8 pies, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, and all the fixings to the police station. There was so much food, they were able to share with the fire fighters next door!

In the aftermath of horrific circumstances, the Jewish community in Squirrel Hill chose to give thanks for their blessings and express gratitude to those who had helped them.

Whenever we trust fully in the love God has for us and in his provision for his people, even in the midst of storms and fires and floods, persecution, suffering, gun violence and even death itself, it is then that we will be able to thank God in all circumstances.

This is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus: that you rejoice always, that you pray without ceasing, and that you give thanks no matter what circumstances you are in.

Paul ends his letter to the church in Thessalonica with a blessing for them and for all Christians:

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*" Amen.

**BENEDICTION**

May the Holy Spirit enable you to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks no matter what circumstances you are in.

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1 Phil 4:4
2 Phil 4:6
3 Phil 4:12
4 Col 3:15-17
5 Then Sings My Soul
6 2 Cor 3:18
7 1 Thessalonians 5:23