

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Thankful Living in a Grumpy World

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Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

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1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:18

It was the day after Thanksgiving. A woman caught her husband weighing himself on the scale. He was sucking in his stomach. “That won’t help you, Fred,” the woman said. “You know that, don’t you?” “Oh it helps a lot,” said Fred. “It’s the only way I can see the numbers!”

I know many of us are looking forward to a big Thanksgiving feast. However, I don’t advise stepping on a scale the day after Thanksgiving!

Many of us are also looking forward to another great Thanksgiving tradition – football! Someone once said, “Thanksgiving dinners take 18 hours to prepare. They’re consumed in 12 minutes. Half times take 12 minutes. This is not a coincidence.”

It’s true that the length of an NFL half time is 12 minutes. It may seem longer than that, but NFL half-times officially take 12 minutes. So if football is your thing, Thanksgiving weekend will be your kind of weekend!

But we all know that Thanksgiving is not just about food and football. I hope you know that! Thanksgiving is about giving thanks for our blessings. It’s about having an attitude of gratitude.

You won’t be surprised that showing gratitude is very biblical. Many times in scripture the Apostle Paul encourages us to give thanks to God in everything we do:

**Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 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.**

–Colossians 3:15-17

**In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.**

–1st Thessalonians 5:18

One of the reasons we come to worship is to give thanks. As we sing hymns and say prayers, we are giving thanks to God. Why? Not only because God is worthy of our thanksgiving and worship, but also because there is healing power in gratitude.

A growing body of evidence reveals that a sense of gratitude is critical to a healthy life. The more we appreciate the good, the more the good around us appreciates. It gives us more joy, more energy, and is just plain healthy. Gratitude can make all the difference in the world. It can transform us. It can transform our relationships. And it can transform the way we see the world. Abe Lincoln said, “People are as about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” There is power in an attitude of gratitude.

I saw it firsthand eating in a mall food court several years ago. It was during the Christmas holidays. The area was packed with people. It took a while to find a table. When I sat down to eat my meal, I noticed a family sitting next to me. They had just sat down to eat as well. They asked their young daughter, maybe 4 years old, to say the blessing. And she prayed for everything but the kitchen sink. She prayed for Santa and Rudolph. She prayed for her parents, the weather, and her dog. She covered everything.

As she prayed, something interesting happened. It got very quiet in our section of tables. When she finished her prayer people had smiles on their faces. For a moment, the stress of the holidays had been replaced with gratitude.

That little girl’s prayer changed our mood. I think everyone sitting near that child felt more grateful not only for the food in front of us but for the blessings around us. We had peace and joy in our hearts.

If only we could feel that way more often, right? We live in a grumpy, selfish world. It is so easy to get caught up in ourselves and what we don’t have. It’s so easy to get irritated over what people do or don’t do. And it’s so easy to get discouraged over what doesn’t work out.

Maybe that is where you are today. You struggle with having an attitude of gratitude and you want that to change. You want to be more at peace with life and experience more joy and thanksgiving.

How can we capture the peace and joy of gratitude more often in our lives? Well we can go back to scripture to help us with that. Once again the Apostle Paul shows us exactly how to experience more joy through gratitude. In the first chapter of Philippians, Paul gives us the key:

**I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. –Philippians 1:3-5**

Paul is expressing his gratitude for all the special people in his life and ministry. As he remembered his friends, he was filled with gratitude, and that gratitude led him to pray a prayer of joyful thanksgiving to God. By his example, Paul shows us that to remember is to give thanks.

If you struggle with feeling grateful, just take a moment to remember your blessings. You'll discover rather quickly there is much to be thankful for. For example you can begin today by remembering what you have.

### **Remember What You Have**

Bob Russell in his book *Jesus, Lord of Your Personality* writes, "Have you had a taste of the best this world has to offer? You went to Hawaii once on vacation, so now it's harder for you to enjoy the state park. You've eaten a steak at Ruth Chris, so it's harder to be thankful for a meal at Ponderosa. You've driven a Jaguar, so now you can't be as content with your used Chevrolet. You've cheered for a national champion, so now it's difficult to be grateful when your team has a good season but doesn't take home the title..."

"Generally speaking, the more we have, the less grateful we are," writes Bob Russell. "It should be the opposite; the more we have, the more thankful we should be. But it usually doesn't work that way, does it? ... It is a rare person who, when his cup frequently runs over, can give thanks to God instead of complaining about the limited size of his mug! Often it is the person who has had something significant taken away from them who learns the lesson of gratitude." Think about it. What would your life be like without your blessings?

Kent Crockett, in his book with the wonderful title *I Once Was Blind, But Now I Squint*, tells about his father who had to undergo radiation treatments for throat cancer. He writes, "The therapy damaged his taste buds so that he couldn't taste food. His inability to enjoy a meal made eating a dreaded duty. The doctors told him his taste might return after the treatments were finished, but no one could say for certain.

"Weeks passed, then months. Every meal became a forced feeding to keep him alive. After eating flavorless food for over a year, he sat down for dinner one evening. Reluctantly, he forced the fork inside his mouth and discovered that his taste had returned. What most people would call a bland dinner became the best meal he had eaten in his life."

Through losing his taste and then regaining it, [his] father learned to relish each morsel as never before. He became thankful for the ability to taste because he now had a reference point. He would never forget what it was like to eat tasteless food.

"You don't have to lose something in order to be thankful," says Crockett. "You can develop a 'taste' for your blessings by simply realizing what life would be like without them."

Think about some of the blessings you enjoy. Imagine you lost those blessings. Now imagine you found them. Just think how grateful you would be!

Someone said that "Christians are people who do not have to consult their bank account to see how wealthy they are."

A powerful email made the rounds the week of September 11th. It was called "What a Difference a Day Makes." It is a good reminder:

*On Monday, we e-mailed jokes. On Tuesday, we did not.*

*On Monday, we were fussing about prayer in school. On Tuesday, we would have been hard pressed to find a school where someone was not praying.*

*On Monday, our heroes were athletes. On Tuesday, we relearned who heroes are.*

*On Monday, there were people trying to separate us by race, sex, color, and creed. On Tuesday, we were all holding hands.*

*On Monday, we were irritated that our rebate checks had not arrived. On Tuesday, we gave money away gladly to people we had never met.*

*On Monday, we were upset that we had to wait 5 minutes in a fast food line. On Tuesday, we stood in line for 3 to 5 hours to give blood for the dying.*

*On Monday, we argued with our kids to clean up their rooms. On Tuesday, we couldn't get home fast enough to hug our kids.*

*On Monday, we went to work as usual. On Tuesday, we went to work, but some of us didn't come home.*

*On Monday, we had families. On Tuesday, we had orphans.*

*On Monday, September 10th, life felt routine. On Tuesday, September 11th, it did not.*

To remember is to give thanks. So remember what you have. But I also encourage you to remember *who* you have.

## **Remember Who You Have**

What would your life be like without the people you love? Appreciate the people in your life. Life is so precious, so it is important to be grateful for people.

But we human beings can be strange creatures. So often we hurt the ones closest to us.

A colleague tells of going to his doctor for a check-up. He and his doctor were good friends. After the examination was over, the doctor took off his stethoscope and said, "Now, will you examine me? I've got to get something off my chest that is bothering me." My colleague replied, "Sure. What is on your mind?"

He went on to talk about his only daughter who went through a bitter divorce. He said they had so much promise when they first got married. But he mentioned that the last two years they were married, he never heard them compliment each other. He always heard them talk about one another's faults.

The doctor said to my colleague, "I think it would have made a difference if they could have looked for something to appreciate about one another. If they had done that, they might still be married and happy."

There is much truth in what that doctor had to say. Appreciating the people in your life can heal wounds and bridge a gulf of dissension. Choosing to see the good in others can keep the loving force alive in an otherwise destructive situation.

I've learned that criticism does not do any good. Our culture puts a high value on criticism, but all it does is make things worse. Let's face it. How do you feel when someone comes up to you and says, "Can I give you some constructive criticism?" None of us look forward to those conversations. And we usually leave those conversations feeling bad about ourselves. I've never known anyone who said, "I'm a wonderful person today because I received a lot of fantastic criticism."

Criticism does not do much good, but honest appreciation works like magic. It can change lives.

"In the book *A Window on the Mountain*, Winston Pierce tells of his high school class reunion. A group of the old classmates were reminiscing about things and persons they were grateful for. One man mentioned that he was particularly thankful for Mrs. Wendt, for she was a special teacher who taught him not only school lessons but lessons about life.

Acting on a suggestion, the man wrote a letter of appreciation to Mrs. Wendt and addressed it to the high school. The note was forwarded and eventually found the old teacher.

"About a month later the man received a response. It was written in feeble handwriting and read as follows:

*My dear Willie, I can't tell you how much your letter meant to me. I am now in my nineties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, and feel very lonely. You will be interested to know that I taught school for forty years and yours is the first letter of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has for years. Willie, you have made my day. (Brett Blair, "Giving Thanks Before Thanksgiving")"*

When was the last time you showed appreciation to the people in your life?

Fred Rogers, better known as "Mister Rogers," would do something special in just about every commencement speech he delivered. He would ask the group of graduates to take a moment and think about someone who helped them. He would then be completely silent for about a minute.

I would like to do the same thing right now. Think of someone in your life who helped you.

Remember the special people in your life. This Thanksgiving, take time to write them a note or give them a call. You never know what a difference it will make.

As you sit down with loved ones this Thanksgiving, look at each of them and ask yourself, where would I be without her? Where would I be without him? To remember is to give thanks.

Of course, the best way to experience the joy of gratitude is to remember who has you.

## **Remember Who Has You**

A popular Thanksgiving tradition for many people is to go around the table and name a few things they are thankful for. I think it is a great tradition, but I have a suggestion for you. It's an idea I got from my friend, Brett Blair. This year, instead of naming what you are thankful for, go around the table and have each person answer this question: "If it had not been for God..."

Think about it. Where would you be right now without God? Empty? Without purpose? Lost? Reflect on God's faithfulness to you this year and express it to those you love.

I also encourage you to write down what you share about God's faithfulness. Writing down the ways you are thankful to God can be a powerful resource down the road.

Annie Dillard wrote about Eskimos in Canada who travel the great tundra west of Hudson Bay. She said as they make the difficult journey, they search for rocks and use them to build a tall tower. They will keep moving forward until they can no longer see the tower. At that point, they will stop to find more rocks to build another tower. Why? If they ever get lost, the rocks will guide them home.

Your memories of God's faithfulness can be your tower of rocks. If you ever get lost in life, just take out what you have written about God's faithfulness. Remember what God has done for you and it will lead you home.

Paul had learned to be grateful for God's faithfulness. He said:

**I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. –Philippians 4:11-13**

John Wesley had this kind of gratitude. Many don't know that Wesley had a great fear of death, like many do. Earlier in his life, it was his greatest fear. He really struggled with it. But when he came to the hour of death, his last words were, "The best of all is, God is with us." Wesley died giving thanks that God would always be with him!

The following passage has been a rock for me several times in my life:

*Let nothing disturb you  
Let nothing frighten you  
All things pass away.  
God never changes  
Patience obtains all things  
The one who has God lacks nothing  
God alone suffices*

–Saint Teresa of Avila

One of my favorite movies is *The Blind Side*. It's based on a true story about an abandoned homeless high school kid called "Big Mike." He gets taken in by a loving family, and they become his legal guardians. They nurture him so that he can live out his dream of playing professional football. It's an incredible story.

There is a powerful scene in the movie that takes place on Thanksgiving Day. It's just a day or two after Big Mike is taken in by this family. In the kitchen sits a mountain of food that has been prepared. Mike can't believe all the food that is before him, but the family just takes it for granted. They grab all they can and run back to the sofa with filled plates to watch the big game.

But Big Mike humbly takes a bit of food and puts it on his plate and then walks in another direction. The camera slowly moves away from the family on the sofa stuffing their faces to the big empty dining room table. And there is Big Mike sitting at the dining room table all by himself. He never had a big dining room table to sit around.

The mom, played by Sandra Bullock, notices Big Mike sitting by himself. She immediately turns off the television and orders the family to go into the dining room to eat. They set the table with silverware, china, and candles. They all sit around Big Mike, hold hands, and thank God for all of their many blessings. Big Mike reminded them just how blessed they were.

To remember is to give thanks. Remember what you have. Remember *who* you have. And remember who *has you*.



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097  
770-497-8215 [www.johnscreekumc.org](http://www.johnscreekumc.org)