

## “Received with Thanksgiving”

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First Presbyterian Church  
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### Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 20 New Testament Lesson – 1 Timothy 4:1-5

In her book titled “The Hiding Place,” Corrie Ten Boom tells about an incident that taught her the principle of giving thanks in all things.

It was during World War II, and Corrie and her sister, Betsie, had been harboring Jewish people in their home. The sisters were arrested and imprisoned at the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp.

The barrack they were housed in was extremely crowded and infested with fleas. One morning, Corrie and Betsie read in their tattered Bible from 1 Thessalonians 5 the reminder to give thanks in all things. Betsie said to her sister, “Corrie, we’ve got to give thanks for these barracks and even for these fleas.” “No way am I going to thank God for fleas,” said Corrie. But Betsie was persuasive, and they did thank God, even for the fleas.

During the months that followed, they found that their barrack was left relatively free, and they could do Bible study, talk openly, and even pray there. It was their only place of refuge. Several months later they learned that the guards never entered their barrack because of those blasted fleas.<sup>1</sup>

Now there’s a situation where, as the Apostle Paul says in our reading from 1 Timothy, “... Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is **received with thanksgiving....**” But hold on a second; God created everything, right? And if everything created by God is good – which would include everything in the world – does that mean there is nothing that should be rejected – not war, not illegal drugs, poisons, sexual deviants, Internet spam, or even those annoying calls you get from telemarketers?

What is it about receiving something with thanksgiving that somehow changes it from unacceptable to acceptable? I mean, that’s what it says in the Bible: “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving...” To find the answer to how this can be, we’ll need to finish Paul’s thought in 1 Timothy. He says, everything is good “... provided it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God’s word and by prayer.” (Sanctified means made holy.)

Here we see that thanksgiving and holiness being acceptable to God have something to do with God’s word and with our prayer. There are two actors here – God and us – two beings that work together to ensure that everything God created is rightly received by us, and thus, acceptable to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Les Parrott III, “Thank God for fleas,” Rev. Magazine, January-February 2001, 42.

In God's great wisdom, God has created a universe where we have a role in whether something is good or it's bad. Of course, in this relationship, God is the primary actor, the supreme being.

It is God who sanctifies that which we receive with thanksgiving, it is God who makes it holy, "by God's word and by prayer." The word of God is found in scripture. We can't know what is good for us without reading scripture, thinking about it, and talking about it with one another, studying it. And as for prayer, we can't know what is good for us without asking God about it, in prayer.

Now when it comes to reading scripture, our ability to rightly understand God's word depends on who we talk to about it, who it is that we listen to and follow in our study of scripture.

Paul clearly warns us about false teachings, saying, "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars..." And then he gives a couple of examples, examples of false teachings being spread at that time, "(forbidding) people to marry, and (ordering) them to abstain from certain foods, which," Paul says, "God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth" – believe in Christ and know the truth of Jesus' teachings. In other words, we cannot necessarily trust everything we hear about what is permissible in the eyes of God.

If we believe God is able to sanctify – or make holy – everything that God created – such as marriage, which people at that time thought was a distraction from one's love and devotion to Jesus; and certain foods, which people at that time thought were inherently unclean and defiled based on what they read in the Bible – if we believe everything that God created is good, then when we are faced with something that is bad or sinful, it's not the thing that's inherently sinful, it's us, or at least our use of God's good creation, our approach to that which God has given to us.

The question for us is, how can that which God says so clearly in scripture is **wrong and defiled**, how can that be made **right and holy**? Or can it? Again, it is has more to do with us than with what God has created. It has to do with our approach, our approach to God, and our approach to that which God created.

By reading God's word in a prayerful manner we can learn to receive with thanksgiving – to rightly receive – that which God created for good and which we allowed to become profaned – that which was made evil and wrong – not by God, but by us. Clearly there are certain substances and behaviors that are part of God's creation that we throughout history have abused and defiled:

War when it is unjust, illegal drugs – controlled substances – when they are abused, poisons when used to kill, our sexuality when it is used to hurt or control the other person; the telephone can be abused, an invasion of privacy, and the Internet, well, don't get me started on the good, the bad, and the ugly when it comes to the Internet and email.

But through all of this, God can deliver us and bless us **by God's word and by prayer**.

Take for instance, the guy who was teaching the Lord's Prayer to his 3-year-old daughter. For several evenings at bedtime, she would repeat after him the lines from the prayer. Finally, she decided to go it alone. Her father listened with pride as his little girl carefully enunciated each word, right up to the end of the prayer: "Lead us not into temptation," she prayed, "but deliver us some E-mail. Amen."

In prayer, even the onslaught of emails can be received with thanksgiving as a gift from God. There's nothing that can't be sanctified, made holy by God's awesome power, when we receive it with thanksgiving: when we receive it giving thanks to God and thus receive it properly, for its intended use.

Thanksgiving; it's different from thankfulness, different from being thankful. Being thankful tends to place the emphasis on us, the receiver of something that was given. "I'm thankful." But thanksgiving is different; thanksgiving places the emphasis on the giver. Thanks are returned to the giver, returned to God.

And that's where we come in when it comes to God sanctifying everything under the sun as good and holy. If we receive everything with thanksgiving, by giving thanks to God, then we are by definition unable to turn that thing to an unacceptable use or purpose. That's quite a power God has given us! And yet, we so seldom use it. We so seldom pause to give thanks to God and ask how God would have us use the gifts of creation we've been given.

Take for example the following poem by J.A. Blevins titled "Words:"<sup>2</sup>

"Today I said, 'Clean your room right now.'  
I failed to say, 'Thanks for doing a neat job.'  
Today I said, 'You're late. Hurry up!'  
I failed to say, 'I enjoy having you around.'  
Today I said, 'How in the world did you tear your jeans?'  
I failed to say, 'You're more important than things to me.'  
Today I said, 'Look at this mess!'  
I failed to say, 'I like the way you share with friends.'  
Today I said, 'Don't talk so loud.'  
I failed to say, 'Your ideas are important to me.'  
Today I said, 'Don't forget to empty the trash.'  
I failed to say, 'You accept responsibility well.'  
Today I said, 'I wish you'd stop that silly giggling.'  
I failed to say, 'I'm glad you're so happy today.'  
Today I said, 'Have you finished your homework?'  
I failed to say, 'I'm glad you do your best.'  
Today I said, 'I'm too busy.'  
I failed to say, 'Let's do something together.'  
Today I said, 'I need some peace and quiet.'  
I failed to say, 'I'm glad you're my child.'

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<sup>2</sup> In "Living With Children," October-December, 1981, referenced by Dan G. Johnson, *Neglected Treasure: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Bristol Books, 1989), 43-44.

Today I said, 'Don't ever do that again.'  
I failed to say, 'I love you.'"

Messy rooms; people who are late; torn jeans; screaming, naughty children; neglected chores; unfinished homework; and packed schedules – we may dislike these things, but none of them are evil. And as we've just seen, all of them can be redeemed and made good when they are received with thanksgiving.

In fact, it's hard to imagine anything in all creation – anything that's gone wrong in this world that cannot be redeemed, made good, and sanctified by receiving it with thanksgiving as we lift up God's word together in prayer.

As we sing our closing hymn today, we will do so with thanksgiving – so thankful to God for all our blessings that we return thanks to God, in the form of our time and talents and treasures. Know that God stands ready to bless you through all that you do. And to receive God's blessing, to enjoy God's gifts, all that we have to do is to receive them with thanksgiving, which means we receive them prayerfully and in keeping with God's word and their intended use.

Think of the trouble that could be averted, the hurts that could be overcome, the evils that could be avoided if we just stopped to pray as we receive all that God gives to us, pray that we as individuals and as a society would have the wisdom to use the gifts of creation not for evil, but for good.

Let that be our inspiration this Thanksgiving – receiving the gifts of creation in a Christ-like fashion. As you gather with family and friends, and even as you encounter strangers and adversaries, let us all receive them as Christ would, with thanksgiving in our hearts, and with confidence that God is able to redeem all things, to turn all things toward the good when we approach life guided, by God's word and by prayer. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

As we come before you in prayer, loving God, we offer first our thanksgiving that you are always present to us.

Forgive us for the times that we have not been present to you.

We regret all the times when we have looked for you in all the wrong places.

For, indeed, your son came to us not in a palace, but as a baby, in a stable. So we ask that you would instill in us the wonder and curiosity of a child.

Help us to be as accepting of others as children are;  
and as our children grow, help us to teach them that all people are your children.

Let us be as eager to help as children are, that working together we might bring healing to a broken world.

We pray all this with confidence, as your children, and using the words of the Lord's Prayer that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.