

Sermon Title: A Methodist Gives Thanks

Primary Text(s): 2 Corinthians 9:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (read by pastor in sermon)

Other Texts:

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Season: 8th Sunday after Pentecost

Series: The Distinguishing Marks of a Methodist

Main Point of Sermon: Disciples give thanks not for what is happening to us but for the fact that nothing can happen to us apart from the presence of God with us (i.e. Holy Spirit).

In 2 Corinthians 9:15, Paul

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (KJV: unspeakable gift)

After much criticism of the “new” movement of people called “Methodists,” in 1742 John Wesley wrote a paper, “The Character of a Methodist” in which he describes the characteristics, or “marks” of a Methodist. For Mr. Wesley, his movement was not about setting a people apart from the Christian faith, but helping them to be more intentional in their commitment to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

The first two “marks” were: A Methodist Loves God and A Methodist Rejoices in God.

Today we come to the third ‘mark’: **A Methodist Gives Thanks.**

You can’t properly read what John Wesley wrote without either having memorized the Bible cover to cover, or having a Bible in your hand that has a good concordance. Not having the capacity to memorize the scriptures, it takes me a long time to read Wesley because I look up references that I don’t immediately recognize.

The item 7 in his description of the characteristics reads like this:

7. **And he who hath this hope***, thus "full of immortality, in everything giveth thanks;" as knowing that this (whatsoever it is) "is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning him." From him, therefore, he cheerfully receives all, saying, "Good is the will of the Lord;" and whether the Lord giveth or taketh away, equally "blessing the name of the Lord." For he hath "learned, in whatsoever state he is, therewith to be content."

**** a living hope -- of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for me!" 1 Peter 1:4***

It goes on a bit more, but these beginning sentences seem to capture the essence of this mark. It directly quotes the KJV translation of **1 Thessalonians 5:18: “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”**

Well, I am going to jump right in on this one! This morning I sat at home reviewing the various prayer needs of people in this congregation. Just look at our current prayer list in our bulletin. **Terrible things have been happening to you!** You have recently lost loved ones, just as I have. You have had symptoms that were terrifying. You have gotten diagnoses that have been

disappointing, some devastating. You have received treatments that have brought you to the edge of death.

Is Mr. Wesley really telling us that we should be thankful when such bad things are happening? And what about the Apostle Paul who Wesley quotes so often? Have you read the Book of Acts? Do you have any idea the terrible things that happened to Paul as a result of becoming a disciple of the Risen Christ? They didn't have psychologists back then – was Paul trying to work out his grief on those congregations he had started?

And what about Wesley himself? I have read a lot from his journal. He was no Pollyanna. He was a realist. **I want to look at this 'mark' of giving thanks in the context of realism today.**

Wesley has it right that gratitude is the response to the grace of God. When we recognize that God has helped us – even redeemed us from our own ways – our response is thankfulness.

When we get good news, disciples give thanks to God. When we get relief, disciples give thanks to God. When we recognize powerful forces protecting us, disciples give thanks to God.

Mr. Wesley set aside Saturday's to consider the prior week's touches of God's grace, both large and small, and to give thanks in his morning and evening prayers. The other six days of the week he dedicated his prayers to the great commandments: love God, love others. He prayed this cycle for more than 60 years.

He was indeed a realist. He prayed for his shortcomings in loving God, he prayed for ability and opportunity to love others. **But Wesley also gave pause on a regular basis to realize God's answers to his prayers – sometimes unexpected answers.**

Second, when we consider Wesley's entire life and his ministry (it is all pretty much in writing for us to read), **we find that gratitude is grounded in the loving nature of God, not in the circumstances that were taking place in his life at any given time.** For Wesley as for us, the nature of God is goodness and love.

God does not take delight when bad things happen to us.

If we are people of the New Testament, then **we do not believe that God is mad at us.** John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life." **God loves. God redeems. God is good. And that is the basis for thanksgiving.**

When Wesley observes that a disciple **"cheerfully receives all,"** he knows that **bad things happen to good people.** And he knows that **we can only remain happy in life if we realize that we are not alone.** God is at work in our lives constantly to deliver us from evil – just as we pray so often – God is doing that.

Paul was not practicing therapeutic deism when he wrote "nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ" (Rom 8:38). Giving thanks is the reason Wesley could go to Paul's words again saying that a disciple has "learned how to be content in any circumstance" (Phil 4:11)

Wesley further develops this 'mark' of thanksgiving by pointing out that it leads us out of anxiety. We don't have to carry the weight of anxiety or burden of trying to figure out why

something is happening to us. God cares. God knows we are suffering. God gives grace. Our thanksgiving is the evidence that we are trusting God with our lives.

How do we pray as a disciple who lives in the real world? We can pray about anything and everything because we know we are praying to God who cares about us. We are praying to God who loves you and me. We are never interrupting God. We are never a bother to God. When we pray, even if we feel selfish in expressing our desires, God sorts through our feelings and addresses our real needs.

We can pray any time. We can pray big things or small things. We can pray whether we know what is going on with us or not. God is always open to us. And our response to God's constant presence with us is one of gratitude – giving thanks.

We all know people who approach life more as a problem to be confronted than as a glory to be lived. If they do that all the time, we begin to avoid them because they bring us down.

But there are others we know who wake up every day with the belief that God is good and is present to spend the day with them. They are **excited**, or **at least happy**, to see what joy the day can bring them. Some of them live with illnesses or disabilities. Some of them live with economic hardships. Some have family stresses. But we look forward to being with them because they are living into life.

Wesley commends our deep thankful response to grace that produces a grateful outlook on life, appreciative of the life we have been given. A disciple gives thanks. A Methodist gives thanks.