

## **“Thank You”**

### **1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

It turns out that Mom was right, but for more reasons than she knew.

We're referring to all those times in your childhood when she instructed you to say "thank you."

It may have been when someone gave you a gift or a compliment or extended some act of kindness toward you. Your first impulse may have been to enjoy the good thing that had come your way but your mother's words made clear that your first priority should be to thank the other person.

As we said, Mom was right, but not just because uttering those two little words was a matter of politeness. A recently released 10-year study of 200,000 managers and employees revealed that saying "thank you" in the business world results in bigger profits. When people are thanked for what they do, they are more motivated, and often, their productivity improves. This, of course, translates into more dollars. What's more, those leaders who do the thanking often gain a competitive advantage in the workplace because others like them and tend to support their projects.

Not surprisingly, then, CEOs and managers are encouraged to find opportunities to thank everyone from interns and mailroom employees to those farther up the corporate ladder. I saw another article in which the author provides a list of 28 expressions of gratitude for those leaders who are too "thanksgivingly" challenged to come up with their own -- including such simple phrases as "I'm truly grateful," "Your contribution is important" and "You make my job

so much easier."

Of course, laying it all out like that makes it sound like nothing more than a business method, another practice to boost a company's bottom line. And apparently, there's something to that, for it seems that the expressions of thanksgiving do make the recipients feel good, even if the one extending them is doing it solely for strategic reasons. As long as it sounds sincere, it's effective.

We probably shouldn't be too judgmental about that, for some of us just don't naturally think to say thank you as often as we should (maybe our mothers didn't tweak our ears often enough!). So if a dutiful but somewhat mechanical practice can get us expressing thanks more often, that's a good thing. And perhaps it can also make us start being aware of when thanks should be given.

For a different view of this matter of giving thanks, consider Paul's letters as we have them in the New Testament. In the letter-writing conventions of Paul's day, it was common to include an expression of thanksgiving in the opening section of letters, and Paul did it in all of his epistles to churches, with the exception of the one to the Galatians. In that single case, it's likely that he was so distressed about problems in the Galatian church that he couldn't think of any basis for thanksgiving. But that single exception also suggests that when Paul did include a thanksgiving in a letter, he didn't do it as a matter of courtesy or routine, but only when he believed it was warranted.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is an example of much deserved thanksgiving. In this letter, he not only included a thanksgiving for the Thessalonian church members at the beginning (1:2-5), he also thanks God again for them halfway through the second chapter (2:13-

16) and again in the third chapter (3:9-10), which is a lot, considering that there are only five chapters in the whole letter! As commentator Beverly Roberts Gaventa put it, "There is more thanksgiving here than interpreters know how to handle."

Of course, Paul had a founder's interest in the church at Thessalonica, for he and Silas had planted it there on Paul's second missionary journey. In fact, in the letter, Paul compared his feelings for the Thessalonians to the compassion parents have for their children (see 2:7, 11). And Paul had reason to be proud of the Thessalonians. Paul and Silas had barely gotten the church started before they'd been run out of town by a jealous mob (Acts 17:5-9). Yet in those hostile surroundings, the church they'd launched continued and grew, and so Paul had much to thank God for on their behalf. Their growth amid that hostile environment may be what Paul had in mind when he wrote in his thanksgiving, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1:6-7).

We should note that Paul's expressions of thanks are addressed not directly to the Thessalonians themselves, but to God on their behalf. Writing not only for himself, but also for Silas and Timothy (1:1), Paul says, "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2-3). But, of course, the Thessalonians would have heard that as a thank you to them as well. Just as I thank God for all of you and appreciate your works of faith and labors of love. People ask me all the time how I survive as the only ordained person on staff in a church with a thousand members. I tell them

I'm blessed with a strong staff and a congregation that is open and committed to lay ministry.

We listen to Jesus teach and then act on what we hear. We give of ourselves generously.

In the same way, Paul is not saying he's thankful that the Thessalonians are nice people; he's much more specific about his reasons for thanking God for these folks: He's thankful for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." Because we're familiar with Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13, we already know that he considers the trifecta of faith, hope and love to be the highest of virtues, so we're not surprised that he also refers to them here.

But when he includes these three in his thanksgiving for the Thessalonian Christians, he does not talk about them as virtues in isolation, but gets more specific: He's thankful for their *work* of faith and *labor* of love and *steadfastness* of hope -- in other words, Christianity in the living of their lives. Their faith is grounded in the salvation presented by Jesus, but it doesn't stop there. It gets translated into what they do, how they act toward one another, the way in which they face the troubles of life, and their attitude about how things will come out in the end. Christianity is not a static belief for the Thessalonians, but a dynamic force that permeates all they say and do.

That's a lot to be thankful for in a group of people.

Of course, letting someone know you're thankful for something they have done or some attitude they exemplify has another effect as well: *It encourages the person to continue in that way.* That's certainly part of what's behind the move to say thank you in the workplace, and very likely Paul has that goal in mind as he lavishes praise on the Thessalonians; he wants them to keep on living their faith wholeheartedly.

But Paul himself is also a better person for his efforts to thank the Thessalonians. In expressing praise to God for them, he is recognizing the ways in which God is blessing his work, and thankful people are, in general, happier people.

Back in the 1930s, the Jewish philosopher/theologian, Martin Buber, wrote a book in which he explained that our human interactions are of two kinds. The first he called the "I-it" relationship. This is when we have no vital concern for other people; we are detached from them. You stop at a restaurant for lunch and a server takes your order. You don't know her and have no real desire to. You don't know about her broken marriage or her concerns about her children or her sore feet or whatever. She's primarily a person who provides you a service. Your relationship to her is essentially the same as to a robot who could deliver food to your table. This is a subject-to-object, I-it relationship.

The other way in which we relate to others, says Buber, is the "I-thou" relationship. This is when the other person ceases to be a "something" to us and becomes a "someone." I-thou is where I view you not in terms of what you can do for me, but in terms of who you are as yourself.

And sincerely thanking someone forces us to see the other person as *thou* and not as *it*, and that changes both the other person and us.

That's something John Kralik discovered. As 2008 dawned, Kralik was living in one room in Los Angeles, separated from his wife and watching his law practice sinking in hard times. But he started the year by taking a walk in the mountains, and on that walk, he became aware of an inner voice saying, "Until you learn to be grateful for the things you have, you will not receive the things you want." So he decided to begin writing thank-you notes, and he

started with his oldest son. At Christmas, the son, a grown man, had given him a one-cup-at-a-time coffee maker. With this gift, Kralik said, his son "was saying that he knew something about me. I'm a notorious caffeine freak." But when he sat down to write his son a thank-you note, he realized that he didn't know the address. Kralik, who has since written a book titled *365 Thank Yous: The Year a Simple Act of Daily Gratitude Changed My Life*, which I enjoyed reading this summer said:

Realizing you do not have the address of someone really takes you out of yourself and helps you focus on the other person. You begin asking questions such as, "Where are they living? How are they doing?" We get so wrapped up in the day-to-day that we lose touch. I decided to hand-write a note rather than send him one that was machine created.

Do you hear the "I-thou" there?

When Kralik called his son to get the address, his son said he'd like to come by and take his dad out to lunch. And to his surprise, while they were at lunch, his son repaid a \$4,000 loan that Kralik had forgotten about. So afterward, Kralik wrote his son another note, thanking him for repaying the loan, and admitting that he really needed the money.

As the year progressed, Kralik made it a practice to handwrite someone a thank-you note every day. And that eventually included family members, clients and even the server at the shop where he got his morning coffee. And to his surprise, gratitude became his way back to success and harmony. "I was at the point of financial collapse, but I decided to keep saying thank you," said Kralik. "I wrote to other attorneys and to good clients. One colleague said, 'When you thanked me, I appreciated it. When we sent you a client we didn't know how you felt about it.'" He also wrote to people he'd lost touch with, some of whom have now renewed the friendship.

When the year was up, he stopped writing the notes briefly, but said, "That didn't work out for me." He resumed the practice and now continues to write a note of thanks a day.

Kralik admits that he didn't gain control of the universe, and he says that there continued to be some setbacks. But, he says, "In the act of being thankful -- which is after all good manners -- my world began to thrive." Kralik is now a judge on the Los Angeles Superior Court.

Some of you have received handwritten thank you notes from me, usually on the back of a postcard. I've been doing this, off and on throughout my 27 years of ministry. It really is worth it!

Paul's practice of thanking God for those among whom he worked was not just a habit, but a genuine expression. It encouraged the people in the churches and made Paul a better person.

We can help our church and make it more vital by thanking God for the faith, hope and love of our fellow worshipers, and by thanking them directly as well. We can help our family, friends and acquaintances by thanking them. And we can become better people -- and better Christians -- ourselves by taking the time to express our gratitude.

There really is a lot to be grateful for.

#839 or 840 – Now Thank We All Our God