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1 Corinthians 1:1-8 ESV

1 Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 ESV

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.

23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Ephesians 5:18b–21 ESV

be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Never-ending Thanksgiving.

We didn't have an extended family when I was a boy. We lived in southern California. My father was an only child whose father died when I was little and whose mother lived in a town called New Bedford, on the coast of Massachusetts; it's an old Portuguese fishing village. My mother had a brother and two sisters, but they, too, lived three thousand miles away, also in Massachusetts. My mother's family was also very far from being close, with only very minimal contact between my mother and her parents and siblings. So, we never had anyone other than our immediate family over for holidays. There were five of us. I was the youngest, and so, at some point, my brother and sister were grown and gone. Then I moved away, too, but unlike my siblings, I was still in-state, as I was a graduate student at USC. So, one Thanksgiving, there were the three of us, my parents and me. That Thanksgiving, for some reason, my mother came home with an absolutely huge turkey, one that would barely fit in my parents' oven. "What the hell are we going to do with that?" asked my father. My mother looked up from the frozen bird that I had just lugged into the house and slammed down on the kitchen counter. My mother smirked: "Eat it." I'll get back to this.

Our first quote is from First Corinthians, and it is a standard introduction that Paul includes in his letters. This letter is addressed to the Christians of

Corinth, a commercially powerful port city in Greece, on the coast of the Mediterranean. The church in Corinth had some problems that Paul wanted to address. There were conflicts between Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity. There were problems between the varying economic and social classes represented in the church. And there were tensions among people who wanted to be leaders in the church in Corinth. The intro to the letter includes this: *⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.* Paul is making sure that he treats the Christians of Corinth with respect, that they understand that he appreciates them. He wants them to feel good about having come to accept Jesus as their savior. He says that he will always be thankful for their presence in his life. He also assures them that they will always have the protection and love of God, that God will carry them throughout life:*⁷so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Paul knows that no matter what conflicts there might be among the Christians of Corinth, they will grow the most if he affirms them as believers.

Our second quote is from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. By the way, scholars believe that Paul really did write 1st Thessalonians, but not 2nd

Thessalonians. 1st Thessalonians, as it turns out, is considered the oldest of the surviving letters written by Paul. Again, Paul is offering advice to this church, which, like the church in Corinth, Paul founded. First, the Christians there were facing persecution. Second, there were problems with their theology and their personal moral practices. In our passage, Paul writes: *Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* This comes from deep within the letter. In this passage, he is telling them to always be thankful, that they should accept whatever happens in life as the will of God. But the passage goes on, and it is very powerful. It says: *¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.* Paul is very big on the holy spirit and grace, and he wants them to remember that their primary goal is to be good people and to not reflect the evil of the commercialized, hedonistic society that surrounds them. And in a way that is similar to our passage from 1st Corinthians, he goes on to tell them that if they have faith, God will always be with them: *May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.* Again, Paul is using an upbeat approach to correcting the faithful. Paul is often very blunt and negative

when he must tell a church that they need to fix their ways, but he is equally often uplifting and affirming.

Our third passage is from Ephesians: *be filled with the Spirit,*¹⁹ *addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,*²⁰ *giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,*²¹ *submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.* In his usual way, Paul is lifting up the Christians of Ephesus, telling them to support each other in prayers and songs, and to always be thankful to God, and to offer up their thankfulness in the name of Jesus Christ. Wendy and I have been to the ruins of Ephesus; they are near the coast of Turkey. They were discovered in the mid-1800s. People had been looking for them for hundreds of years. Ephesus was a coastal city in biblical times; what they didn't know was that the ocean had receded significantly since the time of Christ, and so the astonishingly preserved, vast ruins of Ephesus were buried a surprising distance inland. By the way, there are many scholars who believe that, even though he visited Ephesus multiple times, Paul did not write this letter, and that it was written by a disciple of his, perhaps decades after his death. But this was common practice back then, attributing a letter to a respected leader, and it wasn't an attempt to fool anyone or to trick future generations. It's also believed

that the writer of this letter used 1st Corinthians as a model for how Paul wrote his letters. The author was trying to be instructional and honor Paul's theology.

The letter to the Ephesians was probably addressed to more than just the people of Ephesus; most likely, it was a circular letter that was sent to a number of cities, including Ephesus. These cities were almost certainly all in western Asian Minor, which is today more or less Turkey. Interestingly, it isn't really a letter. It is actually a rhetorical document; rhetoric was a popular ancient style of writing, used when someone was trying to influence an audience with logical and compelling arguments. It was thus not directed toward the needs or problems of any particular church, and so, unlike our first two passages, this one was intended to provide guidance to Christians as a whole. One of the author's biggest concerns was to prevent people from falling for Gnosticism, something that we have talked about in the past. Our pseudo-Paul is trying to convince people to live according to Christian principles of love and prayer, and not by the decadent, selfish ways of the wealthy people of the highly prosperous city of Ephesus.

Continued, nonstop, sustained thankfulness in the context of being uplifted by God and with the knowledge that God truly has given each and every one of us incredible blessings - that's the common theme of our three passages.

I'd like to get back to that giant turkey my mother bought. I should explain that my parents were not at all social people. They were recluses, actually, and they never had friends or neighbors over. I think it had to do with both of them having had very lonely childhoods. My father barely knew his father, who was usually running from the law. He had no siblings, no cousins in the United States. My mother wasn't truly raised by her French-speaking parents. She and her two sisters were deposited in a boarding school run by sisters from France, and that "school" was really more of an orphanage. Her parents didn't want to bother to take care of their own kids, and they found some sisters who would do it for free. My mother had a brother who was left with Catholic brothers, as well. So, my mother grew up not feeling loved or valued by her parents. I figured that it would just be the three of us for Thanksgiving, as usual. I also assumed that my mother would send me home with a huge amount of turkey to eat in my apartment. I was already planning on having a handful of my computer science buddies over.

But then, after my mother spent the afternoon cooking an unbelievably vast meal, I began to wonder if I was going to need to throw a party so that the food wouldn't spoil. It wasn't just the turkey. She was making mashed potatoes, yams, green beans, stuffing, cranberry sauce – all of it in very large amounts. Then she asked my father and me to put the giant insert in the dinner table –

something that I didn't remember us ever using. There were only three of us! But then, as she was laying the feast out on the extended table, the doorbell rang. Someone came in; it was my roommate, who happened to also be a grad student in computer science. Then the bell rang again. Then again and again and again. And again.

My mother had invited a half dozen friends of mine from grad school. She had gotten their names from my roommate, and told each of them to bring a friend, if they wanted. You see, most of my friends were from either out of state or from out of the country, and so they didn't have anywhere to go for the holiday. My roommate didn't even know what Thanksgiving was – he was from France, which by the way, my mother loved, as that meant she could chatter in French with him all evening. We all had a great time. My father even spoke French, and he spoke Spanish with another graduate student friend of mine. There was enough food to send each of my friends off with some leftovers. I had never seen my usually sedate mother so lit up, so animated, so excited.

After everyone had gone home, and my father was out of the room, and I was helping my mother clean up, I asked her what made her decide to do that. "You guys aren't exactly entertainers, you know," I said. "What inspired you?" I asked. She said that she did it for me. "I wanted you to know that I am thankful

for having you as a son,” she said. “Of course, I am thankful for your brother and sister, too, but since you happen to be here this Thanksgiving,” she said, “I decided that I wanted this to be a Thanksgiving you personally would always remember.”

My mother may have had a sad and lonely childhood, but she was a true believer. She knew that God had given her a life that most people on this planet didn't have. She came to a point where she felt she had to express her thankfulness in an outward way. To do this, she decided she had to lift me up. That's what we're doing here today. We all inherit the mission of Paul the evangelist: to encourage all those around us to be thankful for what God has done for us on this planet, to be thankful for God filling us with the nonstop fire of God's grace, and to be thankful for God making us confident of an eventual eternal life. We know that by being affirming, we inspire each other to increase our faith in God. We always treat each other in an uplifting fashion, just as God is always there to lift us up. Amen.