

“GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES” By Pastor YAU
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 November 20, 2016.

INTRODUCTION:

1) Thanksgiving in the Bible: Most of us are familiar with Thanksgiving in American history and the celebration in today's world. It all started almost 390 years ago in 1627 when the early Christian immigrants celebrated their first harvest in this new land, and later their country. But that isn't the first record of thanksgiving celebration. In Deuteronomy 16:13-17, the Bible recorded a God given order of celebration among God's people, the Israelites, about 4,000 years ago, the occasion of celebration after the harvest in their new homeland, Canaan. God gave his command through Moses that his people should celebrate a feast for seven days once a year after they entered and occupied the Promised Land. That occasion is called Feast of Tabernacles (tents). Basically, once a year, God wanted his people to live in tents outside of their homes, to relive the life experience of their ancestors when they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years living in tents. God also wanted them to teach their children the history and meaning of this celebration.

2) Thanksgiving in my personal life: Since September 6, 1963, the first day I began my seminary training at HK Baptist Seminary, to prepare myself for the mission God had called me and I had committed my life to do: To bring the gospel message to Chinese people in the overseas, it has been little over 53 years of my 77 years life to this date. After I graduated on first part of my seminary training in 1968, the Lord has assigned me to four churches in three countries: 4 years in Hong Kong, 4 years in Singapore, 16 in Dallas, TX and 24 here in Memphis at this church. Now I am in the countdown of weeks and days to my retirement on Dec 31, it is a special time for me to count all the blessings the Lord has poured on me, my family, and my ministry in these 48 years of services, half of that, 24 years, at this FCBC.

THE PREREQUISITES OF THANKSGIVING: (1 Thess 5:16-18)

1) It all begins from the heart: “Be joyful always.” (5:16) Joyful is happy. Be always joyful is be always happy. To many of us, it isn’t possible to be happy all the time. Life is a mixture of joy and sadness, good time and bad time. But if you want to be thankful for all things in your life, the good and the bad, you must have a proper condition in your heart: Always feel good, joyful and happy no matter what comes your way. Yes, but how?

2) Built on our relationship with God: “Pray continually.” (5:17) Prayer is our lifeline to God. Continual prayer means a constant connection with God and to God. This includes our spiritual resource from God, our perspective of life from God and our ability to be joyful from God. People without God either have nothing to give thanks for, or credit all good things in life to themselves instead of the source of blessing, God. So, thanksgiving is a good time to examine our relationship with God: How close or how distant from Him.

3) Finally it’s all God’s will in them: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will in Christ Jesus.” (5:18) Give thanks in some circumstances, the happy things, the success, the good time, is easy and we all do. But how can anyone feel thankful in all circumstances, the good and the bad? Since no one may choose what may happen in his life, the good and the bad, he has a choice to make how to face all of them: Be joyful and happy, or be sad and miserable. God advises us to choose be joyful and thankful and he has a good reason: This is His will in Christ Jesus---God made our life that way, it’s his will. God has a purpose to allow us facing all kinds of circumstances, some are better than others, and he has a good reason to do that. Our God is good and loving, and His will is always “good, pleasing and perfect.” (Rom. 12:2)

COUNT ALL GOD'S BLESSINGS:

1) Counting the grace of God: “But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace in me was not without effect.” (1 Corinth 15:10) This is part of the narrative Paul gave on the call of God and God’s transforming grace that made him who he was and what he has done. In a much smaller scale, I also may testify before you that it’s all God’s grace that I have become who I am today and what I have done for him. If I rejected God’s call when I was in early 20s, and continued my career as an accountant in a bank in Hong Kong, I am sure I won’t be this kind of person and I won’t have the opportunity to preach the gospel, counseled and led people to Christ and baptized them into the church. I may not have as much in material possessions as a preacher vs as working in banking business, but that will not build me any thing in God’s kingdom or inherit anything in heaven. All these is from the grace of God.

2) Counting ministry experiences: “For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstance. 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.” (Phil 4:11-12) Here Paul was talking about the experiences he had learned in material condition which I can say “Amen!” Being a preacher, one of the things I have learned is to live within means, to take care of the needs of my family with whatever God has provided. In all my 48 years of serving the churches, I never talked or complained to anyone that I don't have enough money. If I want more money, more material things, I won't answered the call of God to be a preacher. God called me to become a preacher in the middle of a dating relationship with my wife. I told her what God wanted me to do the rest of my life and what kind of life it may look like in term of monetary or material needs. She agreed with me and we have married for all these 48 years, I am very grateful to my wife who supports me in good days and bad time without any complaint or grudging.

3) Counting relationship with people: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom 12:18) I also

have learned how to get along with people, all kinds of people: The very nice to the very mean, the very close to the hard to approach, the very forgiving to the fault-pickers, all kind of people in the churches. Most of you working in secular jobs have the luxury of choosing people to deal with, but when you are a pastor, you have to deal with all of them, because your work depends completely on the good will and volunteerism of all people. Working among those situation for 48 years helped me to mature, to be moderate, to be strong not be affected by anyone who want to make your job difficult, or always on the looking to pick your fault. After all these years, I think it is foolish to make any enemy in a church. Unless it's on doctrinal and moral grounds, usually I take a back step to let go of any possibility of conflict with anyone. Yes there are people I don't care if I will see him again after I left that church, but there are people who are your long term friends even after I left that church over 30-40 years ago and we are still good friends.

4) Counting the long 48 or 53 years: Throughout the years since 1963, I have seen students quit seminary training, preachers quit not just their job but their call to serve for various reasons. Except a very small number, most of those who quit serving the Lord and his churches because of difficulty at their job condition and other related issues. In fact, the idea of quitting came to my mind more than a couple times when things got so difficult to continue. God had used an innocent act to bring me back every time I was more than ready to throw the towel. At the graduation of my class in Hong Kong, I was elected as class representative to give a response to the charge from the seminary president encouraging students to be faithful in our service. In my response speech, I coveted the support and prayer of the over 2,000 in the audience to uphold us when I pledged, on behalf of the class: "We promise once we put our life on the altar, we will never take it back." Every time when I was so close to depletion, my wife always reminded me of the vow I took that day. She always said: "Anyone else could quit, but not you, because you

had made that vow in front of those witnesses.” I see this as God's protection to keep me going in the past half of a century.

COUNT THE BLESSINGS AT FCBC:

1) God has a mission for me to come here: Some of you here today remember that at the same time when this church called me, there was another church in Hong Kong also wanted me to go to serve in their church, a much, much larger church. They even fly me to Hong Kong to preach at their mission conference over a weekend so I can see the church with my own eyes. But God brought me here for a reason, a mission. At the start of the ministry in 1993, there wasn't much a vision or future I could see. But through the following years, we all witnessed what the Lord had done at this church. I am thankful to be part of this glorious page of the church history. Every time when I look back to the past and see what God has done for us, my heart can't stop pumping with joy.

2) God provided many good coworkers: In the four churches I served since 1968, this church I can tell is the most dedicated, most harmonious and much easier to work with. There are so many good people at this church who are good fellow servants to me in serving the Lord. In these past 24 years, I never have to argue with loud voice with anyone in meetings or in personal contacts. We do have disagreements and different opinions, but we always could find ways to solve the differences and come together to get things done. We respected one another and tried hard to work with each other. We all have the same love for this church no matter what the issues may be, we worked it out.

3) God has brought us good friends: Through practical experience and advice of mentors, I was told that pastors cannot make good friends with people in the congregation, and I saw with my own eyes some disasters happened when pastors became buddies to his flock. But in these 24 years, God has brought to us some very good, kind and loving people in this church that we had built relationship more

than pastor/member but close friends. We have some of the best friends in this church that we feel so difficult to move away after my retirement. This happened in the churches in Singapore and Dallas. God is so good to bring us wonderful people with whom we serve, we love, we care and treat each other like family.

4) God blesses our family in these 24 years: From January of 1993 when we moved here from Dallas, we have been blessed by the Lord tremendously as a family: Both of our boys completed their education, got married, have a total of six children, our grandchildren. Both have settled down their family, career, and church life. God also took good care of me and Mrs Yau in these 24 years in many ways, particularly with good health. We did not spend a day in the hospital in all these years. We began exercise when Ginger started a Tai-Po class to teach us how to exercise to keep our bodies healthy and we have been keeping up that way.

IN CLOSING:

1) This is how I feel at retirement: When we committed our lives to serve the Lord over 50 years ago, we didn't know what may happen to our life in the future. But God has been our guide, our provider and protector all these years. At this closing chapter of active service as a pastor, I can only give thanks to the Lord for all He has done for me and my family, my church, my friends and my people. May God continue to lead and bless each and everyone of you in the years to come. May God continue to bring good and faithful people to FCBC.

2) This is what I will do after retirement: It is a challenge for me to adjust to the new roll of being a church member after being the pastor for 48 years. But that is what I plan to do: I can do at least 3 things:

a) I can serve as consultant/counselor to the church people, from council leaders to all church members. I will be available to listen to your problems, answer your questions, and share my opinion to help you serve or live your life more effectively and joyfully.

b) I will continue to help leading two classes: The Evergreen on Wednesday and the Cantonese class on Friday night. I have the longest tie with these people since day one when I first came to this church. We have built a bond to the church and to each other.

c) I will serve as a prayer partner for the church, the leaders, the people and every-thing you may want me to pray for you. Just call me or drop me an email or text message, and I will remember you in the presence of the Lord.