

“Two Little Words”

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Graphics: thank you notes, thanksgiving

Big Truth: The people of the Panama Methodist Church are called to give thanks for ‘the life that is good,’ as opposed to the ‘good life.’ The world can provide the good life, but only God can provide the life that is good. To do that, He initiates salvation, raises up leaders who nurture us, and then equips us to eagerly follow Jesus and believe the gospel.

Focus Phrase: Giving thanks to God awakens the life that is good.

1. Introduction

A. PRAY!

- B. Two little words. That’s the title of our message this morning as we begin this Thanksgiving week!
- C. Two little words.
- D. We received two rare pieces of mail in the last two weeks that had something to do with those two little words.
- E. The first was from our daughter Abby, since the return address was from Nelson, NH where she and her husband live. As I opened the envelope, I thought maybe it was cash for all the years of paying for college and braces. It wasn’t that. I thought maybe it had something to do with the baby on the way. Nope. As I opened the envelope, the front of the card just had two little words.
- F. The other piece of mail came in response to a card that the Band of Brothers Men’s group sent to a couple we don’t really know, but who’s going through a rough patch. We sent the card, signed with the prayers and names of the guys who were present that night, we prayed for them. As I opened the envelope that came to the church office, the same two little words appeared in my hand.
- G. The two little words, of course, are no mystery. They’re not hard to say, even though we don’t say them enough. And, in the age of digital media and communication at our fingertips, these two little words are easier to text and post as an emoji than to sincerely say to someone.
- H. Those two little words, of course, are **THANK YOU**. And receiving those two little words in the mail from Abby for the baby shower we helped plan and the prayer card we sent did my heart good.
- I. Today, as we worship, we’re taking this entire service to prep our hearts for this week and this season and our lives. We’ve already sung praises to God and heard the choir say, “God, You’re SO good!”
- J. Next week, we’ll head into one of the most holy seasons of the Christian year - Advent. But today, we’ll just abide in the presence of God as we allow our

hearts to be reoriented to His provision in our lives. To say, “Thank you” - to give thanks.

- K. The Apostle Paul and his team wrote a letter to the church in Thessalonica in the first century, and said those two little words - thank you - giving thanks to God for those believers, their faithfulness and spiritual fruit, their caring leaders, and their eagerness to follow Jesus and his gospel.
- L. This morning, I’d like to not only say thank you to all of you, but to turn our hearts to God to give thanks for His provision in our lives.
- M. Near the end of the message, we’ll have an opportunity to try it out in a tangible way, but let’s open our bibles to 1 Thessalonians 1, starting in verse 1.
- N. Here’s our focus phrase this morning: **Giving thanks to God awakens the life that is good.**
- O. Two little words. Let’s see how Paul uses those words and then how God wants US to apply them to OUR lives today, this week, and always.

2. Scripture

A. READ 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

- B. After a brief introduction to this letter from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, Paul started with **giving thanks to God.**
- C. Later on the the letter, Paul gave thanks to God for the ekklesia (the church) in verse 2:13 where he wrote, “We also constantly give thanks to God...” and in 3:9 where he wrote, “How can we thank God enough for you and all the joy that we feel...”
- D. The whole tone of this letter is pastoral and encouraging to these Christians who were trying to follow Jesus...all in the midst of a culture that was NOT at ALL tolerant of their witness or practices. Paul was capturing their good will first so that they would be encouraged by the words that followed.
- E. But WHY was Paul giving thanks...and not just giving thanks but always and constantly and in increasing ways?
 - i. Well, he said those two little words to God because of their work of faith, their labor of love, and their steadfastness in hope.
 - ii. They were faithful and loving and hopeful.
 - a. Their faith was not just believing, but it motivated them to be doing the WORK of faith.
 - b. They were also doing the **work - the labor - of love.** Did you know that love is work? Anyone with children or nieces and nephews know that. Anyone with aging parents knows that. Anyone in a church knows that. They were engaging in the hard work of loving each other AND the community that was persecuting them.

- c. And, Paul was thankful that they were **steadfast in their hope** that Jesus was coming back. Last week, I said that our faith is **HEADING** somewhere...as believers, our lives are on a trajectory to meet Jesus when he returns! The Thessalonians were hopeful for that day too!
 - d. Paul gave thanks to God for their faith, love, and hope.
 - iii. In verses 4-5, Paul gave thanks to God for **choosing these believers** to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. When Paul preached the Word, God not only opened their minds to understand it, but He also filled them with the Holy Spirit so they would have conviction in their hearts. He was thankful for that! Every place the church is the church, we give thanks!
 - iv. Paul was thankful that the believers learned what Paul was teaching them and they actually did it - **imitating Paul and his team** - in faith, love, and hope, in how to witness and preach and pray and worship. **ALL** of that in spite of the fact that the church was being persecuted for doing it! They learned and imitated, until it became their own faith and their own practice and their own love and hope. Paul was a good leader in the faith.
 - v. When Paul went to other places to preach and lead, like Macedonia and Achaia, he found out that the people he went to see already **KNEW** Jesus because of the faithfulness of the believers in Thessalonica. He was thankful that **they were examples and witnesses to others**. Faith is contagious. Love is contagious. Hope is contagious. We've heard that word contagious so much lately, for good reasons. But faith, hope, and love are super-contagious and will change the world and your life!
 - vi. Paul was thankful, in verse 9, that the believers there **turned from pagan idols** - worshipped by the Greek culture - to serve God. Pagan idols have no power. Pagan gods are only images made by humans. Paul was giving thanks to God because the believers in the church rejected what the culture worshipped and worshipped the One True God.
 - vii. And, finally, Paul was thankful to God for the fact that the church in Thessalonica was filled with hope **waiting for Jesus**...who will rescue them...the **ONLY ONE** who will rescue, ultimately.
- F. To boil all that down, here's what Paul was thanking God for:
- i. He was saying thank you to a God who initiates salvation - God chose them, called them, and was saving them.
 - ii. He was thankful to God for raising up caring leaders who were nurturing the faith of the believers in Thessalonica. They were leading by example and teaching others.
 - iii. And, Paul was saying thank you to God because the believers there were eagerly following Jesus and His gospel.

3. Application

- A. I get excited for the church today because the same exact things for which Paul was thankful in AD60 are true today. We - I - give thanks to God because He initiates salvation in OUR lives. God raises up leaders in our midst to teach and lead us. And the church is filled with believers who are eagerly following Jesus and His gospel.
- B. Unfortunately, the same pagan culture that was present in the first century is present in our day today. It doesn't take long to find idols in our lives. Persecution of the church of Jesus Christ is alive and well. We in the US don't have a clue what Christians in the Middle East or Africa or parts of Europe experience. The lure of our culture woos the church to look exactly like the culture, and not like Jesus told us. There's always a danger for the church to be a thermometer of the culture instead of a thermostat, setting the pathway.
- C. And the same external impact on the church of the culture in Greece in the first century is present in OUR lives - in our church - today.
- D. Paul was giving thanks to God for what he saw in Thessalonica...and making a very important distinction between the world and the church.
- E. Paul saw the difference between what I'll call "the good life" and what I'll call, "the life that is good." This is a very important distinction for us.
- F. Let's take a moment to think about those two phrases.
 - i. The **good life** is an idealistic vision of a life that the world offers you.
 - a. It's a life that every commercial is trying to convince you that you need.
 - b. The good life is marked by money, resources, possessions, status, vacations, stimulants, comfort, care-free living. The good life is what you deserve, says the advertising agencies. In fact, you can have it your way, according to Burger King.
 - c. The most dangerous part of this message about the good life, as we enter into the week of Thanksgiving, is that every message from the world insists that in order to be thankful, you must experience the good life on ITS terms. Anything short of the good life is less than.
 - d. And we even, at times, will look at our good life tendencies and throw out the #blessed on social media.
 - e. The world's message is that anyone can have - should have - the good life and all it offers.
 - f. Are you saying those two little words because of the good life? Or is there something more? Something else? Paul gave us a different view.
 - ii. For Paul, gratitude - saying those two little words - gushes out of us as a response to God's gift of **the life that is good**.

- a. The life that is good is marked by God's calling you to the work of faith, the labor of love, and the steadfastness in hope. It's founded on faith in God alone and Word and His provision. Love for God and our neighbors. Hope in the sure return of Jesus. He IS coming back!
 - b. The life that is good is filled with the assurance that God has chosen and called you and your faith is heading somewhere.
 - c. The life that is good is increasingly being filled with the Word of God and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.
 - d. The life that is good is contagious to the people around you because it's filled with faith, love, and hope, which the world craves but doesn't know how to buy or produce or steal.
 - e. The life that is good is content with imitating Jesus and the spiritual leaders God has put in our midst and in the church. It loves to be in relationship with other believers and invite new people into our mess.
 - f. The life that is good is marked by an increasing rejection of the world's idols and a passion to worship the One True God.
 - g. The life that is good is filled with deep joy that allows you to patiently wait for Jesus to come back and make all things right again - to restore this world to God's design, to reform our bodies, to shine the light of truth into every darkness.
- iii. Church, the difference between the good life and the life that is good is the difference between night and day, dark and light.
 - iv. And for THAT, we say those two little words: Thank you! Thank You, God!
 - v. Paul gave thanks to God for the church because they were striving to live the life that is good and not the good life.
- G. What are you giving thanks for today? For the good life? Or for the life that is good?
- H. As you enter into this week of Thanksgiving, here are three things for which you can be personally thankful in order to prime the pump of your gratitude.
- i. First, **give thanks to God that He initiates salvation in your life** and offers it to you at not costs to you. Jesus dies on the cross and rose again in order for you to live the life that is good. Say those two little words to God for that.
 - ii. Second, **give God thanks for the spiritual leaders in your life**...your mentors, your pastors, your teachers, your accountability group, your small group. Leaders, give thanks for YOUR leaders and BE leaders that are worthy to be imitated. That's a lot of responsibility, but God's gift of the life that is good is counting on you answering God's call.

iii. Thirdly, give thanks that within you is **a growing eagerness to follow Jesus and the gospel**. The Holy Spirit keeps knocking on the door of your heart to listen...to hear...to give thanks...to forgive and love...to grow in faith and hope...and to worship together. Be eager to believe and follow Jesus.

I. As those three things become a greater reality in your life, it becomes a life that is good, instead of the good life, which can only end in striving for more.

J. The life that is good causes you to utter those two little words: Thank you.

4. Conclusion

A. Church, you are loved. Thank you. Thank you for being faithful. Thank you for all the ways you bless Stacy and me - gifts and cards and meals and pie and encouraging words and friendship. More than those things though, as your pastor and spouse, we thank you for being faithful...for chasing after Jesus and loving each other, even when it's not easy and when we screw it up. Thank you to all of you leaders who resource and lead us deeper into the heart of God for our community. Thank you for your vision and wanting to engage in this journey together. Thank you for helping me be a better pastor and for helping each other grow in grace. Thank you for engaging in the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to give everyone in our community the opportunity to believe in and follow Jesus. Thank you for allowing me to lead.

B. Now's your turn. I gave each of you a thank you note this morning. Today, you get the chance to say thanks to God. Maybe you want to give thanks to God for your life that is good - blessed by faith, love, and hope. Maybe you are thankful to God for healing, or a road to wholeness. Maybe you are thankful for your family or church or a godly teacher or mentor in your life. Thank God for your eagerness to follow Jesus, or a fresh wind of the Holy Spirit blowing. It's different for each of us.

C. Before the praise team comes back up to lead us in our final song and launch us out of here with full hearts, take just a couple minutes to write on that card. During the song, just bring that to the front as an offering to God. If you have any trouble getting to the front, choose someone to bring that to the front for you. One or two things that point to the life that is good and for which you want to give thanks. Bring those forward as a thank offering to the One who gives you the life that is good.

D. This Thanksgiving feels different than last year's, when so many things were so difficult. We still need to be smart, but I'm looking forward to giving thanks this week...deep thanks for all that God is doing in our lives.

E. Let's take 2 minutes to give thanks to God, write it down, bring it forward, and then I'll pray for us and these offerings.

F. CARDS/OFFER THEM **Pray!**