We gather here today to give thanks to the Lord, our God. As a group, we are all agreed on that. But why are you here, as an individual? Why have you here with the rest of us to give thanks? Why are you a part of this gathering to give thanks to the Lord your God?

Are you here in response to a President’s proclamation declaring Thursday as a day of national thanksgiving? Are you here because it is a long-standing tradition - to worship before the family feast? Are you here because you feel that, overall, the Lord has done a pretty good job of caring for you in the past year - and so he deserves a Thank you!, a Well done!, and maybe an Atta boy!?

Or are you here because God commands it? After all, the words of the common table prayer from Psalm 118 say: Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. These are not words of invitation or encouragement. They are a command! And since it is his command to thank him, we might think that this is as good a time as any to fulfill that obligation.

So, why are you here? Of course, I cannot speak for any of you. But I assume that your presence here today is a combination of all these reasons. I suspect, however, that a main motivator is your response to the Lord’s command - his expectation that you give thanks. We all know that the words of our sermon text are true. Paul tells us clearly what God’s will is for us in Christ Jesus.

Thanksgiving is a part of the Christian life. It is something the Lord demands from us all. So that may be the reason why we feel compelled to give thanks. But maybe we should hold on for just a second and look at these words a little more! As part of his farewell to the Thessalonians, he encourages them to continue on in their lives of faith, God’s will for them.

And, he tells them, what God’s will is with three short phrases: **Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.**

Yes, we are to give thanks - but that is the third and final aspect of Christian living. First comes joy, then comes prayer, and lastly comes thanksgiving. Thanksgiving grows out of joy and prayer. Thanksgiving is the end result of joy and prayer. The command to give thanks is the very real blessing that flows from joy and prayer. And we should expect that, shouldn’t we?

I have been reading and studying God’s Word my entire life. And I have yet to come across any command of the Lord that does not bring blessing or is the result of blessing. Usually, it is both! When we live in joy and practice a life of prayer, thanksgiving just naturally comes as part of the blessing. And when yours is a life of thanksgiving, it is clear to one and all, including yourself, that you have been blessed.

So, before we even consider the Lord’s command to Give thanks!, let’s look at our joy and our ability to pray. What we first take note of is that the Christian life is always one of joy. We may not be happy all the time, but we can always be joyful. Joy is a baseline emotion that is ours, something that never has to change, whatever the circumstances.

Happiness can and does has peaks and valleys - times when we are very happy and times when we are very sad and everything in between. Sometimes it is easy to be happy. We may take a look at the things we have, or the people in our lives, or the health we enjoy and be happy. We can be happy, and we should thank God for these many blessings.

In fact, that is a lot of what this public day of Thanksgiving is all about. We are invited to review how graciously the Lord has treated us, and then thank him for it. We are to thank God for the food we eat, the shelter we enjoy, the country we live in, the families that support us, and all the rest of the things easily identified and counted. That is happiness! It may vary from day to day, influencing our thankfulness.

Joy comes from knowing that the Lord is in charge of our lives. In his perfect knowledge
of us and our situation, he provides what he knows to be the absolute best for us. We may not always agree with him, we may not always be happy about his decisions, but we know that somehow, in some way, what happens to us in this life will serve our eternal good.

That never waivers or changes a bit. We can always be joyful because we know that all our needs, and so many of our desires, will come to us from our loving heavenly Father. On top of all that, we have the joy of knowing that no matter what peaks or valleys may come our way in this life, that life everlasting is ours. One day, we will find ourselves in heaven. We live in this joy, knowing that Jesus Christ has already paid the price of all our sins.

We know that he suffered and died for us, so that death and hell no longer have any power over us. Our eternal inheritance, our place in heaven, can never be taken from us. What joy is constantly ours - no matter how happy we may be!

Such joy always leads to prayer. Prayer can be thought of in a narrow and a wider sense. Normally, we think of it quite narrowly - prayer as dearly loved children talking to their loving heavenly Father. That is prayer, of course, at least an important aspect of prayer! But it is only a part of this blessing. The totality of prayer is our ability to communicate with the Lord - and that is a two-way street!

Prayer is not only talking to God, but listening to him in his Word and responding to him in your life. That is why Paul describes the Christian life as continual prayer. Not only do we talk to him, because he is always listening, we listen to him, because he is always talking to us in his Word. And as we are constantly refreshed by his grace, so we constantly want to live our lives in him and for him. We respond to love with love!

In that way, we enter into a wonderful communion with the Lord, a unity that begins here and now in our world, and ends there and then in his world. Our present joy, and our current life of prayer, becomes a foretaste, just a little teaser of what heaven will be like. It is a wonderful thing to regain the image of God lost by Adam and Eve in the Garden, even if it is just the tiniest bit of what it will be one day.

Joy and prayer work together and magnify each other. The more joy you have in the Lord, the more you want to be one with him in prayer; and the more you pray, the more joy will be yours! This is the life Jesus promises to Christians! And flowing from this life comes thanksgiving! And how could it be otherwise?

When you consider the mind-boggling grace of God that replaced your gloom of hell with the joy of heaven, and the love that moves him to be a part of your life as he invites you to be a part of his, what else could possibly be your response? When you live in joy and prayer, do you really need a president proclamation or a pastor to remind you to give thanks? Does the Lord really have to command your thanksgiving? I don’t think so!

Charles Dickens is credited with saying that we are somewhat mixed up here in America. He told an audience that instead of having just one Thanksgiving Day each year, we should have 364. **Use that one day just for complaining and griping**, he said. **Use the other 364 days to thank God each day for the many blessings he has showered upon you.**

Truly, God has showered many blessings upon us all. His blessing is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Use today, use tomorrow, use every day of your life to live God’s will: **Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.** Amen.

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