

Why Be Thankful?

Hespeler, October 11, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Harvest Thanksgiving

Isaiah 25:1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

Don't you just love it when you are reading a passage in the Bible, and you come across a name that you just can't figure out how to pronounce? No, am I the only one who is thankful when he sees a verse like this one we read today: **"I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal Syzygus, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel."**

Why do I love verses like that so much? Is it because I like to torment the worship assistants who read the Bible passages on Sunday morning? Of course not! Well, okay, yes, but only a little bit.

Real People

No, the real reason I appreciate these names is that they remind us that these letters were written to real people. We often read these scriptures as texts that are there to communicate big and universal truths that we are supposed to take and apply to every situation.

Now, I am not saying, of course, that you can't find universal theological truths in these passages. They are certainly there. But when Paul wrote these words, his goal was not to write theology. He was writing to real people – people like Euodia, Syntyche and Syzygus – and giving them real advice to help them with their real struggles.

The passage we read this morning has much to say to us today. It is fitting that we read it on this Thanksgiving Sunday. And I want to reflect on the universal theological truths that it has to teach us about giving thanks.

But before we turn to those ideas, I wanted to remind us that that was not why Paul wrote them. He wrote them for Euodia, Syntyche and Syzygus. Remember them, because we are going to come back to them before we are done here today.

Why Is Thanksgiving Important?

Why is Thanksgiving important? I am not just asking why it is important that we have this holiday at harvest time when we get together with loved ones and enjoy the bounty of what the land has produced and talk about how blessed we are. I mean, a table laden with turkey, stuffing and all the fixings is justification enough for that alone.

But I'm asking why we put such importance on people being thankful. I can think of a couple of reasons that might be part of the answer, but I don't think they are reasons enough alone.

Drilled into Us

For one thing, most of us have had the importance of being thankful drilled into us since childhood. We were given lessons, sometimes painful lessons, about the importance of expressing thanks under all kinds of situations.

And I'm sure you remember those lessons. How your parents told you that it was important for you to



say thank you to your aunt when she gave you a gift, even if you didn't appreciate that gift in the least. I remember being obliged by my mother to write a thank-you note for every single gift that I had received for Christmas or for my birthday. I remember how much that felt like an insurmountable task even if it was just a question of writing a few sentences on a few cards to maybe less than five people!

Social Skill

But the importance of it was instilled in us. And I think we understand why that was such an important lesson to receive. So much so that, when we had our own opportunity to raise a child, we did our best to pass that lesson on. But why is it seen as such an important lesson? Why do we teach children to say thank you, even if sometimes they don't feel particularly thankful?

We do it because we know that people who express thanks make a better impression. They come across as grounded and trustworthy. They are the kind of people that people want to deal with. Learning to be thankful is, in other words, a social skill that will serve you well as you make your way in the world.

And I do not quarrel with that at all. I agree that learning to express gratitude is a positive and useful social skill and that the more we all use it, the better society will be. But is that why we teach that giving thanks is important in the church? No, that is not the reason.

Vance and Zelenskyy

There is another reason why people assume that saying thank you is important. Do you remember the scene over a year ago when Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine, had a famous meeting with the American President in the Oval Office?

At one point, the Vice President, J.D. Vance, said this to him: *"Have you said 'thank you' once this entire meeting? Offer some words of appreciation for the United States of America and the president who's trying to save your country."*

That was a statement about the importance of saying thanks, but the reason for saying it there was not really about social skills or about building a more respectful society. It is clearly not about that because, of course, Zelenskyy and the Ukrainians have not hesitated to express gratitude to any supportive nation.

Managing Powerful People

No, Vance was concerned about Zelenskyy saying thank you for another reason. It was about power and how we treat people who have it. There are people who have the power to do things for you or give things to you, but you have to treat them right.

Such people tend to be somewhat self-centred or narcissistic, and so you have to use things like praise, flattery and lots and lots of gratitude. We all know people who are like this. We have all learned to treat them accordingly whenever we need them to do something for us. And Vance was simply doing the courtesy of informing Zelenskyy how the administration he represented needed to be treated.

So, there is another, different reason why it can be important that people learn to be thankful. It is a useful tool for manipulating powerful or influential people. But is that why we teach that it is important to be thankful in the church?

Managing God

In the life of the church, we are dealing, after all, with the most powerful being imaginable. We believe that God can do anything we ask or desire. And we have all learned how to speak to powerful people. Is it a surprise that we should speak to God in the same way?

Anyone analyzing our prayers and worship and noticing how we make a point of praising God and thanking God for just about everything might conclude that we are doing what Vance wanted Zelenskyy to do: buttering God up so God will give us what we want. In fact, many people who are part of the church may think that is exactly what we are doing.

Humans have historically treated their gods like that. They saw it as transactional. You gave your god a sacrifice, a promise or praise, and you could expect that in return, your god would make your crops grow or give you a child or whatever else you wanted, after which, of course, you had to make a point of thanking your god so that they didn't take it away.

Does God Need Our Thanks?

But is that why we praise and thank the God we have come to know through Jesus Christ? Is our God a selfish and narcissistic being that we need to manipulate in that way? Maybe some people think that. Maybe you think that sometimes, but the answer is no.

God doesn't need our praise and thanksgiving to be persuaded to do things for us. God doesn't love us or want to give us good things because we have said or done the right thing. The Bible reminds us again and again that God's love and care for us comes *despite* our sins and failures.

What's more, the God we meet through Jesus clearly doesn't need our praise or thanksgiving. God is no narcissist; narcissists are people who are trying to compensate for deep self-doubts. God is not on a power trip; God has more power than we can imagine. To treat God as someone that we can manipulate with cringing gratitude is to misrepresent God. It is creating a false idol, worshipping a God who does not exist.

Euodia and Syntyche

So, if we don't teach gratitude as a social skill, and we don't use it as a way of manipulating God, why do we put so much emphasis on giving thanks in the church? Why have we gone so far as to create a festival for it? Well, that brings us back to our good friends Euodia and Syntyche, as well as the loyal Syzygus.

When Paul wrote this letter to the church in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche were in a bad place. They were obviously leaders in the church, but they were at odds with each other. It is easy to see that this was making them miserable. And so, Paul asks Syzygus to help these women change their perspective.

People Who Have Been Richly Blessed

The name Syzygus means companion or partner, someone who accompanies you on your journey, and Paul clearly wants Syzygus to join these women on a journey to a new way of seeing things.

But let us also take note of the names of these two women. Euodia means "prosper on the way," and Syntyche means "good fortune." I think we are meant to understand these are women who have been blessed in extraordinary ways.

They have received so much, but they don't see that, do they? They have been arguing with each other. They have only been focusing on the negative and made themselves miserable.

And we all know people like that, don't we? We know people who have received much good fortune and prosperity, but because they can only see the negatives, they have become sour and bitter. And Syzygus is given the difficult job of helping two people like that change their moods!

Rejoice!

But don't worry, Paul doesn't just leave him there. He goes on to give Syzygus exactly the information he needs to change the perspective of these two women. He writes, **"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."**

Now, that is admittedly somewhat troubling advice. Even though he repeats it twice, it is not really advice that is easy to follow. People generally cannot make themselves joyful just because someone tells them to rejoice.

Turning Anxieties into Prayers

But Paul isn't finished. He goes on to explain how Euodia and Syntyche can change their thought patterns and how Syzygus can help them. He doesn't just say, for example, **"do not be anxious,"** he offers the antidote to anxiety, which is learning to **"by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."**

Turning your anxieties into prayers, supplication and thanksgiving allows you to let go of the things that weigh you down. You recognize that you do not have to carry them alone, that they are not your responsibility and that you can offer up what is not under your control to God.

Changing Thought Patterns

And then Paul continues with this challenge to reprogram your thought patterns: **"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."**

Rather than focussing on the negative, as I am sure that Euodia and Syntyche were doing, we can focus on the positive. There is much that is positive to be found. Let our thoughts focus on these things and you will be amazed at how it changes your perspective.

So, to return to our opening question, why do we encourage people to practice thankfulness in the church? It is not because we want to teach a social skill or shape society. It is not because we think we can manipulate God with our thanks.

It is for our sake. It helps us focus on the positive, the Euodia and the Syntyche of our lives. It changes how we look at the problems we have to face. That is what Paul wanted Euodia and Syntyche to realize, and it is what he wants you to realize too. It is what he wanted Syzygus to help these women to see, and he wants you to help others see it too.