

# MARK TWAIN'S FAVORITE WORD

*I Thessalonians 5:12-18*

**A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND DR. THOMAS K. TEWELL  
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*Our gracious God, every one of us who has come here this morning, comes with some challenge that is before us. We pray, Dear Lord, that through this message you would change our perspective on whatever it is that we are facing. May we see our challenges not as burdens, but as opportunities to serve you. To that end, dear Lord, transform our minds; turn our lives right side up through the preaching of the gospel today. And most of all, dear Lord, pour through me the gift of preaching that these words might truly be your living word to us. We know that they will be, for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ! Amen.*

**We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts. How can God entrust great things to one who will not thankfully receive the little things? If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if, on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ.**

—from *Life Together*  
by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

**W**hen Mark Twain was at the pinnacle of his writing career he was paid five dollars per word for every word that he wrote. So one day someone wrote him a letter with a five-dollar bill enclosed in an envelope that read, "Dear Mr. Twain, Send me your favorite word."

Mark Twain wrote back this simple one-word letter:

"Thanks."

Now tell me, is "thanks" your

favorite word? Is "thanks" a word that you say often? Is "thanks" your very best word? One of the keys to Mark Twain's success was that "thanks" was not only his favorite word, but the word he used most often. And because thanksgiving was in his heart, Mark Twain wrote with a contagious joy.

When he wrote about procrastination, he was able to say, "Don't put off until tomorrow what you can put off until the day after tomorrow." And when he wrote about bad habits he said, "It's easy to quit smoking, I've done it dozens of times." And when he wrote about staying in good physical condition, Mark Twain wrote, "When I feel the urge to exercise, I sit down until the urge passes." Mark Twain was able to laugh at himself and was able to laugh at life because "thanks" was his favorite word!

What's your favorite word?

Does thanksgiving flow from your heart like an Artesian spring that overflows in gratitude to God? Do you have a joy in your soul — a thanksgiving — that is contagious? And do you tell the people in your life how grateful you are for them? If we gave a pop quiz to the people who spend time with you, would

they know that you're grateful for them? Do we express our thanks?

Some years ago there was a reunion for people who had graduated 30 years earlier from a high school in West Virginia. At the reunion, several alumni spoke of their coaches and teachers and principals. Many kept referring to one teacher in particular named Miss Simpson. She had been an influence on so many, but nobody had communicated with her since graduation.

One man said, "You know, Miss Simpson introduced me to the works of Tennyson. I've gone on to get my Ph.D. in English and my specialty is Tennyson."

"Wouldn't Miss Simpson be so glad to know that?" another man piped up. "Have you ever told Miss Simpson how much she inspired you?"

The man, whose name was Willie, said, "No, I never told her how thankful I am. I wouldn't even know how to get in touch with her." But Willie went home that night unable to forget the conversation, and he decided to track Miss Simpson down. He found her address with a little trouble, and wrote her a letter thanking her for all that she had taught him. A week later he got this reply from Miss

Simpson:

“Dear Willie, I remember well your enthusiasm for Tennyson and for ‘Idylls of the King’. My reward for introducing you to Tennyson didn’t have to wait until your belated note of thanks in my old age. You see, I received the best reward any teacher could ever get in your eager response to the lyrical beauty of Tennyson. You’ll be interested to know, Willie, that I taught school for 50 years and yours was the only note of thanks that I ever received. It arrived on a dark, gray, cold morning and it cheered my lonely, old heart as nothing has cheered me in many a year.”

Is there a Miss Simpson in your life? Is there someone who introduced you to something and you appreciated it but you’ve never told them so? Is there a Miss Simpson out there who did something wonderful for you but never received thanks? In Mark Twain’s life, thanksgiving flowed out of a joyful heart. Does thanksgiving flow from yours?

Ironically, the apostle Paul’s heart was overflowing with this contagious joy. I say ironically because Paul was often shipwrecked on his travels to see the early Christian communities of faith. People tried to murder him, people threw stones at him, he almost died many times, he was in prison, he was misunderstood, he was hated, he was resented, and Paul had a thorn in the flesh! He would frequently write to the congregations again and again, “I pray that God would take away this thorn in the flesh.”

We don’t know what kind of physical malady it was, but he would always pray for God to remove it from him. But God never seemed to take it away. And yet the words that most characterized Paul’s life are “thanks” and “joy.” Paul used these words again and

again in his letters to the Philippians, the Galatians, the Ephesians, the Colossians, the Romans, the Corinthians; again and again and again!

**From the apostle Paul, we learn the three secrets of a thankful heart.**

As we celebrate this holiday known as Thanksgiving, let us learn even more profoundly as Christians the three secrets of a thankful heart. Make a note of them. Stamp them in your mind. And if you remember them, like Mark Twain, your favorite word someday might become “thanks”.

#### **Secret #1**

**In order to be a thankful person, do not focus on the things you don’t have. Focus on the things you do have.** I hope you will take home today’s bulletin, clip the quotation by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classically brilliant book *Life Together*, and stick it someplace where you can refer to it often.

In his book, Bonhoeffer shares some of these secrets of the thankful life. In that quotation, we are told that if we aren’t thankful for the little things, God will not entrust the big things to us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison. He lost his life as a martyr standing up for what he believed to be the cause of Jesus Christ. Yet he was a thankful person! Bonhoeffer was writing about the common complaint that the Christian community is not as strong as it should be. He wrote that these internal critics were concentrating on all the great things everyone could and should be doing.

But Bonhoeffer put a spin on things. He wrote that we should instead be grateful for the things we *do have*. When we become grateful, God opens our eyes, our minds, and our hearts, and soon we can see as never before! And we

continue to be thankful as we move towards the things which God wants to entrust to us. Thanking God for the little things opens the door to a clearer perception that there are large blessings surrounding us all the time.

In the *Peanuts* comic strip, Lucy and Linus are having a profound theological discussion. Lucy says, “Linus, I’m as low as I’ve ever been. Life is a drag. It is boring, it is so dull, it is blah.”

Little Linus, Lucy’s brother, tries to cheer her up and says, “You know, Lucy, at times like this you really should count your blessings. You should think of all the things you have to be thankful for.”

“Ha,” says Lucy, “That’s a good one! What do I have to be thankful for? I could count my blessings on one finger. What possibly do I have to be thankful for?”

Linus rather shyly says, “Well, for one thing, Lucy, you have a little brother who loves you.” Lucy is hit by this and touched by it, and she starts to cry. And in the last scene of the comic strip, Linus says to the camera, “Every now and then I say the right thing.”

Do you focus on what you don’t have or do you focus on what you do have?

This past week, I met one of the most thankful people I’ve ever encountered. Her name is Nadine Hammonds. Nadine Hammonds lives in Memphis, Tennessee. I met this 67-year-old woman because she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Bible Society during National Bible Week. Do you know why?

Nadine Hammonds has memorized the entire New Testament.

“Go ahead,” she told a packed crowd, “if you don’t believe it. Test me!”

I thought perhaps they’d start out with an easy one; perhaps the oft-memorized I Corinthians chapter 13, or Romans chapter 8. But

instead they immediately took her to task, asking her to recite some of the most difficult passages of all, like I Corinthians chapter 3 or Romans chapter 5 or Revelations chapter 21!

And Nadine just recited it word for word for word without losing her cool. After she finished, the man who asked her to recite the passages said, "That's pretty good, Nadine, pretty good." I thought to myself, "You try that, buster!"

Here's something that might surprise you. Nadine Hammonds is blind!

And someone asked her at the awards ceremony, "Are you resentful that you could never see?"

"Oh my goodness, no," she said. "I do wish I could see a sunset. I would love to see the ocean. I'd love to see the stars! But see, I learned a long time ago, you don't focus on what you don't have. I'd love to have those things, but I don't focus on them. I think of what I do have -- a sharp mind and a good memory! I can study the Bible by braille everyday, and now I've got it in my memory bank! Now I just pull out whatever I need, whenever I want. It is a great gift from God."

Nadine's brother is a portrait painter, and when he painted his sister, he painted her with beautiful eyes wide open. Why?

"Because," her brother said, "My sister sees more than most people ever see in a lifetime."

The first secret of a thankful heart is to focus on what you do have, not what you don't have.

#### Secret #2

**Do not focus on your *present* circumstances. Focus on the *presence* of Almighty God.** Don't focus on what circumstances have brought your way. Circumstantial focus is replaced by a clear perception that God is present in the very midst of these circumstances.

**So to receive a thankful heart, attend to these things: focus on what you *do* have, not what you *don't* have! Focus on the *presence* of Jesus, not on *present* circumstances, no matter how bad they may be. Focus on how you can serve other people, not on how they can serve you.**

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was easy to be discouraged by the current circumstances. The year was 1636 and in a little town called Eilenburg, Germany, a pastor came to that town whose name was Martin Rinkart. Martin Rinkart came when the 30-Years War had erupted and all of Europe was at war. It was terrible time!

Eilenburg, Germany was a walled city, and so they brought many of the wounded off the battlefield to Eilenburg for treatment. Pestilence, famine and violence spread throughout the city.

Then in 1636, The Plague came. Soon thousands upon thousands upon thousands of children and teenagers and men and women were dying. And it was precisely at this time in history that Martin Rinkart, a 31-year-old pastor, was assigned to Eilenburg, to a Lutheran parish. So Martin Rinkart began his pastorate in Eilenburg, home of The Plague, averaging 40-50 funerals every day.

But instead of looking at these abhorrent circumstances, Martin Rinkart called on the presence of God. To his congregation he said, "We must lean on God's presence. We must be the presence of Jesus for one another. We must have the sustaining presence of the spirit to guide us or we will not survive."

And in this time when thousands of people were dying every day, Martin Rinkart was so focused on the presence of God that he wrote a hymn. Suzanne and I so loved this hymn that it was sung at our wedding. This is a profoundly meaningful hymn of thanksgiving

which we're going to sing to close this morning's worship. It's titled, "Now Thank We All Our God".

"Now Thank We All Our God" is one of the most frequently sung hymns in Germany. The words are printed in the bulletin for you. As you read those words, think about a pastor burying 40-50 people every single day. Think of a man who didn't dwell on those circumstances but instead leaned back on the arms of God.

What is the challenge in your life? Oh, you've got one and I've got one! Every one of us has a challenge! And so often we focus so much on the present circumstances that we fail to focus on the presence of Jesus.

#### Secret #2

If you would have a thankful heart, don't focus on *present* circumstances. Focus on the *presence* of Jesus. It makes all the difference.

#### Secret #3

**If you would be a person with a thankful heart, focus on how you can serve other people, not on how they can serve you.** The word in the Greek language for servant is spelled t-h-e-r-a-p-o-n. From the word "servant" in Greek, ("therapon"), we get the English word "therapy".

The best therapy is helping someone rather than thinking, "Why didn't someone thank me? Why didn't I get a thank-you note? Why didn't I get a word of encouragement or appreciation?" Instead, helping others with their needs will help you with yours!

That's why I'm so proud of our

Board of Deacons. They have given us a brilliant cornucopia on display this morning as a way of saying, "Think of all the blessings God has given to us. In response to that, we give canned goods to the hungry and the poor of this world." That's why I'm so proud of those who gave the angel tree and the gift to those children in the church of Gethsemane. In response to God's grace in our life, we give a Christmas gift to a child in need.

In 1961 a man named Paul Beyer was kneeling in his garden in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He was working on his tomato plants and thanking God for his many blessings, when a fellow Mennonite walked into his yard. Paul was acquainted with the man from church, but he didn't know him well. Turned out the man's name was Pop Swychert, and Pop had something he wanted to ask Paul.

"Paul, I got a challenge for you," said Pop.

Paul looked up from his tomato plants questioningly.

Pop continued, "About nine years ago our ministry began going over to New York City. And we began taking food to a place called the Bowery Mission." Pop explained that the word "bowery" in Dutch literally means "farm land". Years ago, the Bowery had been a lush part of New York. It had been beautiful! But in the late nineteenth century, that land became difficult to inhabit and flop houses developed. It evolved into the toughest part of the area we know as New York City. It became a tough section, so tough that even robbers and prostitutes wouldn't venture there in fear for their lives.

So, in 1896, the Bowery Mission started a ministry there to reach out to men and women in that area and then introduced them to the gospel and the saving power of Jesus Christ.

Paul Beyer was quite touched

by the story that Pop was telling him.

"Paul," Pop said, "For nine years now I've been taking food from Lancaster County, driving into New York City and sharing it with the people of the Bowery Mission. But now I'm getting too old to make the trip. You're 31 years old and I wonder is there any way you could take the food from this area over to New York City."

When Paul Beyer said yes he planned on delivering food only for a short time, but Paul Beyer is now almost 70-years-old and he is still helping at The Bowery Mission today!

For almost 39 years he has been delivering food that is donated from people in Lancaster to The Bowery Mission of New York City. Paul Beyer unloads it, and then he gets back in his truck and he drives all the way back to Lancaster County.

A reporter from *The New York Times* once said to Paul Beyer, "Paul, this is a miracle! For 38 years you've driven all this food to New York City."

But Paul replied, "That's not the miracle. The miracle is that for 38 years I've driven all this food to New York City and never once gotten a traffic ticket!"

"Why do you do this," asked the reporter. "You've got another job; you've got a family; you've got responsibilities! Why do you do it?"

He said one word in reply:

"Gratitude."

If you focus on the *why's* and the *why not's* of your present circumstances, you are in serious danger of missing out on life! You can become so full of resentment and bitterness that Bonhoeffer says, "You'll miss the things God's given you. They are so close! We could reach out and touch them."

*They are so close we could reach out and touch them!*

What Jesus wants us to do today is fill our hearts with gratitude until they overflow. But gratitude doesn't just happen! It comes from focus!

So to receive a thankful heart, remember these three secrets: Focus on what you do have, not what you don't have! Focus on the *presence* of Jesus, not on *present* circumstances, no matter how bad they may be. Focus on how you can serve other people, not on how they can serve you. And if we remember these secrets, then, and only then, when someone says, "What is your favorite word?" Like Paul Beyer and like Mark Twain, we'll send back a one-word note:

"Thanks."

Tell me, what is **your** favorite word?

*Now Thank We All Our God*  
Martin Rinkart, c. 1636

*Now thank we all our God  
With heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things hath done,  
In whom this world rejoices;  
Who, from our mothers' arms,  
Hath blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God  
Through all our life be near us,  
With ever joyful hearts  
And blessed peace to cheer us;  
And keep us in God's grace,  
And guide us when perplexed,  
And free us from all ills  
In this world and the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God,  
Who reigns in highest heaven,  
To Father and to Son  
And Spirit now be given.  
The one eternal God,  
Whom heaven and earth adore,  
The God who was, and is,  
And shall be evermore.*

Amen!