

Wrong Turn, Right Idea

By Susan Brackett

Ephesians 5:20 Giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“I think we took the wrong exit.” You might imagine the level of tension in the car for the next several miles. This family vacation occurred before GPS. I studied the map while everyone else called out signs indicating where we were headed. An exclamation came from the back seat, “Look, a billboard for a beef jerky store!” Hmm, located in Dundee. That was helpful. It appeared the road we were on would take us to Detroit with a similar arrival time as our original plan. Things settled down, except that we began to see billboard after billboard enticing us to stop for amazing jerky of all kinds. That unexpected stop following a wrong turn ended up being one of the highlights of our trip.

It is easy to look back now and be thankful for the good fortune of one particular wrong turn, but couldn't this lesson be applied to future challenges? In the verses leading up to Ephesians 5:20, we are encouraged to be careful how we live, to be wise, make the most of our time, and finally to give thanks to God for everything. Life is full of wrong turns, setbacks, and misunderstandings. God teaches us to approach life's struggles with trust and thankfulness, assured that we are not alone.

God of Peace, I pray that your Word guides my thoughts and actions every day. Lead me through difficulties big and small with a grateful heart. Amen

Strength to Try

By Monica Lursen

Philippians 4:13 'I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.'

There have been multiple occasions during my personal and professional life, when I hesitated to take on a task because I didn't think I was capable of successfully doing it. With more than a few prayers accompanied with some study and investigation of what the task really entailed, I decided to take on the challenge. More often than not it turned out that I was so glad that I had given it a try and been successful most of the time, learning so much in the process. With every attempt and successful conclusion, I became more confident in my abilities and even began sharing some of the success stories with my colleagues. I began feeling like the sharing of my successes and those not so successful, I became even braver in my attempts. I had learned that I had been given the strength to withstand not only the attempts, but the results both good and bad. Prayer about these attempts is as necessary as letting your colleagues know about the plan to successfully complete a task – we can't do it alone! God will always give you the strength to complete a task – you just have to ask.

Dear Lord, I know you are beside me during every step of my journey. I ask for your strength in all my daily activities. In Jesus name, Amen

Giftedness

By Pastor Kim Smith

I Peter 4:10 Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

What are your gifts?

A quote, sometimes attributed to Albert Einstein, goes: "Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

Genius may be too strong a word, but everyone has gifts that come from God. Our task as parents is to recognize and encourage the gifts of our children. If we didn't get that gift from our parents in the amount we needed, we need to discover it in ourselves by paying attention to what attracts us in life. What our gifts are and how we can develop them. Our friends can be helpful if we struggle to recognize our giftedness.

In his novel "What Abigail did that Summer," Ben Aaronovitch's heroine, Abigail, convinces the mother of her friend to change her approach to her son. "He's never going to be clever," she tells her, "But he's good at being happy. That's rare isn't it . . . You should love him for that." So, she did, and so, he thrived.

Abigail had the gift of cleverness but not the gift of happiness. She saw that in her friend and supported that in him.

Meaning and purpose in life come as we recognize our giftedness and give back joyfully out of the gifts we have been given.

Gracious Lord, thank you for the gifts you have given us, especially the gift of friendship, of people who recognize and draw out the giftedness in us that we may not see. Empower us to joyfully give back from the deep well of those gifts. In Jesus name, Amen

Understanding Our Riches

By Judy Meyer

Timothy 6:17,18 NIV: Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

As we read these two verses, one might say to oneself, "I'm not rich-I have just enough money to live, so this command is not meant for me". This command is indeed meant for each of us! We are each rich in a variety of ways. Our bank account would not fit a definition of rich, but Jim and I have enough food to share with extended family, sick friends, lonely friends, church fellowship, food banks, "drop in company", and tornado survivors. In that capacity, **we are rich**, so God expects us to share that wealth. Being retired, we are rich in time. God expects us to share our time with others by stepping up when there is a need in the neighborhood, church, and family. We may not think we are rich monetarily, but we are certainly expected to share a tithe of whatever we are given. God commands us to share whatever rich blessings He bestows to us. The command we are given in these two verses is indeed meant for all of us. What ways are you rich, and how are you generously sharing those riches with others and to God's Glory?

Dearest Father, open our eyes to the many forms of richness you have sent into our lives. Give us the willingness and courage to step up and share selflessly each of those blessings wherever needed. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

How do you make use of your time?

By Ann Juel

1 Corinthians 15:58 Nothing you do in the Lord's service is useless.

Some activities waste time... seems a lot of time can be wasted with electronics.

On the other hand, many activities can be constructive and enjoyable that include people. Activities that involve helping others can also help ourselves and make us feel good. Look for things to do that are good for other people and good for you.

Giving words of encouragement or a compliment can be more constructive than you might think. Has there been a time when someone has helped you more than they could have realized? Pay that feeling forward, as often as you can.

Being positive toward people you know might be easier than to strangers but being kind sometimes can turn a stranger to a friend. Make an effort to be of service to others. When we help others, it is a service to the Lord.

Dear Heavenly Father,
Thank you for the people who have helped me through difficult times. Help me to realize ways I can be of help to others and service to you. Amen

Godly Giving

By Mary Anna Hunstiger

Titus 3:14. "And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful."

Jesus, our example, gave Himself at great personal cost, and commanded His disciples in John 13:34-35, "... *just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples.*" The scourging & crucifixion were just ahead. Jesus knew, what farmers know--**the cost of fruitfulness**-. John 12:24 *"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."*

In Titus 3:14, the Holy Spirit speaks truth through Paul, we can learn to exemplify Jesus and be fruitful. Fruit bearing depends on our source—Jesus the true Vine or something else? Eternal/spiritual or temporal/carnal fruit? A spiritual harvest is a win/win benefit to us and our recipients, like an intentional planting of seed that enriches the soil and yields a fruitful harvest. Obedience strengthens faith and bears fruit for eternity.

Fortune heir, Bill Borden, chose to leave all and follow God's call to discipleship in China via Egypt. His ministry was cut short by spinal meningitis. Before he died, he penned these words, "*No reserve, no retreat and no regrets.*" God used Borden's story to inspire a generation of missionaries from America who went all over the world.

God doesn't need us; He wants us for our own good as well as the good of others. 1 *"Suddenly she understood. She was beholding a wondrous and glorious truth; "a great multitude whom no man could number" brought like herself by the King to the Kingdom of Love and to the High Places so they could now pour out their lives in gladdest abandonment, leaping down with him to the sorrowful, desolate places below, to share with others the life which they had received. ...singing as they poured themselves down..."From the heights we leap and flow, to the valleys down below, sweetest urge and sweetest will, to go lower, lower still."* May this be the "song" of our daily lives. 1 Hurnard, Hannah *"Hinds' Feed on High Places*

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace to call us into discipleship with your Son, Jesus Christ. Please teach us to devote our lives to bearing eternal fruit for your kingdom with the time, talent, and treasure you have blessed us with during our brief time on earth.

Love of Money

By Pastor Steve Brackett

1 Timothy 6:9-10 ⁹ But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

This verse from Ephesians is often misquoted as, “Money is the root of all evil.” That is obviously not true, because money can be used for many things that are beneficial and good.

Verse 10 actually says, “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” It is the love of money that is the problem. And money is not the root of evil, it is a root of all kinds of evil. Obviously, there are many other temptations that lead to evil behavior. It could be argued, though, that the obsession with money in order to become wealthy is one of the most difficult temptations for us to overcome. It seems that no matter how much money and possessions we accumulate, it is never enough. The three best things one can do to be the master of money are getting completely out of debt, establishing an adequate savings reserve to cover emergencies and unexpected expenses, and working toward giving away at least 10% of your earnings to things that help those in need. There are many great charities out there. But gifts to the church are always a good way to help people both locally and far away meet not only physical needs, but emotional and spiritual needs as well!

Holy and loving God, there are many things that can become idols in life that threaten to take your place in my heart. The love of money is one that I know can cause much misery and destruction. Help me to use the money that I have wisely. Help me to always see money and my possessions as a tool, and not my master. Take my life, together with all that I own to help bring your kingdom here on earth, in Jesus’ name I pray.

Labor with the Correct Attitude

By Steve Reints

Ephesians 6:7: rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not men

When I worked in the pharmacy, I usually would try to be cheerful, smile, and engage pleasantly with customers. Occasionally, for some reason or another, that would not happen, and it would take a comment like "where's that friendly smile today?" from someone to get me back in shape.

Ephesians 6:7 reminds us that in our labors we are to serve faithfully from a principle of love for others and to work freely and cheerfully. We are to work not merely because it is the will of man or commanded by our supervisors to such, but because it is the will of the Lord and is pleasing in His sight. In our labors we should be moved with a reverence for God as though we are serving God himself.

Recently I heard a sermon on the 3 A's which could also apply here. The first and most important 'A' is for attitude and has a lot to do with the Action we take which will affect our Accomplishments. If we work or serve with the attitude that we are doing it for the Lord, not only will we be more satisfied, but also more successful in achieving our goals.

Dear Lord, help us to maintain a Godly attitude in our labors by reminding us to view our work as an honor to you. Let us keep in mind that we are to do all things for your glory. Amen

God's Grace

By Gloria DeGroot

Acts 20:24 But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.

I count my blessings every morning when I wake up. I thank God that He has given me another day to spend with friends, family, and loved ones and to be able to work. I know only too well how precious life is and how we need to appreciate what we have received from God each and every day. We need to let God's love shine through us so that others may see and believe that God is with us each and every day. He forgives our sins through His grace.

Thank you, God, for this day. Please help me share the good news of God's grace to others. Amen

In the Sight of Faith

By Pastor Kim Smith

I Corinthians 4:7 NRSV

“For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”

Cartoonist Charles Schultz wrote a book entitled, “Two by Fours,” about the way children from the ages of two to four experience church.

One cartoon showed a picture of one of those little ones standing in a pew, looking around and asking, “where are all the hypocrites I’ve heard so much about?”

Merriam-Webster defines hypocrisy as: a feigning to be what one is not, or to believe what one does not; behavior that contradicts what one claims to believe or feel.

The Apostle Paul batted hypocrisy in the church in Corinth by reminding the Corinthians that the faith they received was a gift, and the appropriate response to receiving a gift is thankfully giving back for what has been received.

We battle hypocrisy in our faith stories by practicing the faith in our worship, our prayers, and our giving of our time and talents.

And as we grow in practicing our faith, we grow in the joy that faith brings.

The Apostle Paul also reminds us that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up!

Dear Lord, restore the joy in our hearts by casting out the hypocrisy in our lives. In Jesus Name, Amen

How Should We Live Our Christian Lives?

By Dave Pruisner

Colossians 3:17 Everything you do or say then should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through Him to God the Father.

These few words say a lot about how our Christian life should be lived, how we should act day by day. My mom used to tell me when I left the house, 'Remember Jesus is watching you.' Believe it or not that bothered me; made me nervous thinking about him watching me. Today I still think about that, but in a different way. Are my actions in the name of Jesus or are they just actions? No matter what we do or say when we do it for the right reasons, we honor our Lord. Are we living our life in the name of Jesus or just living? A friend of mine said, 'You know we may be the only church some people see.' Do we shine?

Dear Lord: Help us to remember to live our lives to the fullest with you in mind. Help us to remember that you are watching and help us shine.

The Best Light

By Joe Avery

Matthew 5:16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.

For me this means something like a statement I heard once “you may be the only version of the Bible anyone sees.”

And some people think this means to be the light. That’s also true, but I think there are many ways to be the light.

I was told once that you should do a good deed without the person knowing it. I found that was a very difficult thing to do.

But I had a friend that found a way to, in a way, do that. He was a fisherman and fished a lot. He would catch, clean, and deliver fish to widow ladies who liked to eat fish. Now in this case, the ladies knew, but probably only one or two others ever found out he was doing this. It was his way of shining a light, giving joy to someone in an unexpected way.

I think we all have different talents in life that we can share to help other people; different ways to be the light. And we need to be sure that we are the best possible version of the Bible that people see - the BEST LIGHT.

Dear God, please help us all be like Jesus and be the light that people need today. Let us look inside ourselves to find the special gifts you have given us in order that we may share those gifts with others. Amen

Giving God Our Best

By Parish Publishing

Exodus 23:19 “Bring the best of the first-fruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God.”

Giving is part of life. We probably give many people birthday, anniversary, Valentine’s Day, and Christmas gifts. As Christians, we also give to God who first gave to us. In contrast to our giving to other people, our gifts to God should represent our first and best because He is our creator and redeemer. Our giving to God reminds us of His sovereignty and expresses our gratitude to Him for what Jesus did on the cross for us. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Through giving, we express our love. We give to others because we love them. Our attitude towards or love for that person will determine what and how much we give. When we know the love and mercy of God, we become giving people who want to give to Him by sharing with others. It has been aptly said that the mind grows by what it takes in, whereas the heart grows by what it gives out. The account of the brothers Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:3-5) exemplifies how giving or lack thereof reveals what is in the heart. Abel raised animals while Cain worked the soil and harvested grain. Abel loved the Lord and gave Him the first-fruits of his flock. However, Cain merely gave some of the harvest. The Lord honored Abel’s offering because of his loving and obedient heart, but He was not pleased with Cain’s offering. As we examine our giving, we should ask ourselves whether God is getting our best or just our leftovers? Is our giving a proper response to God’s love for us? As we read and meditate on His word and participate in the Sacraments, God changes our hearts so that we are willing to give Him our best.

Lord, we thank you for your tremendous love for us which enables us to give you our best. We thank you for your promise that you will never leave us nor forsake us. In your name we pray. Amen.

Unconditional Love

By Monica Lursen

1 John 4:19 'We love because He first loved us.'

Seeing a recent newborn whose adoring parents and family were 'gushing' with love over the beauty of this new creation, yet this tiny new creature is not able to return that love just yet. This infant will gradually learn to accept and return this love from those around them. The same can be said for Jesus' love for us – at first, we may not be accepting of receiving or giving Him love, but throughout Sunday School, Church services and other faith related events, we learn how much God loves us and it only becomes natural for us to return that love. Since God is rather like an enigma, we actually return that love through our actions toward others, our community, our family, and our world by demonstrating a positive, kind, gracious, and communal spirit to all. That is the true way to show God's love for us being returned back to Him in our actions.

Dear heavenly Father, we ask for your guidance and direction as we demonstrate our love for you in our actions toward our fellow man. Amen

Rating Your Effort

Parish Publishing

Ephesians 6:7 “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.”

On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the absolute best, how would you rate what you are doing as a steward in giving it all you've got? As you think about this for a moment, you will begin to realize that, by your own efforts, you will never come close to being a “10”. On God's grading scale, we all rate a zero without Him. Fortunately, God knows that we are not perfect. Since the fall of Adam, God has used ordinary sinful people to do the extraordinary. In spite of our imperfections and frailties, God wants to use us as His hands and feet to feed the hungry, house the homeless, build His church, and seek the lost with His Gospel. God has made us His stewards, and He equips us for the task. The Apostle Paul wrote, “And God is able to make all grace to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). God doesn't expect us to be perfect stewards, but He expects us to have attitudes that desire to praise and serve Him. Jesus didn't say, “Blessed are those who achieve their potential and never make a mistake,” nor did Jesus say, “Well done, good and successful servant.” What Jesus did say was, “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . those who mourn . . . the meek” (Matthew 5:35). He also said, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23). In our humanity, it is easy for us to make a mess of things, but we please the Lord when we, through faith, willingly use our time, talents, and treasures to help others and His church. The good news for us is that, in Christ, our “0” becomes a “10”.

Lord, we thank you for your strength that enables us to do what we can to give you honor and praise. In your name we pray, Amen.

Let It Go

By Pastor Kim Smith

Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

By and large, I am fairly good at the things Paul lists here – right up until the point where I am not – not good at all when life has smacked me in the face hard enough that all I want to do is get even.

At those points I need the law as a tool to reign in my sinful self – to keep my sinful self from making matters worse than they need to be while I wait patiently to get back on track with the fruits of the Spirit which are ours in Christ Jesus.

It's the Spirit who gets us back on track with the practice of faith – of loving as we been loved and forgiving as we have been forgiven, of being stewards of the gifts we have received from God.

It's an experience of letting go of the hurts we have suffered and embarking on the road to healing and wholeness that leads to a joyous giving back for what we have received.

Gracious Lord, thank you for providing guidance when life doesn't go my way and bringing me back to the joy of your salvation. In Jesus Name, Amen

Called To Be Different

By Blake Willson

Matthew 5:44 "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

To love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you was a radical idea 2,000 years ago. It seems to still be a radical idea in today's world as well. It is completely unnatural to what has been commanded. Why wouldn't I want to get even or see my enemy suffer? But as followers and believers in Christ, we are called to live differently. We are called to live holy lives. We are called to live a life that is set apart from the rest. Loving and praying for our enemies is one practical way to do that. This is also a great way to show others the light of Christ. By not returning their hate with more hate, but with forgiveness and love, just as Jesus has commanded us. So let us take this passage to heart and pray for our enemies this week. Is there someone you don't see eye to eye with? Maybe you have differing morals, values, or just general views on life? Let us remember there is no one that God does not love and cannot save. It's time to follow the example of Jesus by loving and praying for our enemies.

Father, I thank you for the example Jesus has set for me on how to love those it may not be natural to love. I pray for the strength and guidance to walk in obedience and to put this command into practice. Amen.

What we have Came from God

Submitted Anonymously

2 Corinthians 9:7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Some years back I heard a story about a man that when he graduated from college made a promise with God that if he could get a really good job, he would always give 10% to the Lord. Well, he did land a good job and kept his promise of his giving. As the years went by, he moved up in the company and was making good money. Finally, he ended up owning the company and was making over a million dollars a year. He went to his Pastor and asked him to ask God if it would be ok to back off his promise and maybe not give so much. The Pastor told him your giving is between you and God, not me. But after some conversation the Pastor said he would see what he could do. The following week the man asked the Pastor if he was going to be able to give less. The Pastor told him that was going to happen. The man asked him what do you mean, happen? Well times are going to get tough for you, you will only make a third of what you made last year. Be careful what you ask for. Giving is very personal, it is between you and God. We shouldn't give out of fear or pressure. Remember the verse says God loves a cheerful giver.

Dear God help me to be a cheerful giver and give thanks to the Lord for what He has given me. Amen

Keeping the Faith

By Dave Pruisner

1 Timothy 6:9 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Sometimes undertakers are asked to provide suitable clothing for the deceased to be buried in. They make special clothes for these people they come with no pockets but other than that they look ordinary. After all they have no need for pockets as they have nothing to take with them. We come into this world with nothing, and we leave it with nothing. The love of money can be overwhelming we don't think we want it, but it can overpower us. Now don't get me wrong working hard and having nice things is ok, it's when we forget where it came from that gets us in trouble. It's when that becomes more important, and we lose our faith and find ourselves going down the wrong path thinking it's a short cut only to find out we took a wrong turn.

Dear God: Help me to understand that all I have comes from you. Help me to keep my eye on you and not lose my faith.

Anticipate No Longer

By Kevin St. John

Ephesians 2:10 (ELCA New Revised Standard Version):
For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Anticipation: the action of anticipating something; expectation or prediction.

Synonyms:

expectation · prediction · forecast · expectancy · hope · hopefulness · excitement · suspense

Have you ever wondered or even speculated in anticipation what the future might be? I know I have! My guess is that we all have done this at times as we navigate through our earthly trek. It's our human nature to wonder and try to calculate what our future might be. Sometimes the future turns out great and in other times it's not what we may have planned for.

Regardless of the outcome, our heavenly Father created us, our path, and our own toolbox to handle the course to be good stewards of all His gracious gifts. Anticipate and wonder no longer for our course is set in stewarding His work and purposes.

This year's stewardship campaign "Graced by the Fruits of Our Labor" connects us to this Ephesians verse and to stewardship. As "Stewards of Faith", offering our time, talents, and treasures, we are blessed in knowing that we are taking care of God's handiworks, created in Christ Jesus, which were prepared for us in advance.

Anticipate no longer, just do good works in the name of the Lord!

Heavenly Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by your continuing free and unmerited grace, continue to guide us in your already prepared ways that our good works may be pleasing to you.
Amen