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### **Sermon Transcript: Be a Giver**

Are you a giver or a taker? When you leave a conversation or an interaction with someone, can you say that you gave something or did you merely take? Perhaps I should ask it this way: Are you existing in your own bubble, maybe with your blinders on, worrying so much about the next thing that you need to do or the next thing that you need to accomplish that you miss what's going on around you? That you miss the opportunity to be a listening ear or to be kind? Are you so caught up that you miss noticing things that you can be grateful for? Are you a giver or are you a taker? Are you paying attention or are you just merely existing in such a constant state of selfish urgency that you miss the opportunities to give, to be grateful, to celebrate and encourage others? Paul, who wrote this letter, spent an estimated three weeks with the Thessalonians. That's it. Scholars are like, "Just about three weeks." That's all he had with them. He came to Thessalonica, he shared the gospel for a few weeks, and then he pieced out. So, you know, he's eager to hear about how these baby Christians are doing and they've been writing letters back and forth. And we also know about Paul that he likes to preach and teach and correct theology, right? Just look at the other letters in the New Testament—some light reading in Romans. We know how Paul is. So, we know he's eager to correct misunderstandings about the Christian faith that are happening amidst the Thessalonians. He's eager to answer questions and clarify them. And Pastor Rob talked about how the second coming of Jesus was a big concern for them. And it was a big concern. And yet—and yet Paul doesn't start with that. Paul seemingly wastes the beginning space of this letter giving thanks and encouraging the Thessalonians to tell them that he actually brags about them to other Christians, to specifically name the things about them that he gives thanks to God for. It's almost like he's saying, "Yeah, yeah, we'll get to that second coming stuff, but this is important, too. First, I want to express gratitude and encourage you." So, are you a giver or a taker?

### **Efficient or Just Checked Out?**

Sure, I know that's a bit of an overgeneralization and we're all both at different points in time, but be honest. Lately in your interactions and everyday conversations in general, do you give thanks and encouraging words, or are you merely selfishly taking what you need or want from the conversation or situation? I'm talking grocery store interactions, work emails, Sunday morning interactions, conversations with your neighbors, chats in the car with family. Maybe you're thinking, "Pastor, selfish is a bit of a strong word. I'm just efficient at how I go about my day." Maybe for some, it's not a selfish urgency that leads us to miss opportunities to connect with others, but maybe we're just too checked out, too distracted to pause, to slow down, and to pay attention to what's going on around us. But the lesson for us today is that Paul takes the time. He takes the space in this letter to express gratitude and encourage before moving on to what needs to be talked about and what they're really concerned about. Paul has been paying attention to what is going on with the Thessalonians. He paid attention while he was there and he hasn't just skimmed their letters, so he has other things to say to them besides merely talking theology.

### **Three Things to Celebrate**

Paul celebrates three things with the Thessalonians—three things that they're doing despite their afflictions. Did you catch those three things? I know it's easy to tune out the beginning of a letter.

Done it. There's only four verses, though. It's easy to skim and think it's just the introduction. But Paul writes, "We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God, for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and afflictions that you are enduring." They are growing in faith, increasing in love, and are steadfast. Paul gives thanks to God and encourages those Thessalonians, naming the things that they are doing that he is grateful for and has heard about. And so this morning, I propose we follow Paul's example. Who could you write a letter, a card, a text to that says something like, "I just wanted to say I always thank God when I think about you because of your faithfulness and serving at the food pantry. It's wonderful and it encourages me to find ways to live out my faith even when I'm too busy." Or in conversation with someone, you could say something like, "Before we talk about that project, I wanted to tell you that I give thanks to God for you often. The amount of patience and love that you share with those kids is wonderful and really helps me to be more patient with my kids at home." Or maybe you're a parent or worked with kids. What about those kids? What about encouraging them after a long day? You could say something like, "Before we eat, I just wanted to say, I am thanking God for your attitude today. It was a long day with some unexpected challenges, and you were patient and had a good attitude the whole day. Thank you."

### **An In-Service Assignment**

So, now that I've given you all these ideas, I want you to pull out your handout, pull out your song insert. I made sure we had a blank sheet on purpose. And I want you to write down your own letter of gratitude for someone. So I'm going to keep talking, but you are going to write. Pick a person in your life who has been growing in their faith, or showing love to others regularly, or has been a steadfast friend despite difficulties. Pick a person. Pick one of those categories and write a draft. You could even like fold this up and send this to them in the mail or you could put it on a card. But write a rough draft. Some of you are thinking, "My brain has been going, Pastor Alex. I already have something in my head and I want to send it." Pull out your phone right now. There's no judgment. I'm telling you it's okay in church. You send that text message. I'm gonna keep talking and giving you examples, but I want you writing—writing one down or sending a text message to someone. It could be something really short, right? It could be something like, "Hey, John, I just wanted to let you know that I thank God for the example you set in leadership at this church. It makes me want to be a better leader and help others grow. Thank you." That's all. It can be something as short as that. If you are at a loss and you're like, "I don't know. I don't know who. I don't know what," that's okay. This morning is hopefully some encouragement to take a beat and slow down, to pay attention and have conversations with other people that don't revolve around your ever-growing to-do list. Because once you start to slow down, you notice things. Once you stop existing in that constant state of selfish urgency—and let's be honest, we wouldn't be so urgent if we weren't on our phones all the time, right? We'd have more time. But once we start paying attention, we will notice things that we can thank God for and people that we can encourage. We can start to be givers instead of merely takers. So if you're stuck, I want you to write down the three categories that Paul names, and that will give you a place to start looking: Look for people who are growing in their faith, increasing in the love that they share, and are steadfast despite the circumstances. The good news in our scripture and this brief introduction in a letter from Paul is the reminder that we are not called to live in a constant state of emergency, skipping over humanity and others in order to get things done. Jesus already came and died and was resurrected, so we can take a pause. We can take a breath. We don't have to prove anything or earn anything. God has got us. And Paul models in this letter that the second coming stuff that the

Thessalonians are worried about, that can be explored. But first—but first, let's express gratitude and acknowledge the humanness of other people. May we not go about our daily lives merely taking, but also give.

Amen. Amen.