INTRODUCTION

Some years ago our kids were debating the “right” nicknames for Kathy and me since grandchildren had come along. Through a series of circumstances Kathy was tagged as “Mimi” by one of the grandchildren, and the name stuck. So what would I be called? I suggested the Luxembourgish title of endearment “Bopi”—the equivalent of “gramps”—but one of my sons-in-law playfully suggested “grumpy”. That would rhyme perfectly with Mimi! We all chuckled, of course, but it raises an important question: is Pastor Tim usually in a sour mood?

Advancing years can make room for cynicism in everyone of us. When we are young, we have hope that everything is going to be great! When we get old we realize that many things aren’t right, and that some things will not get right. But even if that older perspective is correct, is there still room for gratitude? That’s what we want to talk about this morning as we begin a new series of studies in Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians.

Three of the themes Paul addressed in 1 Thessalonians are picked up here in the second letter: persecution, the second coming of Jesus Christ, and the problem of idleness. In each respect, the difficulties in the city of Thessalonica have apparently intensified since the first letter. Paul must deal with them in new ways. As we meditate on these three chapters in the spring months, we will be helped by God’s Spirit as He teaches us (1) to see His justice in His judgment, (2) to anticipate His return even if the world rejects Him, and (3) to work diligently as we await His second coming.

But before we can appreciate much of these themes, we must examine ourselves to see if we are part of God’s family. Coming to church doesn’t make us Christians any more than showing up at a dinner table makes you a family member. After all, the matters Paul deals with here are family issues. Only God’s children will really grasp and appreciate them. So let’s think about family membership and two traits that mark people out as belonging to the family of God: their thankfulness to God for one another and their open thankfulness to one another for one another...

I. BELIEVERS ARE MEMBERS OF GOD’S FAMILY (1:1-2)

The writers open their letter by emphasizing spiritual family relationships. As a little review, let’s recall the three people introduced in the letter’s greeting. As you will recall from reading other letters in the New Testament, people signed their names at the beginning, much as we today type out the sender and the addressee at the head of a business letter.

A. THE WRITERS

Paul, Silas and Timothy founded the church in Thessalonica. Paul was a Jewish Pharisee who had been converted to Christ on the road to Damascus as he prepared to persecute Christians in that Syrian city. Silas (names Silvanus elsewhere) was a Jew prominent in the Jerusalem church, and also a Roman citizen. He accompanied Paul on the second missionary journey and was with the apostle in Corinth when the two letters to the Thessalonians were written. Timothy, named last, was the son of a Jewish mother and a Gentile father from the region of Lystra and Iconium (today southern Turkey). Paul chose him to go along on the second missionary journey as well. He was a young understudy whom Paul trusted deeply.

Each of these men had suffered to get the gospel to the believers in this Macedonian city. You may remember the story of how this happened, recorded in Acts 16-17. But suffice it to say that Paul and his teammates preached for three weeks in the synagogue, then were thrown out and threatened with their lives. The new believers hurried them out of town, but experienced persecution themselves for their new faith. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul commended them for their perseverance and growing faith, and encouraged them to look for the Lord’s return.

B. THE READERS

The believers whom Paul, Silas and Timothy addressed in this short letter were all new believers. They had probably all come to faith within the last year. They had both great joy over knowing that their sins were forgiven and also considerable trouble because of their trust in Jesus Christ. Some of them were Jews, some had been Gentiles converts to Judaism. But all of them were related to the head of the family, who is introduced as well...

C. THE FAMILY HEAD

Note the first two members of the triune Godhead mentioned in these opening greetings: the Father and the
Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The writers’ and the readers’ relationship to the God they worshiped was central to their identity. And that relationship would have greatly comforted them in their sufferings.

1. **God the Father**

   God was like a protecting, providing and caring Father to Paul, Silas, Timothy and the believers. Note that the writers call God “our Father”. The gospel’s message emphasized the possibility of knowing the Creator personally. The gospel was not a list of rules one was called to follow; it was a call to a relationship with a personal God who Himself existed eternally in relationship within Himself as Father, Son and Spirit. Because man’s sin was a personal offense against a loving and holy personal God, a personal solution was essential. The relationship between God and man must be restored through a person, not a system. Jesus the Messiah achieved this. And all those who trusted Him would find that the grace they needed for living and the peace they needed in the midst of their trials would come through that relationship.

   That is why Paul writes that grace and peace come from God their Father. Do you see how personal this is? Lost people hope to find grace and peace from other sources: practicing religious ceremonies, achieving economic stability and business success, wielding political clout, arranging astute marriages, plunging into escapist habits like drunkenness, immorality or sheer consumerism. But the gospel of the New Testament gave them this good news: they needed and could receive a personal relationship with a personal God who loved them and offered His fatherly care and protection.

   If you are seeking grace and peace today, I assure you from God’s Word that you will not find it anywhere else but in a relationship with the personal God who can become your Father through the new birth. And that new birth occurs when you place your whole confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, who is mentioned along with the Father...

2. **The Lord Jesus Christ**

   Paul, Silas, Timothy and the Thessalonians were not only “in God” their mutual father, but also “in the Lord Jesus Christ”, the Son of God made man. The title “Lord” pointed to his deity. He was also the Christ, the Messiah of Israel who came to rescue both Jews and Gentiles. He was the source of grace and peace just as much as the Father was. Not only could the writers and the readers have a personal relationship with the invisible God of the universe; they could also personally know the Jesus who embodied God and gave His life for them.

   These family relationships are fleshed out in two important habits which Paul mentions in 1.3ff. One way to measure your relationship with the Father and the Son is to ask yourself if these practices are yours. Let’s look at them together...

**II. GOD’S FAMILY THANKS THEIR FATHER! (1:3)**

The two letters to the Thessalonians were probably separated by several months. Paul had heard of several changes in the situation in the church in Thessalonica. On the one hand, he rejoiced at certain developments, especially their growth in Christ in specific areas. On the other hand, he expressed concern and gave correction over their wrong views about the coming of Christ and the impact this had on the diligence of the believers there. How will he begin his letter? He will not begin it with scolding, but with thanksgiving and commendation. He will not be grumpy but grateful. He will do this, not because he is trying to “set up” his readers for rebuke, but rather because he genuinely loves them as members of God’s family.

   Do you doubt this? Then notice the language he uses for his readers: “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren...” The God he refers to here has just been presented as “our Father”. That is why Paul and his readers are brothers along with Silas and Timothy. They have been “born” spiritually through faith by the power of the same life-giving seed, the Word of God. And just as there is a natural family love and esteem in a nuclear family in good health, so there is a natural love and respect for members of God’s family. And so he thanks God for his brothers in Christ. I find that quite striking because it is far easier for us to see one another’s imperfections and sins than to see one another’s growth and strengths by the enabling grace of God.

   Look carefully at this short, instructive sentence to discover more about thanking the Father for the family. The phrases appear in the original in this order: “To give thanks we should to God always concerning you, brethren...”

**A. THANKSGIVING IS A GLAD DUTY**

   “We ought”. Thanksgiving is a happy obligation, a debt, not just an option. We express thanksgiving because we realize our indebtedness to someone who has given us something valuable. The obligation of thanksgiving need not make it insincere. We do many things because they are right, and in the doing of them find that the appropriate emotions of thankfulness grow.
There’s a philosophy around that says a child should never be told to say “thank you” unless he feels thankful. To act out of mere obligation, so we hear, would be “hypocritical”. But the Bible teaches us otherwise. By understanding our obligation to thank the giver, we come face to face with the fact that we are not the center of the universe. And we see our frequent selfishness. If we think we need not give thanks, then we imply we deserve what we receive. That is arrogant. Think about it—who of us did anything to deserve the gifts we received at birth? Paul knew thanksgiving was a duty, and obeying God in this way generated feelings of thanks. In the same way, taking time deliberately to write a note of thanks helps us to savor the generosity of our friends.

Paul may also have insisted that he ought to thank God for his brethren in Thessalonica because they had written back to him and demurred over the commendation he gave in the first letter (1:2-10). Perhaps they replied that they did not deserve such high praise, that their situation was not as healthy as he thought. But Paul responds here that indeed the positives were clear, and that this made him duty-bound to thank God for them.

Do you realize that seeing thankfulness as a duty—not a mood—will help you to be a more grateful person? I need to work on this regularly, and perhaps you do, too. If we learn to live by obedience to the grace of God, we find that our feelings eventually fall into line as well. If on the other hand we decide to live by our feelings, we will be easily imprisoned and immobilized by them. Thanksgiving for God’s people is a glad duty!

B. THANKSGIVING IS OFFERED TO GOD

The reason thankfulness is a Christian virtue is that God is a personal Father to His children. He is the personal source behind the good things that come to us in life. He is the person who makes possible even the blessings that come from trouble. And so thanksgiving is directed to Him. Paul does not thank the Thessalonians for enlisting their faith and spreading their love; he thanks the God who made all this possible.

If we are ungrateful people, we will see it in our unwillingness to express thanks to other people. But the core problem behind my ingratitude is not just bad manners; it is thanklessness before God. Dealing with ingratitude must start here—in our relationship with the Father. One of the hallmarks of unbelief is thanklessness (see Romans 1:21). The pagan world we live in sees no need for gratitude, since all is either the result of blind fate or human achievement. But to become a grateful person, you must first honor God and address your thanks to Him for His many undeserved blessings in your life.

C. THANKSGIVING IS ALWAYS APPROPRIATE

Paul next uses the word “always”. That means that there may be some times when we would think it too hard to give thanks for people. Just consider some of the imperfections of these believers. Some of them were tempted to live in immorality (1 Thess 4:2-7); some were lazy and undisciplined (1 Thess 4:11-12; 2 Thess 3:11). Despite this, Paul expressed thanks for his brethren as he thought of the important positive things God was doing in them: their faith was enlarging and their love growing.

Psalm 92:1-5 reminds us of the goodness of thanksgiving: “It is good to give thanks to the LORD, and to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High; to declare Thy lovingkindness in the morning, and Thy faithfulness by night, with the ten-stringed lute, and with the harp; with resounding music upon the lyre. For Thou, O LORD, hast made me glad by what Thou hast done, I will sing for joy at the works of Thy hands. How great are Thy works, O LORD! Thy thoughts are very deep”.

Have you ever been in a conversation where you don’t know what to say? Thanksgiving is always appropriate! Try expressing gratitude, and watch the tone of the conversation turn!

D. THANKSGIVING IS SOMETIMES ESPECIALLY SUITABLE

Paul focused his thanksgiving on the things that really mattered. We may be tempted to thank God for lesser things. But trials and tests sharpen our perception of what is important. Both the missionaries and the believers in Thessalonica had been threatened with beating and suffering for their faith. Paul remembered what these people were before their conversion. When he thinks about where they are now, he breaks out in gratitude to God like a proud father beaming on the occasion of his son’s or daughter’s wedding.

1. A hyper-growing faith is a theme for thanksgiving! Paul was always concerned that under the pressure of trials his converts would abandon their faithfulness to Christ. He had been praying for this stability in 1 Thessalonians 3:2-8. Now, several months later, he has heard that they are continuing to trust the Lord to meet their needs. They hold fast to their profession of faith in Christ! They have not been blown away by their sorrows! The death of loved ones has not made them turn in anger against God! It’s only natural that Paul would break out in praise! And he does it in public.

Do you know a Christian who has gone through a deep trial recently and has remained steady through it? Have you thanked God for them in public as Paul did in this letter? It’s suitable and upbuilding!
2. **An expanding love is a theme for thanksgiving!** The love of these people for each other in the middle of their persecutions also drew praise from Paul’s lips. He had prayed for them earlier just about this need, and now here was an answer. In his first letter he had encouraged them to love those who labored among them (5:12-13) and to encourage each other, helping the weak and showing patience to all (5:11,14). Now he is grateful that all of them were involved in this kind of Christian love for each other. Apparently no one was left out.

Getting along with each other with self-sacrificing love is a beautiful thing. A family and a church where this kind of true consideration and thoughtfulness happen is attractive because it honors the Lord. When there is real love among God’s people, it’s worth saying thank you to God. Do we do this?

### III. GOD’S FAMILY TALKS TO OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS TO ENCOURAGE THEM (1:4-5)

Not only did Paul speak to His heavenly Father about the brethren in Thessalonica; he also spoke to other believers about those brothers. In fact, Paul says he and his colleagues boasted of them to other churches. This does not mean he himself took credit for what had happened there. Instead their conduct could be used as an encouragement to others. The fact that he says “we ourselves” suggests that the Thessalonians’ growth in these virtues was so outstanding that even though the founders would not generally boast about how things were going in one of their churches, even Paul, Silas and Timothy felt obliged to give public notice to how the Thessalonians were growing despite their troubles.

The Thessalonians were being pursued (“persecuted”) for their faith. And they were undergoing other problems that may not have been the result of their faith (“trials”). Despite these pressures they were persevering and trusting. They were “staying under” the pressures instead of trying to escape them. They were patiently enduring and putting up with them instead of complaining about them.

Perhaps few things encourage others as much as a Christian who patiently endures trials. People like that are an anchor for us. They show us that God’s grace and peace are sufficient for our needs. One of the reasons why some of us go through difficult times is to encourage others who will also experience trouble. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 reminds us that “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, . . . comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Affliction and trouble are a consequence of sin in the world. But by the gospel God flips trouble on its back and conquers it by making it a source of comfort for other people. The difficulties believers experienced in one city for their faith became a well-spring of comfort and encouragement for others who would go through the same pressures.

Furthermore, the very fact that believers undergo suffering and do not faint under the weight is a sign that a just God lives today! Believers will suffer for the sake of God’s coming kingdom, and through this suffering they will be counted worthy of entering it. The suffering the Thessalonians—yes!—endured is not a work that allows them to merit the kingdom. Instead, these believers, having been translated into the kingdom of God’s Son, will be considered worthy to enjoy its greatness because they will have tasted just a little of the sufferings of Christ.

Are you wondering today why God has permitted something hard in your life? It does not have to be discipline; it may be that God wants to give you a ministry of comfort and encouragement to someone else. After all, why did Jesus go to the cross? Certainly not for Himself; He did that for us. Members of His family will be called as well to endure what they do not deserve in order to bless others, and to prepare them to enjoy fully the kingdom that lies before us.

### CONCLUSION

Are we members of God’s family? If so, we should carry the family smile! God’s children speak to God in thanksgiving often for the gifts of the Father. And they encourage one another by speaking to each other about the perseverance and faith of believers we know, so others may be encouraged. These are hallmarks of those who belong to the family of God—they are grateful, not grumpy.

May these traits—the family smile of God’s grateful children—be ours in abundance!