

Series: *STICKS AND STONES*—October 8, 2006

SAYING THANKS
1 Thessalonians 5:18

I. INTRO

- A. Most of us will be sitting down to a great meal today or tomorrow as a kind of celebration of all the good things we enjoy in life. And, of course, we all celebrate in different ways with different kinds of food. How many of are going to have turkey? Any **ham** people? How about beef? Anyone having lasagna or spaghetti or curried goat?
-So, what's your favorite part of the meal? How many of you would say, "the **veggies** are my favorite part!" I just need to reassure you that, if you're a stuffing person, no one will judge you because you like bread cooked in grease. Or if you're a pumpkin pie person, no one will give you a hard time because you smother a perfectly good vegetable with sugar, cream and shortening.
-And Jesus backs me up on that. Really. All you people who get weird about calories and fat need to listen up here. Jesus said: **What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean...'** So, there you go! Enjoy your meal!
- B. The interesting thing about that passage is that Jesus didn't stop there. In a culture where what you ate was a big deal, Jesus said, "It's not what you eat that contaminates you—it's the garbage that gets vomited out of your heart and through your mouth--evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander (cf. Matt. 15:17-19).
1. We're starting a three-part series called, ***Sticks and Stones***. It's about how we use our mouths, really. Speech is this awesome gift God has given us. And we use it a **lot** in our world—in a whole variety of forms. But not everyone uses it well. Have you noticed that? So, we're going to talk in very practical ways about how to do that.
 2. So, today, I want to talk about two little words that I believe get used far too little—and **lived** out even less. Two words that, if you learn to use them frequently, sincerely and well can change the whole course of your life and other's lives. Using these two words well will make you happier, will prolong your life, give you healthy relationships, please God and change the eternities of people around you. How's that for a big claim. And those two little words are...**thank you!**

II. USING WORDS WHERE EVERYBODY WINS

- A. Now the words **Thank you!** in and of themselves are not magic. Sometimes they just ooze with sarcasm! Sometimes people say them when they've just taken advantage of you—like someone who pulls right in front of you so you have to hit the brakes—and then waves 'thank you!' As if you had a choice, right?
1. But for the most part—when these two little words are used graciously and used well—everyone wins! Really. Saying thanks, when it's truly sincere, is a character thing. People of character are grateful people. They're people who see and understand what they really have, what others do for them. Grateful people understand that good things don't just come from "out there" someplace; the good things that come our way usually come directly from God or from others.
 2. I thought about some reasons why we should just say thanks. See if you agree.

- a. I think saying thanks is simply a matter of treating others the way we would like to be treated. When someone looks into my eyes and says, “Thanks” I feel like a million bucks.
 - b. Something else—saying thanks is virtually painless. It’s so **easy** to do! To just take a moment—where it’s in the checkout line, or the cash register at Canadian Tire, or catching the person picking up your garbage, or setting meal before you that they’ve just made—and just look them in the eye and say, “Thanks for what you do!” At least, I **think** it’s easy. Let’s practice. **Thanks for what you do!** Turn to the person next to you and say, “Thanks for brushing your teeth.”
 - c. And saying **thanks** makes people want to do better, don’t you? Some jobs are pretty thankless. Sometimes the only words people get who teach children or serve food or deliver papers are some form of criticism. When someone genuinely thanks them, they feel noticed and valued.
 - d. Want to know something else about saying thanks? It makes **you** feel better when you do it! Know why? Because it’s the right thing to do. Sometimes we walk through life pretty selfishly; people are pretty much just obstacles between us and where we’re going. But when we stop and notice—we suddenly see this world through **God’s** eyes: Filled with people He’s **crazy** about! **Longs** for.
-Know what I believe, really? That just one person walking around with gratitude in their hearts and saying thanks—can have a transforming effect on a home and on an office. Gratitude is powerful stuff.
 - e. If you’re ever having a terrible, no-good, horrible, very-bad day, do you know how to bring it to a screeching halt? Stop and think about all you have to be grateful for. Think about all the gifts God has given you, what others have done for you. Walk outside and thank God for all the beauty He packs into a single maple leaf that’s fallen. For what it feels like to drink uncontaminated water and breathe pure air and sleep in a warm bed. What it’s like to be forgiven—and cut free from the past. Saying **thanks** can pull you right out of the mud!
3. I’d like to take credit for this whole idea of saying thanks, being a grateful person, but I can’t. That’s what the Bible says—from cover to cover, really. Paul tells us that we need to **cultivate** thankfulness. Anyone here ever cultivated a garden? It’s tough work. You have to pull weeds, dig up the dirt and put down some fertilizer. Any thoughts on why God would tell us to do that? Is He fishing for compliments? If we don’t thank Him, He feels sad and struggles with low self-esteem?
- a. I don’t think so. God is concerned about **us**. Kids who are unhappy and ungrateful get into trouble. Employees who are unhappy and ungrateful do a poor job. When we’re unhappy and ungrateful—and the two go together—it’s a set-up for falling into one of Satan’s traps. In fact, when Romans 1 lays out this incredible downward spiral of the human race—know where it starts? Let me read it for you:
Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks... (Romans 1:21 NLT).
 - b. Something else that may surprise you. Saying thanks is related to answered prayer and peace of mind. Listen to *this!*

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7 NLT).

-This doesn't say, "Wait and see if God does something—then you can thank him and find peace!" It tells us that as we thank him in the process of asking for his intervention—we find peace.

c. Let me tell you what the big idea is here. Make sure you get this if you don't get anything else today. **Gratitude—when it's firmly embedded in our hearts—is the key to personal happiness and peace within.**

-We *think* happiness comes from everything going well in our lives. And that's not true. It comes from a deeper well—from living with a grateful, thankful heart. Simply saying thanks—regularly—and meaning it—gets your life flowing in a good direction. It's acknowledging that you aren't the center of the universe—the fussy taste-tester of life.

-How many of you think having a great relational world affects your happiness quotient. Well, gratitude—saying thanks--gets relationships flowing in the right direction—whether it's at work, in the home, in the church—wherever. Know why? Because it communicates the message: **You are a person with a soul, not an appliance waiting around to make my life more convenient!**

d. When you say thanks, it makes people want to serve, want to give, want to help. Saying thanks gets the flow of goodness and kindness and grace flowing toward you instead of away from you.

B. Many of you are aware of the story in the Bible where Jesus healed 10 men of a horrible disease, leprosy, which would be the equivalent of AIDS in ours. It's a very simple story. Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem, going into a village, and a group of lepers—10 of them—call out and ask him to heal them. **Jesus! Have pity on us!**

1. They were all together because lepers, in that culture, were permanently quarantined away from all people—even their families. If you got leprosy, suddenly no one would touch you any more, eat with you, sleep with you—it truly was a fate worse than death. **Hanson's disease**, as it's called now, causes a person to gradually lose all feeling in their bodies—starting in the extremities. That would cause them to wound themselves, develop infections, then gangrene, and lose their bodies one piece at a time. Lepers smelled like rotting flesh.

a. So, Jesus sends them to the priest, kind of the pandemic officer in that culture. He would examine them and, if they were healed, give them a clean bill of health.

b. As they're simply doing what Jesus said to do—they're healed. I don't know what it looked like, but I imagine fingers, toes, noses and ears growing back, eyes clearing up, skin suddenly becoming clear. But only one came back to say thank you. One out of ten. And Jesus gave them their lives back. Jesus says, **Where are the other nine?** He cares about us saying thanks!

2. Now, if you could interview these nine men, what would they say? What's the big deal about saying thanks when someone has given you your life back?

- a. I think one would say, “Well, I only did what **you** asked—went and showed myself to the priest. That’s specifically what you **said** to do!” Legalistic people aren’t usually that grateful.
 - b. Another would probably say, “Well, I went to see my family. I mean, my **family** comes first you know—and, hey, they’ve been through a **lot!**”
 - c. Another one would probably say, “Well, of **course** I’m grateful—but I didn’t know he expected me to go back and **tell** him. After all, he does that for a living, doesn’t he?”
 - d. Or, maybe you’d hear another saying, “You know, I think it’s probably a coincidence. I mean, I’ve been taking these herbs that are supposed to cure leprosy. I think it’s just chance—my cure worked right after he said those words.”
 - e. And I’ll bet at least **one** would say, “Yeah, you’re right. I was healed—but I’m not sure it was to my advantage. I mean, before, all I had to do was sit and beg. Now I have to go find a job!”
 - f. And probably another would say, “Yeah, well, the leprosy is gone, that’s true. But I’m not all that happy with the way I look. I’ve had leprosy for 10 years—and now I look 10 years older. Couldn’t he have done something about that?”
 - g. And someone would be sure to say, “Oh, yes, of **course** I’m grateful for being healed of leprosy. But how can I clap and cheer and be happy when there are so many other lepers out there who haven’t been healed! That wouldn’t be considerate!”
 - h. Another would say, “Oh, yes, I fully intend to go back and thank Jesus for what he’s done for me—I just haven’t gotten around to it. It’s just been crazy since I’ve been healed. I mean, newspaper interviews—and later today, I’m posing for a “Got Milk?” commercial. But someday, sure.”
 - i. And maybe another would say, “You know, actually, I’m a little afraid to go back. I’ve heard that this Jesus can be a pretty demanding guy. He asked one guy to give up **everything** to follow him—and I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”
3. So, is what happened to Jesus average—about 10% of all people say thanks? Let’s just do a quick check. How many of you are school teachers? What would be the percentage of students who’ve come back after they’ve gotten established in life and said, “I just wanted to thank you for what you’ve done for me—what it meant to have a teacher like you!” Ten percent?
 -How about the sound and light people here who make sure you can see and hear what’s happening. Anybody ever come back and say thanks? How about the teachers in Kid’s Branch—especially the nursery—**pediatric purgatory** as one guy called it?
 -Parents—we have some parents here? What happens after a meal you’ve spent an hour or two making? Or when they find clean clothes folded and ready to go in the drawer? Mom, Dad—**thanks so much!** Thanks for doing all you do to keep this house going. I’m just gonna pack that stuff away in my drawers before it gets lost or something! One out of ten?
4. Why do grateful hearts seem so rare? It’s **so** easy to do, it pleases God, it lifts the hearts of others, it’s a sign of character, it guards us against Satan—and it is the key to our own happiness and sense of peace. Why is it that when we live in a

culture that 90% of the world envies, we gripe, grumble and complain—whine about life—maybe more than we give thanks for it?

- a. Well, one possible explanation is that we got spoiled rotten as kids in North America. We have been pampered and protected—sometimes to the point of being blind to what we have. We end up with these totally unrealistic expectations of life—that it’s supposed to be fair, free of disappointment and pain and hassle.
 - b. By the way, did you know that affluence apparently has a direct effect on a person’s gratitude quotient? On average, people who have a lot are less grateful than people who don’t. I guess more creates higher expectations. If you’ve had a BMW with high numbers after it, it’s hard to be satisfied with a Hyundai Pony!
 - c. Sometimes our struggle with the two little words, “thank you,” are directly related to the family we grew up in. You may have grown up in a home where you were regularly criticized and rarely thanked. Conversation around the table was constantly negative—about teachers who were jerks, about how hard and expensive life was. Any thanks to God just got rattled off followed by “Pass the potatoes.”
 - d. And, of course, when we compare ourselves with others, that sabotages our gratitude too. It’s easy to do, isn’t it? Notice someone who seems to be further ahead, whose children seem to be performing better in life--who seem to have healthier bodies, fewer set-backs. And, of course, out of all the people we could choose to compare ourselves to, we compare ourselves to those who have more instead of those who have less.
5. I’m not saying this to make anyone feel bad on Thanksgiving. Our attitudes are like water. It tastes a lot better—and is a lot better for you if you strain out the bugs and dirt--and purify it.
-Let me summarize. Ingratitude sabotages everything we want in life. But gratitude, saying thanks to God and others, keeps life in perspective, attracts others—and makes us joyful people. Anyone here who likes to hang out with crabby, ungrateful people? Well, then there’s another perk. Gratitude is attractive. That’s why saying thanks is **so** important to the flow of your life going in a good direction—with a great ending!

III. PAY IT FORWARD!

- A. I’d like to go a little deeper on this issue of saying thanks. You okay with that? This is my bottom line—just so you know. I don’t think **saying** thanks is enough. I think as we mature through life, it needs to go further. Deeper.
 1. I want you to think about life for a minute. Think for example, about your family background. How many of you had family who immigrated to Canada, say, in the past 100-150 years? How many of you had family that came here with very little? -My family came primarily from England and Germany, moved into the industrial part of the United States, worked hard and had very little. My parents had very little as I was growing up—I have **way** more than they ever did. Can anyone relate to that?
 - a. This is what I’m trying to say. All of life is that way. Everything we enjoy is built on what others have done. Clean water, warm, insulated homes, health care, education, living in a free world—this is **all** built on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.

-One of our greatest gifts in the West, particularly, is freedom. We have freedom, only because someone in our past thought it was important enough to die for.

- b. Think for a moment about what it means to have the truth about life in God's Word available to you—whenever you want it? Think about forgiveness. About what it would be like to go through life and have to carry the consequences in your heart for the stupid, rebellious, selfish things you've done. Jesus paid for our forgiveness on a cross. And the **only** reason we even know that life is available is because someone paid.
 -Someone left family behind, laid their life on the line, sold off everything they had—gladly—so you could be here this morning. It's an awesome gift. And I'll bet in your memory somewhere, is the face of a parent who prayed, a Sunday School teacher or camp counselor or youth worker or pastor who really cared about you.
- c. Here's the deal. We are indebted to the people who built the foundation our lives sit on.

2. Just think about that for a minute. Maybe you haven't felt a lot of love—but think about those who **did** love you. Maybe you had some nasty teachers, but think about those who noticed you, helped you. Think about those who invested everything they had so that we could have the conveniences we have. Think about those who lobbied and fought for human rights and decent wages and welfare for the broken...I mean, I could go on and on. My point is that we are indebted to those who blazed the trail!
3. One of the things we struggle most to be grateful for is how God laid out our DNA. You think, "I mean, how hard would it have been for God to make me 4 inches taller, and 40 pounds slimmer—and nice white teeth—or hair that **lasts?!?**"
 -How many of you would agree that **having** a body is better than **not** having a body? I rest my case! I'm not trying to just hydro-plane over the tough stuff. Life gets hard—heart-breaking, really. Sometimes problems are just overwhelming.
 -God knew that. He knew that however good our bodies are—it wouldn't be good enough for us—because, see, there's this problem called **age**. We wrinkle and sag—I mean, everything starts heading for the floor. We get spots like old apples. Like old potatoes, we start growing hairy stuff where there shouldn't be hairy stuff. He knew that even when we really like our bodies and are pleased with our looks—it wouldn't last. Not long enough for us.
 -To solve the problem, he didn't send #1 important angel. He came. And He made a way for us to be forgiven forever—and live forever with the body, the mind and friendships we always dreamed of. For us to have the power of the Spirit to really live and to have way more impact on the world than we'd ever dream.
 -But there was a price tag. Jesus willingly gave his life—so that we could have it **all!** You may not even realize it, but **all you've ever really wanted in life is available because of what Jesus died to accomplish.** We are **indebted!**

- B. A movie came out a couple of years ago entitled **Pay It Forward.**

A little kid who had a ton of problems of his own in his home—and who came up with this idea for a class project, "Pay it forward!" His idea was to start a movement in this world by doing something unusually good for four other people—something that cost him.

Then he would tell them, "Pay it forward! Do something senseless act of kindness for four other people. Pay it forward." And they did—and this movement of goodness started sweeping LA. Paying it forward ultimately got him killed.

-It got the originator of this **pay it forward** idea, Jesus, killed too. But He didn't die for his idea, ultimately—he died to make it happen. When people have engaged, it has been breathtakingly beautiful. The poor get fed, communities of faith get planted, hospitals get opened, the oppressed get set free, AIDS orphans are cared for. And the people who have done that have, like this little boy in the movie, become the real heroes of the world. -It's interesting—all these people who have paid it forward so you and I could have what we have didn't do it to be paid **back**. And Jesus didn't give his life so we would pay him back by doing religious things. He said, "Go do for others what I have done for you. **Pay it forward!**"

1. But it doesn't come naturally. We start out in this world as pure takers. We are imbedded in our mothers—and everything she eats, drinks, breathes has to be shared with us. And it's not voluntary—she doesn't even have a **choice!**
 - a. At childbirth, we formally separate, but we're **still** pure takers. But gradually, over time, a process is supposed to take place in us—called maturity—where we take less and less and give more and more.
 - Emotional and spiritual maturity is, among other things, learning to give back; realizing that life is not all about you. God's plan for followers of Jesus is that as they mature, they look more and more like Him. And He's the ultimate **Giver**.
 - Think about the people who have impacted your life the most for the good. Were they **givers? Takers?** How would you describe the greatest people who have lived on this planet? **Givers...or Takers?**
 - b. Let me draw this out in how I believe we've been wired up to mature and make our greatest impact in this world.
 - *The longer we live, the less we take
 - *The longer we live, the more we **pay it forward**.
 - *If you were to put happiness and joy on this same kind continuum, the more we take, the less our joy quotient; the more we give, the greater our joy—in life, and in our relationships. Jesus said, **It is more BLESSED to GIVE than to RECEIVE**. That doesn't just apply to money, it applies to all of life.
 - c. Think of how this principle applies across the board. For example, ecologically. What happens to seas, to land, to lakes, to natural resources when people just take and take and take and take without ever giving back? Forests get hacked down, soil erodes, wooded mountains turn into big empty holes, seas and lakes get polluted and fished out. It's not a bad thing to take—we **have** to take; but we also, increasingly, need to give back.
2. Let me just net it out. We, of all people, as the People of God on this planet are not called to find better and better ways of consuming and taking. We are, however, called to find better and better ways to **give** thanks. To **give back**. To **pay it forward**. For the sake of those around us, for the sake of the world we live in, for the sake of our own happiness and welfare, and for **Jesus'** sake. You could call it **saying thanks** and **giving thanks**. Saying thanks is really important—but it's painless, easy, cost-free. You start there and never stop—but this matures into **giving** thanks. You pay it forward.

3. Let me get into the really messy side of this—and talk about some of the areas where this may fit.
- a. We start with the family—that’s where we start as little takers—opening our mouth for two reasons; to suck or eat or scream for something. It’s okay—we’re made that way. But the point is to grow up into grateful people who give back—and find pleasure in doing that. Where we thank “food fairy” who makes meals appear—the laundry fairy, the money fairy. And then, instead of just seeing yourself as the connoisseur of fine dining and fine living—you **give** back. You help. t.
-It could be that you’ve never thanked your parents for all they did—as imperfect as they were. It’s easy to focus on the imperfection—and forget everything else. So, **say** thanks; then **give** thanks; **pay it forward!**
 - b. If you’re married, it’s so easy after a while to just **expect**. You know, that they’ll do what they always do, be what they’ve always been. You’d be **surprised** what a difference just **saying** a heartfelt thanks makes. And you’d be ever more surprised what **giving** thanks would do! It could get pretty romantic. Once someone you love is gone, it’s something you’ll wish you had done.
 - c. You may have had people who’ve made a profound impact on your life; a coach, a teacher, a friend—have you ever told them? Have you ever said thanks for what they’ve done for you, how they’ve touched your life? And have you **paid it forward?**
 - d. Most of us have been profoundly impacted by the Church of Jesus Christ—probably way more than we realize. We tend to think of the **Church** as the little piece of it we attend, give to and are part of.
-The church has sometimes been **way** off course. But the church has also carried the message of grace, of love, of hope, of the Son of God who gave His life.
-Just like the family, we start here as **takers**. We need that, and God expects that. But that’s supposed to change. Before he left, Jesus told his little circle, whom He had served for three years: **“Pay it forward!** Go out, gather others around you, baptize them—and do for them what I’ve done for you.
-As we mature—that’s what **we** do. We find Jesus. That’s amazing. We find forgiveness and hope for every day. That’s amazing. We find friends who love us as we are. That’s amazing. We find grace when we crash and burn. That’s amazing. We have people who teach us and teach and love our children, who stand with us as we marry, as we dedicate our children, as we celebrate the events of life, as we grieve loss. And that’s amazing.
-The expectation is not that we pay something back for what we’ve taken—but that we **say thanks**, and then **pay it forward**.
4. How’s it going with just doing the easiest, classiest, cheapest thing you can do—**saying thanks**. Looking in someone’s eyes—and just **thanking** them for what they’ve done for you? And are you **giving back?** Are you **paying it forward**.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. I was reading a brief chapter in my devotions this week. I thought I’d looked at most of the verses about giving thanks—but I missed this one:
Pray diligently. Stay alert, with your eyes wide open in gratitude (Col. 4:2 Msg).

-I spent a major portion of my life with blurry vision—nearsighted. This was corrected, of course, with dorky looking glasses--then contacts. Several years ago I was given the gift of laser surgery. Seeing well is an incredible gift.

-This passage says, “If you’re alert; if you **see** well—like **really** well—you’ll have a grateful heart.” Our vision gets quite nearsighted, doesn’t it. Blurry. As I look back on my life and see my self-centeredness, the times I’ve just taken without ever saying thanks, ever realizing how profound the gifts were—had the chance to pay it forward, but didn’t, I’ve thought, **How could I have been so BLIND?!**

- B. You know, Jesus was quite good at fixing eyes when He walked here. Bad eyes. Blind eyes. Blurry vision. Maybe He could do some surgery on ours. How about it?