

## Grateful Living

Sermon 110 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 15, 2021

Ephesians 5:15-20

On January 2, 1996, Oprah Winfrey sat down with a group of spiritual leaders for a conversation about navigating difficult and challenging times. The conversation meandered with the different guests based on their personal and professional areas of expertise. Maya Angelou talked with Oprah about the O.J. Simpson trial, the Million Man March, and the racism that the two agreed was dividing our country. Stephen Covey described how money had driven the film and entertainment industry over the cliff of morality and decency and he expressed a longing for a sense of accountability and integrity with what consumers can find on their TV screens. And the third guest, Marianne Williamson spoke about how she refused to believe that there was nothing we could do to change the 1990's epidemics of AIDS, Cancer, drug addiction, and violence. In response, she calls all people of faith to a life of prayer, trusting that God would intervene.

Listening to their conversations today (as featured on Oprah's new *Super Soul* podcast), one might easily forget that the conversations were recorded nearly thirty years ago. The ills of society, the evils threatening humanity's wellbeing seemed eerily similar to those we struggle with today: racism, sensationalism, and an overwhelming lack of faith. And the solutions: gratitude, integrity, and faith seemed even more time-worn than the problems themselves. In a sense, what Oprah's "experts" had to offer, sounded a lot like a twentieth century adaptation of the first century letter to the Ephesians.

As the author, presumably Paul, writes to the early church, he urges them to make the most of their time, indicating that he thought their time would be short. It wouldn't have been too rare for him to hold this belief. Most of the members of the first century church thought Jesus would return in their lifetime. There was a sense of urgency around their mission – and it comes through here in the language of the text. "Make the most of your time..." Avoid foolishness and use your time wisely by praising God, singing holy songs, and giving thanks in every moment. There was no time to dwell on anything else.

Like Oprah's panel of spiritual leaders, the author of this ancient letter also concludes that the times were full of discord and discontent, full of struggle, "the days are evil," he warns, before offering a pathway to a better way.

You know, thinking back on our history, remembering the stories from our school books and also those passed down in family histories, it kind of seems like every moment from the first century to the twenty-first century has had its own kind of "evil". Some more long-lasting than others, but each with its own contemporary interpretation of "the days are evil."

We have struggled with illness, plague, famine, and frost. We have experienced the evils of war, poverty, injustice, and greed. We have endured economic depression and recession. We have suffered losses in numbers great and small. We continue to struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic, a struggle that at times feels like it will never go away. We

struggle with housing and healthcare and food for our neighbors. We struggle to understand one another across lines of difference whether they are rooted in politics or economics, ethics or semantics. We can all make a list of the reasons our days are evil, can't we?

So perhaps the ancient words from that first century pen still apply to our twenty-first century lives and our twenty-first century church?

Be careful how you live...  
Make the most of the time...  
Be filled with the Spirit of God...  
Sing hymns and Spiritual songs...  
Give thanks at all times and for everything in the name of God.

Biblical Greek and Hebrew are notoriously difficult to translate; and as one of my seminary professors used to say, all translation is interpretation. I am reminded of this saying as I read the last line of today's scripture. "Give thanks at all times and for everything in the name of God..."

Some preachers would happily interpret (or translate) the line this way. And I can understand giving thanks at all times. Most of the time there is *something* to be grateful for, even if it is a small portion of air to fill my lungs. But giving thanks "for" everything? Are we to give thanks *for* COVID? Are we to give thanks *for* injustice? Are we to give thanks *for* the things that make our days so challenging? so... *evil* to use the ancient terminology?

Another way to read that line from the Greek is to translate "IN all things" rather than "FOR" all things. *Give thanks at all time and in everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Choosing to give God thanks *in* all things makes gratitude a spiritual discipline, a faithful practice that shifts our focus from all that is evil, all that is wrong, all that is challenging... to all that is good and holy and right. Giving thanks *in* all things re-orient our lives away from the human struggle at hand and allows us to see God at work in our midst.

In the *Super Soul* episode, Maya Angelou remembers a time when Oprah called her in the middle of the night, helplessly distraught and without any idea how to move forward. The "evils of the day" so to speak had worn her down. Angelou spoke wisdom into her hopelessness offering a spiritual practice of gratitude in all things.

"Stop." she said to Oprah, interrupting her narrative unwinding on the other end of the line.

"First you thank God because it shows you have the faith that God is there and can intervene." Angelou sat quiet after speaking these words.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://omny.fm/shows/oprah-s-supersoul-conversations/people-you-d-love-to-have-dinner-with>

We thank God *in* all things, because we want to show we have the faith that God is there and can intervene.

Later in the episode Winfrey is talking with another friend from her lineup of spiritual leaders. This time it's Marianne Williamson. Because the conversation happens around the same time (January 1996) there is a lot of overlap as the women discuss the evils of their day. In addition to issues of racism and division that Angelou had discussed at length moments before, Williamson also named the AIDs epidemic and called people of faith to lives of prayer and hope. Williamson's call to prayer echoes the words Maya Angelou spoke to Oprah on the phone, except Williamson introduces a daily regimen of morning prayers. *If we do not begin our day with prayer, she says, how can we expect to be grounded in the Spirit as we face our day? Knowing that God is listening, that God does care, and that God will intervene.*

As Williamson continues, it becomes clear that she is not only urging people of faith to pray in the face of struggle, but to do so with great courage. She says, "A lot of people are more afraid that AIDs will kill us than they are that God can cure AIDs." But we have to pray with courage, recognizing that God is there, that God cares, and that God will intervene.

While I'm not sure I would have said it quite the same way as Marianne Williamson... or Oprah, or Maya, or the letter to the Ephesians for that matter... I do share their sense of awe and wonder and reverence for God's deep love for us.

And in the mystery of God, I wonder what might happen if we took these truths seriously enough to put them into practice, each day, as our spiritual commitment.

What if we could be a praying people, a people who hemmed in each morning and evening with prayers of courageous hope and confident gratitude?

What if we ... sing songs of praise, despite our circumstance  
What if we learned to give thanks in everything, simply because in giving thanks we were showing that we had faith enough to know that God was there...

What if we were people who prayed like that?

And although I know that being that taking on that kind of commitment in our own, individual lives...

What would it look like for the church, as one collective body of Christ to commit to these practices – to prayer, to gratitude, and to courage.