

## **Drinking from my Saucer**

Philippians 4:4-7

Thanksgiving Sunday

11 22 2009

### **Introduction**

It has happened two times in my life—once as a teenager and a second time when I was old enough to know better. I was driving down the road when the car began to stutter and stall. Then the motor died, stranding me on the side of the road. I would like to say the timing belt broke or a computer chip malfunctioned. However, the embarrassing truth is much simpler: I just **ran out of gas**.

Nothing makes a driver feel much dumber than running out of gas. After all, there is a fuel gauge prominently situated on the instrument panel to prevent that eventuality. My car even had an idiot light that warned about low fuel. However, this idiot managed to still run out of gas—not once but twice.

### **I. Running on Empty**

In 1977, Jackson Browne released a song entitled *Running on Empty*. Listen to the chorus: “*Running on—running on empty. Running on—running blind. Running on—running into the sun but I’m running behind.*” Do the words resonate in your life today? Check your fuel gauge this morning. Do you have a full tank or are you down to fumes?

This Thursday marks the official start of the holiday season. However, **Hallowthankmas** actually began months ago. Green and red decorations appeared soon after Labor Day. The coming days will be filled with the hustle and bustle of Christmas. During a season that taxes our time, energy, money, and sanity. Many enter the holidays already running on empty.

The reasons for our unstable condition vary: over-committed schedules, family disputes, ill health, fresh grief, or just a bad case of the winter blues. The **economic crisis** continues to cause worry and anxiety. A general malaise grips our nation.

Last week I had an interesting conversation with a staff member of the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. He said that worship attendance across North Georgia has dropped during the past year’s financial meltdown. At the very moment when people need the church the most, they have elected not to attend. Part of the reason is that folk feel isolated and alone—like they are the only ones going through crisis. In reality, it has affected us all. Supporting one another in good times and bad is part of the reason God created the church.

The sense of running on empty is also intensified by our unrealistic **expectations** of the holiday season. Does anyone here have a Thanksgiving meal like the ones depicted in the Publix commercials? We want a Hallmark holiday in a Currier and Ives setting catered by Martha Stewart. What we often get is Cousin Eddie in a scene from National Lampoon’s *Christmas Vacation!*

If you’re running on empty this morning, then you’ve come to the right place. The church is a full-service station that can top off our lives. I believe that it is providential

that the holiday season begins with **Thanksgiving**. This uniquely American and Christian celebration offers us an opportunity to fill up our tanks. This Sunday reminds us that Christians are called to be a people of Thanksgiving.

## **II. Thank Tank**

So check your “**Thank Tank**” today. How thankful are you on this Thanksgiving Sunday? Where does the needle point between E and F on your gauge? Most people run out of gas because they didn’t remember to check the fuel gauge. We ARE a forgetful people, and we don’t always remember to be thankful. It is human nature to take for granted what is already ours. Familiarity breeds contempt for our blessings.

Joni Mitchell sang the song *Yellow Taxi* with the chorus: “*Don’t it always seem, you know, that you don’t know what you got till it’s gone. They paved Paradise and they put up a parking lot.*” The grammar is wrong, but the message is right.

We don’t appreciate electricity until the power goes off. We don’t think about transportation until the car battery dies. We don’t give good health a second thought until illness strikes. Even the grandest of blessings can be taken for granted over time.

However, it doesn’t end there. Those who forget to be thankful cultivate a spirit of **ingratitude**. The downward spiral of ingratitude prevents us from seeing our blessings; AND it may actually lead us to **complain** about the gifts that are ours!

A man experienced a religious calling and decided to join a **monastery**. He began the five year probationary period as a novice before becoming a monk. The abbot of the monastery warned him that the vow of silence was strictly enforced. He would only be able to say two words to the abbot each year.

On the first anniversary, the novice told the abbot: “Room cold.” The next year he used his two words to say: “Bed hard.” During the third year, he said, “Food awful.” On the fourth anniversary, the man said: “I quit!”

The abbot sighed and said, “It’s just as well. Since the day you got here, you’ve done nothing but complain!”

Do you ever find yourself complaining about your blessings? We have pantries full of food and closets full of clothes. Then we complain that there’s nothing to eat and we have nothing to wear. Have you ever found yourself fussing because the refrigerator was so full that you couldn’t put away all the groceries? Or griped because you couldn’t get the car into the garage because of all the stuff?

In 1 Corinthians 10, the apostle Paul recalled how Moses led the Jewish people in the Exodus out of Egypt. Delivered from slavery and death, you would think that the people could work up some sense of gratitude. Instead, they complained every step of the way. They griped because they were thirsty, so the Lord gave them water. They whined because they were hungry, so God covered the ground with manna each morning. They complained because they were tired of manna, so the Almighty sent flocks of quail.

In Numbers 14, they went so far as to say, “*If only we had died in Egypt or in the desert!*” Then they began muttering among themselves about selecting a new leader to

lead them BACK to Egypt! Back to the land of slavery. Back to enforced labor. Back to the pharaoh who ordered the death of their baby boys. BACK!

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “*And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel!*” (1 Corinthians 10:10) I am not suggesting that complaining is a capital crime. Over time, however, a spirit of ingratitude can prove deadly in our spiritual lives. Complaints are a toxic waste of the soul.

Far from seeing the blessings of life, we focus upon the irritants and discomforts. We become so busy grumbling about the thorns that we forget to smell the roses!

In the early 1990s, I served Summerville FUMC. One Sunday the district superintendent made a surprise visit to the 11:00 worship service. I was a bit nervous, but it was one of those days when everything went right. There was a big crowd with lots of visitors. The choir was pitch-perfect. And the sermon—well, what can I say?!? :+)

I spoke with my supervisor afterwards and asked what he thought of the service. Actually, I was just giving him the opportunity to brag on the sermon. However, he didn’t mention the crowd, the songs, the prayers, the anthem, or even the preaching. Instead, he made two comments and two comments only. First, the American flag pole was a bit crooked. Second, the parking lot had been full when he arrived. And here I was thinking that a full parking lot on Sunday morning was a *good* thing!

We can come to church on Sunday morning and choose. We can complain because it’s too cold or hot, the pew cushions are too hard or too soft, the choir is too slow or too fast, the sermon is too short or . . . okay, no one has ever complained about the sermon being too short!

OR we can come to worship God, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, listen for God’s Word, and experience the fellowship of the saints. While I’m clear that the Holy Spirit can bless anyone at anytime, I’m fairly convinced that the second group stands a much better chance of being blessed.

In the same way, we can go through life complaining about this, that, and the other. OR we can open our eyes to see the blessings that are all about us.

### **III. Attitude Adjustment**

On occasion, we all need a little **attitude adjustment**—and I include myself in the “we” of that statement. It is easy to slip into an ungrateful, complaining lifestyle. But brothers and sisters, I have searched the Scriptures, and I cannot find a single reference to a “Complaint Department” in heaven.

We are called to cultivate an **attitude of gratitude**. We become a people of Thanksgiving in a threefold spiritual rhythm: count our blessings, recognize the Giver, and give thanks.

#### **A. Recognize God’s Blessings**

First, take time to recognize the blessings of life. You’ve heard me quote the gospel hymn time and again: “*Count your many blessings, name them one by one, count your many blessings, see what God has done.*” Some people keep a “Gratitude Journal”

to list the blessings they experience each day. There are all sorts of creative ways to become more aware of God's gifts.

For example, I hate to **shave**. It's just a waste of time. I've timed it before—it takes me about 6 minutes each day to shave. So do the math. Say six days a week. 52 weeks a year. I gave myself the benefit of the doubt and decided I would live to 100! Using a calculator, I discovered that I will spend 104 days of my life shaving! So a while back I decided to redeem that time and use it to mentally list some of the blessings of the day. It has transformed a boring chore into a spiritual discipline.

## **B. Recognize the Giver**

The second movement of gratitude is to recognize the Giver. All that we possess is a gift from God's own hand. James 1:17 reminds us: *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights . . .”* Blessings act like steeples—they direct our eyes beyond ourselves and upwards towards heaven. Each gift points to the Giver.

One of the constant temptations we face as self-centered human beings is to think of ourselves as self-made men and women. We freely use personal pronouns like “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine.” We forget that we are not owners but loaners. We are not self-made but God-made.

## **C. Give Thanks**

The third act of gratitude is to give thanks to God. Thanksgiving is an integral part of the Christian life and church worship. On this week of all weeks, we turn our hearts Godwards in prayer and praise.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rudyard Kipling became so popular that his writings earned him ten shillings per word—an exorbitant sum at the time. A group of college students who did not appreciate Kipling's work sent him a sarcastic letter with ten shillings enclosed. They wrote: “Please, send us your best word.” They got a letter back from the author that simply said, “Thanks.”

Give thanks. Always and everywhere, in every time and place. Philippians 4:7 declares: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! . . . In everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God.”*

Yes, give thanks for the good things of life; however our faith also enables us to be a grateful people when we face the difficult times of life. Ultimately, a spirit of gratitude is not based upon outwards circumstances but an inward relationship with Jesus Christ. So count your blessings—but recognize that the greatest blessing of all is the salvation we share through the cross and empty tomb. God has given us life, abundant life, and everlasting life. Certainly, eternal life speaks about life after death—but it also reminds us of the life we have here in life.

In the book, *A Third Serving of Chicken Soup*, Marie Curly wrote about a young boy named Jamie Scott. Jamie was trying out for the elementary school play, and he was very excited about getting a part. However, his mother feared that he might be disappointed. After school, he burst through the door and announced with great joy, “Guess what, Mom? I’ve been chosen to clap and cheer!”

### **Conclusion**

Most people have seen Jimmy Dean Sausage in the grocery store. Those of a certain age, however, will recall that Jimmy Dean got his start as a Country and Western singer. His first big hit came in 1961 and was titled *Big, Bad John*. He later co-wrote a song celebrating God’s blessings entitled *Drinking from my Saucer*. Hear the words of the last two stanzas:

*I remember times when things went wrong, and my faith got a little thin  
but then all at once the dark clouds broke, and the sun peeked through again  
so Lord help me not to gripe about the tough rows I hoed  
I'm drinking from my saucer, cause my cup has overflowed.*

*And if God gives me strength and courage, when the way grows steep and rough  
I'll not ask for another blessing, I'm already blessed enough  
And may I never be too busy to help another bear his load  
I'll keep drinking from my saucer, cause my cup has overflowed.*

How about you? Are you running on empty this morning? Then cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Recognize your gifts and the giver with thanksgiving. We are drinking from our saucers because our cups have overflowed.