

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ –

give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus – Amen.

I would love for you to meet *Benny*. Benny's only two years younger than I am, but just by looking at him, you'd think he was in 6th or 7th grade. He has this scrawny, wiry frame. He stands no taller than, say 5'4"... and he can't weigh more than 110 pounds. Benny is a unique specimen. A couple years ago Benny and I were at college over in New Ulm, Minnesota. Understand this is a small college in a small town in the middle of nowhere... a place where everybody knows *mostly* everybody. And *Benny, crazy little man* that he is... well, pretty much everybody on campus knew who *Benny* was. If you looked for Benny, you could find Benny - because he was so *active* and *involved*. Whether it was in the audio/video booth helping with the latest drama production... in the cafeteria kitchen washing dishes... in the music hall practicing his trumpet... Benny was there – all 110 pounds of him – and not to mention, his HUGE personality! Sort of a nervous, excitable guy, with these beady brown eyes that darted to and fro... Benny was always *ready* with his nasally, high-pitched to say hello... always *prepared* to give you a big smile, no matter what time of day.

I'm thankful – I got to know Benny quite well. I was able to experience his "*Hey Stevo!*" every day because both Benny and I were on the cross-country team. But to be honest, I wasn't sure exactly *why* Benny ran cross-country. He was *fragile* to begin with. Hundreds of miles take their toll, and sure enough, he was consistently bothered by knee injuries. (Probably because one of his legs is longer than the other!) On top of that, Benny used an inhaler for his asthma. He'd rarely finish any race inside the Top 100. BUT ALL THIS BENNY DIDN'T MIND... and neither did anyone else! In fact, we loved having Benny around! Because he was always so willing to *help*... with *ANYTHING*... from set-up, to race-time, to pack-up & head-home, to *always smiling all the time*. Benny equaled = more encouragement, more excitement, endless enthusiasm, a happier day. His positive attitude: *contagious*. His big smile: *infectious*. This was just *Benny*. So it became obvious why Benny kept running – he loves life.

Meanwhile back on campus, I had accepted a job through the college – don't worry, this story's going somewhere – so I took this part-time position as a *Greek tutor*. This just meant chilling out in the school library about twice a week, waiting to see if any pre-seminary students needed help on their Greek homework. Anyway – there I was, and as it so happened, I was eventually paired up with just one student... and maybe you can guess who it was (?) Yep. *Benny*. I suppose... this was a great opportunity to get to know Benny even more. But to be honest, I wasn't so sure. I wasn't sold on spending more time with Benny, because now and then I'd think to myself: "*Exactly why is Benny studying for the ministry?*" Not the kindest thought, I know. But realistically speaking, Benny would study and *study* and *study* and *study some more*, but it hardly ever showed. He would get D's, sometimes C's, and rarely a B on his Greek vocabulary quizzes. Benny always had a little trouble with academics – his reading wasn't always smooth for a college student. It almost seemed – the harder Benny tried, the worse he did. Nevertheless... we both plugged onward. Benny didn't mind. His work ethic changed none. He kept smiling and stayed upbeat.

You see → IN THE END, I'm pretty sure I benefited more from Benny than he did from me! It all culminated one spring afternoon of my final semester – as Benny and I walked together out those library doors, Benny shared something with me that I'll never forget. He said: *Hey Stevo! You know that story Jesus told, the one about the talents?* (I said, "Yes." Benny was referring to Jesus' parable about the three servants who were each entrusted by their master with a different number of talents – either 1, 2, or 5) Then Benny said to me: "*Well, Stevo... sometimes I think God made me the servant with two talents. And you know what, Stevo? That's OK with me!*" At the time, I didn't know how to react to that. I think I smiled and spoke a soft reply: "Wow, Benny, that's so awesome!" before walking back to my dorm room. Really, Benny's surprising comments hit me hard. Like a bag of bricks at first. But then, his insight sort of began to sink in. I could see Benny's amazing attitude play itself out later that same week. Later that week as the Men's Choir sang an anthem for morning chapel. Normally... I'd listen for this group of guys to go flat, cringe a little bit, then hope for their sake that the song would be over soon. But this time, I noticed instead *Benny*, standing toward the front of the choir, straining his neck, singing out loud – as loud as anyone else. No sooner had the chapel service concluded, and fifteen minutes later, Benny could be seen scurrying around the cafeteria, making sure there were enough plates for lunch. And of course, he was smiling. You could expect nothing less.

Benny is always THANKFUL. Even as he sat out half the cross-country season injured. *Benny is always THANKFUL*. Even amidst academic struggle. *Benny is always THANKFUL*. Even when he decided that the pastoral ministry wasn't for him. Even as he sees the visibly-more-talented folk seemingly breeze by him on the path to success. *Benny's always thankful*. Every day. He loves life. I might even say he puts me to shame! He maximizes his two talents for all their worth!

For *Benny*, there is always a time for thanksgiving. He's one of a kind.

Now, I realize *anyone* could tell this story. Benny's story is one that might make us feel good. He's the underdog, the mighty mouse, an inspirational "Rudy," an uplifting example of hard work and appreciation. But please understand: I haven't shared all this just because it's some nice story. This is not my halftime speech entitled, "*Make it a Benny Thanksgiving!*" I'm certainly not trying to shame us all into an attitude adjustment – "Be more like Benny. Just BE THANKFUL... okay?" Because that would never be enough.

No, but finally, there is **something more**. Something more to this messy and meaningless life... and Benny has it! You see: Benny has his *reasons* for loving life, his *reasons* for finding time – ALWAYS – for thanksgiving. If Benny could have joined us this evening, he would echo the words of that wise Teacher who wrote down Ecclesiastes for our eternal benefit.

BE THANKFUL. *Be thankful in every time of life.* WHY?

Well, there are two simple reasons.

No. 1) God set eternity in Benny's heart. What does that mean? Well, it means that Benny can be so full of life even when his life screams otherwise, even when his life is sort of hard. The same thing holds true for YOU. God has set eternity in *your* heart. We may say concerning this life: "Everything is meaningless." Yet we know that God makes each thing beautiful in its own time. "Everything finds full meaning hi Him." Even as the changing seasons and appointed times for every earthly activity come to an end, the LORD of heaven and earth will usher in an eternal season of joy and satisfaction at Jesus' side. Benny knows this very well. This is why his thankfulness will last forever. Even when *your* life is hard – a loved one is hurting, a particular sin keeps eating at you every day, when the time to weep, tear down, and give up seems NOW! – at the very same time you and I can be thankful. For it will not last forever. We can see beyond all the trouble and we eagerly await the triumph of being with Jesus.

No. 2) The second reason there is always a time for thanksgiving... your very life is a God's gift made possible by the ultimate gift – Jesus. The power, energy, and enthusiasm to GIVE THANKS come not through sheer will power or some random attitude shift into "Benny mode." Rather, there's a reason for the hope that you have, and it's wrapped up in the person of Christ. His love compels you to be thankful the whole year-round by the power and positive energy of his forgiveness. Full pardon for whenever you view your life as some mindless, meaningless labor. Real forgiveness and healing that only Jesus can apply to your daily battle against sin. Your every-seasonal struggle in an often-thankless life. Jesus, who is THE reason for thanksgiving, won our forgiveness on the cross and sealed our fate on Easter morning.

God has appointed a time for everything in this difficult life. Everything has its place – this is important to know. But just like *crazy little man Benny*, we know there is always a time for thanksgiving. What will you do when the turkey is gobbled up? when the football games are over? when close family and friends have to leave? Whether your heart is light or heavy this Thanksgiving, thanks be to our God who gives us the victory and the best reason to give thanks In Christ Jesus our Lord. Give thanks in all circumstances – this is his will for you – Amen.