

John Lee, Thankology
Reading: Romans 6:1-15

December 27, 2015

We will be going to the sixth chapter of Romans in a little bit, but I want to begin with a question because I like questions. If they're an easy question and I know the answer, that makes me kind of feel good, but I have come to prefer questions to which I don't know the answer, because those make me learn and make me probe, so I want to begin my thoughts this morning with a question-- how long can you go without sinning?. How long can you go, and of course I'm including myself in that, and how long can we go without sinning?

Could you go the rest of today without sinning? Could you make it till Wednesday night without sinning? Is it possible you could go until we meet again next Sunday without sinning? Could you go a month? How long could you go without sinning? Now I didn't ask you how long will you go or how long should you go? Those are good questions, but I'm asking myself and you, how long can we go without sinning? We're at the end of the year. Probably this week there were presents exchanged between many of you, but all the presents in the world are worth nothing without the presence of God. And our greatest present came not with his birth; it came with his death. The passage Jake read for us in Romans chapter 6, the first four verses--and they end with the concept of newness of life. And then it goes on in verses five through 15 about being free from sin. How free are you? How free am I? How free do we feel? How long can we go without sinning?

When I was in grade school-- and I imagine they may still do this, I don't know--but we used to have contests as to who could hold their breath the longest. I wasn't real good. I was kinda mid range, but I started out at with about 30 seconds and with some practice and exercise, I got up to a minute, maybe a minute and a half. I was told that you would pass out before you died and you would start breathing, but I never wanted to test that. But the point is you can get better at that by practicing. Could it be that we can get better at not sinning with practice? Paul tells us in Romans six, we should rise above sin's domination, rise above it, not live enslaved to it. The spirits of God's people cannot hold on to both sin and righteousness, because they're incompatible. I'm well aware as you are with what Paul says in the next chapter how he struggles-- what he wants to do he doesn't always do--the struggle his spirit has with the flesh, and we're aware of what he said previously in Romans chapter 3 verse 23 that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. But in the sixth chapter, in verses one and 15, he is talking to people who are inclined to abuse God's grace when he says, "What shall we do, shall we continue to sin, that grace may abound?" I believe with the power of the Lord and his Spirit in us, we can live days without sin. Some find that statement shocking or unrealistic, but surely part of the "newness of life" that he talks to us about in verse four is living without sin. Oh, not forever. We do stumble, but I believe we can and we are to live with the spirit of God in such a way that our flesh does not get its way for extended periods of time in our lives. True, we're never free of it because flesh remains, but I believe Paul is telling us we can and must be on the side of victory in Christ. We sing a song "Victory in Jesus." What does that mean? We've got victory over sin if we have

Christ in our hearts. I don't know that this is a New Year's resolution. I'm not one given to them; there's nothing wrong with them. I just find them to be rather disappointing, but maybe this is a life resolution. This newness of life--a resolution--Lord, I am going to practice extending the time in my life when I can go without sinning. What a wonderful resolution! In verse six, he talked about the old man being crucified. I quote "that the body of sin might be done away with." If we sin hourly or daily, has that old man been done away with? You know why we sin? Simply because we want to. That's not profound, but I think it's probably an ugly truth, and we all stumble. That's not my point. But we're not forced to sin; it's when we give into our old nature. The concept of "I can't help it" is not a biblical concept because sin is a choice. So the question remains, how long can you and I go without sinning?

If you made a commitment right now in your heart to go this entire week without sinning, could you do it? I believe the answer to that is yes; we wouldn't all make it, but we could. As with holding our breath, I think there are things --call them exercises--that we can do to make sin less frequent and therefore less dominant in our lives. And maybe begin to grasp what Peter said to us in I Peter chapter 1 verses 15 and 16 about being holy as our God is holy. God doesn't ask us to do things he knows we can't do. He may ask us to do things that are difficult for us to do. I'd like to spend the rest of my time on what might be a couple of things we could do to extend our periods of not sinning. I'm not naïve enough nor am I strong enough nor do I believe the Bible tells us that we can spend the rest of our lives without sinning. That's not what I'm saying, but I do believe we are exhorted to free ourselves of the frequency or the domination of it. One of the things I'm going to just ask you to think about as we simply have to be willing to and learn to say the word "no" sometimes, "no" to ourselves, because that's what sin is, pleasing of ourselves. Paul writing to Titus in chapter 2 verses 11 and 12 says "for the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared unto all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in the present age." God's grace, he says, liberates us from sin's slavery and frees us to do what is right in the present. I believe that's what Paul was sharing with us in Romans chapter 6. Grace teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness. There is a difference between freedom and licentiousness. Our English word licentiousness is a cousin to license. It comes from the Latin, *licentia*, which means freedom, but licentiousness or sinfulness is not true freedom. It's nothing more than the lack of restraint. It is stolen freedom from the person who disregards the rules of reality and throws discipline to the wind because sinfulness and sinful conduct, respect no standards, except those that are of the person's own pleasures. Its effect is not to liberate but to enslave, enslaving to our own pleasures. Speaking of those that taught that God's grace confers freedom to engage in immoral conduct, Peter wrote in II Peter chapter 2 verse 19:" while they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage." There simply is no way around the fact that there are "thou shalt nots" even in the law of Christ. They are not restricted just to the Old Testament. Grace does not mean that we never have to say no; it means that we say no to ungodly things as Paul said to Titus "teaching us to deny ungodliness"--that's one of God's great graces--the ability to do that, the ability to do that. But I think there is more to it than just saying no. Or maybe there's more ways to help us to say no to

ungodliness. I ran across a word several months ago that intrigued me because I wasn't sure it was a word and I'm still not sure it's a word. It's called "thankology." The first time I can find this in literature-- and this may not be a thorough study-- was in November 2014. A man by the name of Bob Brown in a post wrote a little article on "thankology." I think we're familiar enough with those two words to know that that reflects the study of thankfulness. I googled thankology. The only thing that came up was Bob Brown's post; everything else, all 18 other million of them, were TANKology because Google assumed I had misspelled the word, and so they gave me all these things about how to build tanks. I thought that was interesting that Google would assume that I had misspelled THANKology and I must surely be wanting TANKology. Maybe that's a comment on our society.

I'm sure some of you will Google it and find other places where thankology is found, but it's an interesting word that brings me to my second and really my only other point about maybe exercising ourselves to say no to sin, and this is an attitudinal exercise. It's the exercise of being thankful-- may be more thankful or maybe more thankful more often. A thankful mindset because the thankful mindset is a mind that is desirous to please whomever it's thankful. If you do something nice for me, I want to please you in some way, and vice versa. A mind that is less focused on fleshly desires and more focused on being thankful to God, it seems to me is a good way for us to hold our sinning breath a little longer. Thankology comes from the merging of the words, thankful and -ology as you can see. As Christians, our thankology comes with an understanding that gratitude is a response to God's grace. Of all the things God has given me that I am probably the most thankful for is His grace. He allowed me to live long enough-- to some extent--to get my act together, and I pray that that's true for you also. And thankfulness flows from the knowledge of how loved and precious we are to God. The entire story of Jesus from womb to tomb and beyond details God's love for each of us. God's love even extends past our knowledge of him. Even if a person doesn't know God, he does not change how God loves him, because God loves all people. And we in Scriptures are commanded to give God thanks and praise. If you were with us on the last Wednesday night of November in this assembly, I found that to be one of the most inspiring services I have ever sat through in this congregation. Maybe it was just the way it struck me, but multiple brethren got up in ways that had not touched my heart as they did that night and talked about various aspects of being thankful and it got me to thinking what a powerful tool being thankful is.

If your personality has a "grumble setting," and for some, that's their default setting. I'd like to challenge us all maybe to exercise something that might really change our lives because I think it is going to be very hard for us to sin and meditate on our thankfulness to God at the same time. Because when our minds are filled with God, they are less filled with self and therefore less inclined to sin. When I was trying to learn to hold my breath longer, I found the worst thing I could do was think about how long I was holding my breath. It was to think about something else nice. Who was going to catch me when I passed out? But I got up to what I thought was a long time. Now some of you can probably hold your breath for five minutes. I don't know; we see on TV guys diving without any gear and holding their breath for 10-12 minutes or whatever. But it comes

with practice. It comes with exercise. It comes with strengthening our lungs. Maybe thankology is a concept of strengthening our spirits. As Christians, our thankology comes with an understanding that thankfulness is the proper response to the grace of God. Christian thankfulness is an attitude of the heart whereby we become aware of our blessings, but more than becoming aware of our blessings, we become aware of where our blessings come from. Our nation and the world is full of people that are thankful for their blessings but don't acknowledge that their blessings came from God. The key is to be yes, thankful for our blessings, but also thankful from where they came so that our mind is focused on God, and then we sin maybe not as often. It flows from an understanding of how loved we truly are and how precious we are to him and he is to us. We are commanded to give thanks. However, it is more than a command. It is the proper response for receiving something we did not deserve.

Now why did God command you and I to be thankful? Why did God command us to be thankful? Does that make him a better God? Does it make him more godly? God will be God whether I thank him or not; he will be as great as he is in his infinite greatness whether you and I thank him or not, but he knows what it does for us. He knows what it does for us. Truly thankful people have no time for complaining because they are overwhelmed by the grace of God in their thankfulness for it. In Philippians chapter 2 verse 14 Paul says "do all things without murmurings and disputings." In chapter 1 he says I'm thankful for you, and in chapter 4 he says give prayer with thanks. He understood that thankfulness was the key to not grumbling. There's a little song the kids love to sing in VBS. Maybe some of you--I know some of you have heard it --maybe all of you. "In country town or city, some people have been found

To find their lives in grumbling at everything around.

Oh yes they always grumble no matter what they say

For these are chronic grumblers and they grumble night and day.

They grumble on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday grumble on Thursday too.

They grumble on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, grumble the whole week through."

You don't how hard it is to read those words and not sing the tune. But it's profound; it's profound.

What does the Bible say about thanksgiving? It says to start each day with a thankful attitude and end the day with it. It is good to give thanks to the Lord and sing praises to his name oh most high, to declare your loving kindness in the morning and your faithfulness every night. The Bible tells us that being thankful is a choice. Leviticus 22:29 "and when you offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord, offer it of your own free will." That's the only kind that will do us any good. One of the first marks the Bible tells us of rejecting God is forgetting to thank him, Romans 1:21. They knew him. They knew about him all right, but they wouldn't admit or worship him or even thank him for his daily care and after a while they begin to think up silly ideas about what God was like and what he wanted them to do, and the result was that their foolish minds became dark and confused. The Bible says, as I stated just a little earlier, that we need to give thanks to God to make sure we don't forget where those blessings come from. Psalms 103:2. "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all of his benefits; give thanks for our

redemption; give thanks for victory is ours." I Corinthians 15:57 "But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

That thankful attitude that we talked about about a month ago and I'm trying to bring to your attention again this morning is something that I believe can transform us from being selfish, sinfully inclined people to those who are consumed and inspired to do good things for God and for others for extended periods of time. I believe having a more thankful attitude will help you and I go longer without sinning. Somebody wrote " ability is what you're capable of doing. Motivation determines what you do, and attitude determines how you do it." While ability is not an issue for any of you-- I'm looking at a host of very able people--so then we're left with motivation and attitude. Ability, talent is not our problem. That's where thankfulness comes in--in the motivation and in the attitude.

There have recently been several articles written on--not spiritually centered articles-- just scientific articles on the proven benefits of being thankful. I'll just tick off a few of them. Being thankful opens the door to more relationships. Not only does saying thank you constitute good manners, but showing appreciation can help you win new friends. Thanking a new acquaintance makes them much more likely to seek an ongoing relationship and remember you. Secondly, thankfulness in this particular study said that it improves our physical health. Grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and they report feeling healthier than other people. Not surprisingly, grateful people or thankful people are also more likely to take care of their health. They exercise more often and are more likely to attend regular checkups with their doctor. It also purportedly, and I believe, improves our psychological health. It reduces the multitude of chemical emotions ranging from envy, resentment to frustration and regret. It enhances our empathy and reduces our tendency toward aggression. It even helps you sleep better. So maybe we shouldn't be too thankful right now. Thankfulness helps you improve your self-esteem because it reduces social comparison. I really like that. When we understand that all we have came from God, then we're not as competitive, one with another, because everything comes from the grace of God. If you're a better singer than me, it's because God made you a better singer than me. If I'm better at something than you, God made me better at that and gave me that ability. It also increases our mental strength.

But as I near the end of this, I would like to use a an example that occurred just a few days ago. And I know if he were here, he would give me permission, I talked to him yesterday but didn't ask him about this. Last Saturday late afternoon or early evening when we were summoned to the hospital by Tammy. We got there not too long after Mike got there and was having his heart attack. We got there not too long after Mike coded, flatlined, his heart quit beating, whatever you want to call it. And they had put the paddles on him three times to get him back. When we got there, all of that had happened maybe in the hour or so prior. Donna and I and Shane found Tammy in the waiting room and she had witnessed all of that. Mike told me this week that was one of his regrets, that she had to see all , but that's just part of being loved. So she had been through--I'm going to say-- the ringer by then. We were sitting in the waiting room

waiting for the doctor to come in --I think they were putting in the stent at that time; things had settled down. I always try to remember Job's friends who did their best work when they listened rather than talked, and Tammy was, Tammy is Mike's wife for those of you who don't know, Tammy was in the mood to talk, and what she did is something I find very frequent when I visit people in stress in the hospital. She was ticking off all of the things she was so thankful for. I'm thankful I was home when this happened. I'm thankful he got into the back door as he could've laid in the yard for 30 minutes before I found him. I'm thankful I got him into the hospital even though I had to drive an old truck, I think it was, that she's not fond. I'm thankful that if his heart had to quit, it quit while he was in the hospital, and just went on and on and on. Thankfulness is a great comforter; thankfulness is a great comforter.

Many of you have been through times of stress and you have gone through a similar thought process-- I'm just glad it worked out this way. I don't bring this up for any morbidity. I bring it up to emphasize one of the greatneses of God asking us to be thankful is it is such a comfort to us. There's a song in our red songbooks, "Count your blessings, name them one by one." You may be able to sing that and stay depressed, but you can't sing that and think about it and stay depressed. Paul in I Thes. chapter 5 verse eight says, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ concerning you." Paul doesn't say to give thanks FOR everything because things do happen that really I don't know that we should be thankful for. He says to be thankful IN everything, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, be thankful.

Do you and I have what it takes for now the coming year to make the periods that we go through without sinning longer? When we stumble, God has graciously given us a way to come back. We all rely on that, absolutely, but as he urges us to become more holy as he does, it seems to me like there are things we can do to make the periods within which we do not sin, longer. Thanking God is not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. And I believe 2016 will be a better year for you, if you are more thankful. I know it will be for me, and it's not that we're not; it's that we just forget to be thankful. Paul tells us in I Thessalonians 5 when we are thankful--his words--" You are in the will of God." Because that's where God wants us.

If you're not a child of God, and I don't mean this to be in any way harsh, but if you're at the age of accountability and if not accepted the Lord, you cannot live any time without sin because every moment you reject God, it is a sin. I don't know any other way to say it. It doesn't mean God doesn't love you. It doesn't mean we don't love you. It just means you are not in his will, so extended periods of sinlessness has to begin with accepting the Lord, and then it has to be exercised as we learn to discipline ourselves and as I suggested one way is to be more thankful.

We're going to close our lesson and extend the gospel invitation. I know you're thankful or you wouldn't be here, but it is so easy to let it slip or to forget to be thankful for what we have and maybe not pause with firmness, and reflect on yeah, that came from God. Thank you God, and help me to extend those periods of sinlessness a little bit longer each week or each month. I don't know how long you can go without sinning. I don't

know how long I can go without sinning, but I strongly suspect I could go longer than I do, and I strongly suspect probably you could, too. But it doesn't happen by accident. It happens with focus. If we can help anybody in any way, this morning we invite you to come as we stand and sing . . .