

ALWAYS REJOICE, PRAY AND GIVE THANKS

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

This is Thanksgiving week 2024. And so I say to you all, “Happy Thanksgiving.” Even though this is Thanksgiving week in the USA, giving thanks must not be reserved for this 4th week of November each year. Rather, thanksgiving is a constant requirement in the Christian life. Not a requirement in the sense of an obligation or a law that you will be punished if you do not do it. Rather, without a thankful mind, heart and spirit, we forfeit the joy and peace that is meant to be ours in Christ Jesus. In today’s short reading from Apostle Paul’s first recorded letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul gives 3 imperatives: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. And he adds words: “for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” It is consistent with the New Testament that Christians are repeatedly urged to rejoice, to pray and to give thanks. These 3 things to do are closely related, perhaps inseparable. Let’s consider these 3 admonishments, to be joyful, prayerful and thankful.

First, rejoice always. This sounds impossible. How can we always be joyful when we don’t feel joyful or when circumstances don’t call for rejoicing? Well, first of all, we need to balance this Bible verse with others such as Romans 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” So, there are times when it may not be appropriate to rejoice, such as at a funeral or a time of painful news. Rather, it would be appropriate to share the pain with others. Here is another Bible verse: Ecclesiastes 3:4 says there is “...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

So why does Paul say to “rejoice always.” Philippians 4:4 is helpful here. It reads, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” Paul says to rejoice “in the Lord.” Paul’s letter to the Philippians has been called the Epistle of Joy, since Paul repeats the word joy or rejoice many times. Once Paul and his friend Silas were beaten and jailed in Philippi for ruining a local fortune-teller’s business profits. Humanly, it would be quite natural for Paul and Silas to be groaning in pain and asking God, “Why?” this happened to them. But Acts 16:25 says, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.” They were praying and singing hymns! When I even have a headache or stomach ache I find it hard to sing. When I had kidney stones six months ago I was doubled over in pain and vomiting every time a wave of pain came over me. I did not think to sing hymns, although I did pray, “God, have mercy on me.” And I asked others to pray for me at that moment during a phone Bible study, and it did help.

There is a mysterious joy “in the Lord” when we suffer for truth and righteousness. Jesus said that when we are insulted or persecuted for his sake we can rejoice for we are sharing in sufferings for God. Peter wrote to suffering Christians, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (1Pe 4:12-13).

Bitter suffering is to suffer for our sins, mistakes and regretful words and actions. But there is a heavenly joy to suffer for the name of Christ. The apostles were beaten and released by the Jewish Sanhedrin, but they left “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Christ]” (Ac 5:41).

I did a little research on some of Paul's rejoicing topics in his letters. Here are 11 of his reasons to rejoice, which I'll put in the imperative mode. Perhaps his reasons can also give you some reasons to rejoice.

Rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Ro 5:2).

Rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance...character, and ...hope (Ro 5:3-4).

Rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Ro 5:11).

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer (Ro 12:12).

Rejoice with those who rejoice...” (Ro 12:15a).

Rejoice with the truth (1Co 13:6).

Rejoice at the arrival of coworkers (1Co 16:17).

Rejoice to see godly grief and repentance (2Co 7:9).

Rejoice at others' care for you (2Co 7:7).

Rejoice that Christ is proclaimed (Php 1:18).

Rejoice in sufferings for others' sake Col 1:24).

Did any of Paul's reasons to rejoice in the Lord resonate with you?

Second, pray without ceasing. Again, does this mean that we must be praying 24/7? Yes and no. Obviously, we don't literally pray with every word or sentence we speak when we communicate with others. Even full time ministers don't do that. Pray without ceasing means to walk and talk with God all day long. Brother Lawrence called this “practicing the presence of God.” When we are going through hard times, it is much easier to be praying to God for help, wisdom, guidance, grace, strength, etc. But when things are going well, it is much easier to coast along in cruise control, depending on

ourselves or others or the fuel reserves we have in the tank. If we have a lot of savings in the bank, we aren't as desperate to depend on God. We are not as "poor in spirit." To be poor in spirit means we are not relying on our own wealth, resources or reserves. Said another way, Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. Branches are useless when cut off from the vine. Branches of a tree depend totally on the vinestock of the plant, like the tree trunk. Cut branches wither and die quickly, because they have no sap from the root source.

We maintain a vine and branch relationship with Jesus through prayer. Prayer is the expression of faith and reliance on God. Proud self-sufficiency says, "I got this. I can handle things on my own. I don't need others' help, even God's." That is a recipe for failure or worse, disaster. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

When my son Paul was in preschool I used to stop by the playground. I enjoyed when he excitedly rocked back and forth saying, "Daddy! Daddy!" It delighted me that he was just as excited to spend time with me as he was to play on the slide.. Also, it delights me when my adult children call me for advice or just to talk and pray together. It's a joy to connect with my children. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven..." We are children of God. Our Father God wants to hear what is on our hearts even though he already knows. God our Father knows what we need but he still wants us to ask. Jesus taught us to ask, seek and knock on heaven's door through prayer.

This past two weeks one of our church members texted me to ask how she could pray for me. She had time to pray and wanted to pray for the church pastors. My point here is that we shouldn't only pray for ourselves. Actually, the more we get close to God, the more we care about and pray for others, not just ourselves, or our families. I'm not saying we shouldn't pray for ourselves and our families. We should. At the start of this letter to the Thessalonians, Apostle Paul says, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers...(1:2). It's good to pray for others and to thank God for his work of grace in and through them. Do you pray for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

We should also pray for our leaders—church leaders and government leaders. The Bible tells us to pray for those in authority. 1 Timothy 2:1-4 says, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Do you pray for those in authority? Do you pray for those who need salvation and the knowledge of the truth? A few relatives of mine have ideas that are outside the

message and truth of the Bible. That is a good reminder for me to pray for them to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Third, give thanks in all circumstances. Once again, how can we give thanks in all circumstances, when our circumstances are not always favorable? I thought about an airplane. When an airplane gets caught in a storm in the middle of a flight, what does the pilot do? He flies above the clouds, to get the storm below the plane. There is a spiritual truth here. When we are in a difficult storm, one way to get above the storm is to pray for God's help. Another way above the storm is to pray for God's perspective.

In the recent U.S. elections, $\frac{1}{3}$ of registered voters didn't vote. Approximately half of the Americans who voted were not happy with the results, which indicates an ideologically divided nation. There seem to be many reasons not to give thanks to God. But for Christians, happiness or thankfulness is not to be reliant upon who gets elected. For Christians, God reigns now and forever. God is in no danger of losing control of human destiny and earth's future.

There is a repeated phrase in the psalms to give us good reason to give thanks in all circumstances. Four psalms begin with the words. "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1). God is good, all the time. His steadfast love endures forever. As Paul wrote, there is nothing in all creation that, "...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro 8:39).

So what should we give thanks for? Usually we equate thankfulness with earthly blessings, like good health, wealth, meaningful work, family, etc. It is good to be thankful for all these, such as a job promotion or a successful surgery, or just another year of life. It is also good to be thankful that others love us in spite of all the unloving and unlovely things we think and say and do. Even more, we can thank God for his continued grace to us in spite of our stubborn sins, ungodliness and immaturity.

Giving thanks is not optional for a Christian who wants to be growing, thriving, and fruitful. Giving thanks in all circumstances is God's will for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Some people turn to alcohol to feel better. Apostle Paul understood this, since it was a common idea in Paul's day as well, 2000 years ago. Paul presented a better way of joy and thankfulness. He wrote, "...do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Eph 5:18-20). Paul says give thanks always and for everything in the name of Jesus.

Earlier we saw that Paul gave thanks for the Thessalonian believers. What was he thankful to God regarding them? Listen to Paul: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Th 1:2-3). Paul thanked God for their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfast hope in Jesus. Do you recognize the faith, love and hope of fellow believers in Christ? Do you thank God for their faith, love and hope shown and practiced in their lives?

Giving thanks is quite contrary to complaining, grumbling or criticizing. The Bible speaks of talk that is filthy, foolish and crude. Paul wrote, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph 5:4). To give thanks to God is pleasing to God. Paul wrote, “...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:15-17). Above all, thank God for Jesus Christ our Savior.

Today, we celebrate Communion. For all who have accepted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on their behalf and have committed their lives to him, we give all our thanks and praise to God. This is the primary reason we can give thanks to God in all our life circumstances: Christ redeemed us by his broken body and shed blood on the cross. He brought us into his family and his kingdom. No matter what happens, nothing can separate us from his love. So we give thanks to God through Jesus Christ every day that we have breath. Say it with me if you believe it: Thank you, Jesus.

So what has the Bible told us today? Three things: rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. This is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Christ Jesus loved us and gave his life for us. Through Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven, we are loved as his children, and we have an eternal place in his family and in his kingdom. May God remind and help us by His Spirit to rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks in the name of Jesus our Lord and Savior—today, this week, and every day. Amen.