REJOICE; PRAY; GIVE THANKS

1 Thessalonians 5:12–28

Key Verses: 5:16–18

“Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

“How are you?” We ask this question all the time, without really expecting a truthful answer. And if asked, we usually answer, “Fine.” But really, life can be filled with ups and downs. Often there are more downs than ups! It’s so easy to get carried away by how we feel at the moment. But in today’s passage Apostle Paul tells us something surprising. He says that in Christ Jesus we are not to be up and down, but to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances. What does that *mean*? *How* can we *live* that way? And *why* is it “God’s will”? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

As we’ve seen in our study, Paul was writing to the new believers in Thessalonica. After being there just a few weeks, he had to leave suddenly due to persecution, and these people had been left sort of as orphans. Timothy had been there for a quick visit, but Paul was still very concerned. He wanted to maintain a personal relationship with these new believers. He told them how much he cared for them, even though he hadn’t been able to go back to them yet. He reminded them of his hard work and mother-like care for them. He said they were his joy and crown. He wanted them to stand firm in their faith and live lives pleasing to God. So he taught them to abstain from sexual immorality, to love one another, and to work with their hands. While living in a corrupt society he wanted them to live with the hope of the second coming of Jesus and of the resurrection of the dead. In light of it, he taught them to be spiritually awake and sober, armed with faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. He urged them to encourage each other and build each other up. Now he gives them some final instructions. In these verses Paul teaches how we should treat our leaders, how we should treat one another and outsiders, what should characterize our daily lives, and his main prayer topic for us.

Look at verses 12,13. Here Paul is basically addressing how we treat our leaders. He describes them as “those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you.” We don’t know exactly how these people became leaders, but what’s important isn’t how or their human status but “their work.” They weren’t just digging ditches; they worked hard at caring for their fellow believers. They must have learned quickly from the good example of Apostle Paul. They were caring for and admonishing the young believers among them. It’s amazing that in such a young church God had already raised such leaders. They were already living as practical shepherds. But Paul knew the sinfulness of our human nature. We tend not to appreciate those who work hard for us; we tend to take them for granted, and, even despise them. Even great men of God like Moses and David were despised. It might happen in other kinds of human gatherings, but Paul says it should not be happening in the church.

How should we treat our leaders? In verse 12 he uses the words “acknowledge them.” Literally it means “know them.” In verse 13 he says to “hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” In our world people respect those who have impressive achievements or make lots of money. But in God’s eyes, those who work hard at building up the body of Christ have the most noble task. Some people want honor because of their seniority or social or educational background. Some want honor without doing much. Some work hard to gain human recognition. But we should be careful to honor those who are actually working to build up God’s people. Paul adds in verse 13b, “Live in peace with each other.” When we honor those who serve God and others, we can have peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Read verse 14. There are many kinds of people, even in the church fellowship. Some are idle and disruptive. Others are disheartened. Some are just plain weak. When people are behaving badly, it’s so easy to lose our temper. So Paul says, “Be patient with everyone.” After honoring our spiritual leaders, we’re also to treat our fellow members in a Christ-like way. Paul uses active verbs here: “warn,” “encourage,” and “help.” To do these things, we need to be aware of others. We need to really understand what’s going on in their lives. We need to observe and listen carefully. Sometimes we need to warn, but we also need to be patient. We shouldn’t jump to conclusions. In many places in our world people can be anonymous. Sometimes they choose to do so intentionally. They just want to be left alone. But in church we’re not supposed to be anonymous. We’re called to mutual accountability. It’s an accountability in love.

Read verse 15. When someone wrongs us, it’s so easy to retaliate. But Paul calls us to practice God’s mercy towards one another. The world celebrates revenge. But God’s people celebrate forgiveness. Based on God’s grace of forgiveness in our own lives, we should actively be seeking to do good to people, especially to those who wrong us. Why? It’s because it reflects our Lord Jesus. On the cross he prayed for those crucifying him, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk23:34a). Christians can have the impression of being judgmental. But by God’s grace, what we Christians really need to be known for is forgiving and doing good to those who don’t deserve it.

Read verses 16–18. Rejoice, pray and give thanks! They should all flow out of our relationship with Jesus. But they don’t always “flow.” So, in our daily lives these are things we can either choose to do or choose not to do. What does it mean to live this way?

Read verse 16 again. The key word here is “always.” Is there no place for sorrow in a Christian’s life? Even our Lord Jesus once said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mt26:38). But Paul is talking here about a general spirit of living. Christians are called to be joyful and to rejoice. Some personality types can be somber. Even whole cultures tend to be quite serious. But if we are always heavy and serious, we’re not reflecting the beautiful new life Jesus has given us.

Earlier Paul mentioned how these new believers were “in the midst of severe suffering” but experienced “the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1:6). It’s not something we do with our human effort. It tells us of the fundamental change that happens to us when we believe in Jesus. When we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus who died for us and rose again, we receive the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, God the Father and Jesus the Son actually come and make their home in us (Jn14:23). One of the key fruits of the Spirit in us is joy (Gal5:22). It’s not fake; it’s not an act; it’s genuine joy. Why are we so joyful? It’s because we’ve tasted the grace of Jesus. It’s because we’ve got a glimpse of the hope of the kingdom of God. When God has given us such great forgiveness and such a living hope, how can we *not* be joyful? Through Jesus we have access to the most intimate, personal relationship with our Father God, and this wonderful relationship fully satisfies our souls.

Yet, we all have to live in this real world. And life can be tough. Our joy won’t always be automatic. Often we have to *choose* to rejoice. When we’re persecuted for our faith in Jesus, we should remember to rejoice (Mt5:11,12; 1Pe4:13). The Bible also teaches us that in any kind of suffering we should rejoice. Why? Because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope (Ro5:3,4). God is using our sufferings to mold us into the image of Jesus. When people suffer they usually grumble and complain. It may have become our bad habit. But when we’re suffering in some way, we need to see what God is doing and choose to rejoice. Even when life is mundane and seems boring, we need to choose to rejoice because of God’s grace to us in Jesus. If we’re going around with a heavy spirit, people won’t be encouraged. But if we go around in our daily lives with a genuine spirit of joy, people will notice, and they’ll find our faith in Jesus attractive.

Read verse 17. For many people this verse may not seem practical. How can we pray when our minds have to focus on the task at hand? Very few people can withdraw from all work and human relationships to devote themselves to solitary prayer in a remote or secluded place. But this admonishment isn’t meant for special people; it’s for everyone. So what does it mean to “pray constantly”?

First, it’s to have the general spirit of prayer. This means to be dependent on God, not on ourselves, in real life. We don’t rely on our own abilities, our own strength, our own smartness. Throughout our day we seek God’s help in whatever we’re doing. We seek his discernment, his strength, his guidance. We’re asking him for his grace to do what pleases him and to use our lives for his glory. Second, to “pray constantly” means not to give up on what we’re praying for. Jesus taught his disciples the parable of the persistent widow to teach them to always pray and not give up (Lk18:1ff.). When our prayers seem unanswered, it’s natural to want to give up. But if we have a conviction, we should keep on praying and not give up. We especially should be praying for *people* constantly, without giving up. We know we should, but still we always need a reminder. There’s another reason to “pray constantly.” When people sense a prayerful spirit in us, they open their hearts to us, and God gives us the chance to help them.

Read verse 18a. We understand being thankful when something good happens. When something bad happens, we naturally get discouraged, or frustrated, or angry, or afraid. How can we give thanks “in all circumstances”? It’s not because of the circumstances. We may know the famous story of Job. In one day he lost everything—all his wealth, and even all his children. When he heard the news, what did Job do? The Bible says he “fell to the ground in worship,” saying, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. May the name of the LORD be praised” (Job1:21). What an inspiring story!

Sometimes we have a complaining spirit. We’re always focusing on all the negative. We may think we’re being realistic, but it’s draining. It drags the people around us down, too. Some people always see the glass as half-empty; others see the same glass as half-full. We’re taught to think positively because the power of positive thinking is well-documented. But this is more than just positive thinking. We give thanks in all circumstances because we know who God is, and we know his amazing grace. No bad circumstance in this world can nullify who God is or his amazing grace to us. We’re called to always hold onto God’s grace to us in Jesus in our hearts. When we do, we give thanks in all circumstances. With this grace alive in us, thanks to God gushes from our hearts. The Apostle Paul taught Timothy, “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2Ti2:1). Only the grace of Jesus in our hearts gives us a thankful spirit.

Read verse 18b. Rejoicing, praying and giving thanks are all God’s will for us in Christ Jesus. Why? It’s because they keep us spiritually healthy. They keep us from coming under Satan’s influence. Satan tries to steal our joy, make us give up praying, and cause us to start complaining. He wants to undermine our spiritual lives. To resist him, we need to keep rejoicing, praying and thanking, no matter what our circumstances. It characterizes a true life of faith in Jesus.

In verse 19 Paul tells us not to quench the Spirit. It reminds us again that it’s the Holy Spirit who enables us to rejoice, pray and give thanks in all circumstances. The Holy Spirit in us is like a fire. He helps us to burn with spiritual fervor no matter what we’re going through. But we can pour cold water on him. We do that when we intentionally sin, or when we reject his leading. Paul also encourages us to create an environment where the Spirit inspires people. But he also tells us to be discerning, to embrace what is good and reject what is evil (20–22).

Read verse 23. Paul was so concerned with their sanctification. It should be our main concern, too. Only God himself can sanctify us through and through—soul, body and spirit. And only God himself can keep us blameless until the coming of Jesus. We human beings are so weak and so chronically sinful. How could Paul be sure of their ultimate sanctification? Read verse 24. Like Paul, we need confidence in God for ourselves and to pray for others. Paul concludes by urging prayer, love and clear Bible teaching (25–27). Read verse 28. What beautiful final words! He committed them to the grace of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is the best blessing.

Read verses 16–18 again. May God newly inspire us to choose to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances. In this way may he fill us with his Spirit and make us vibrant witnesses of Jesus to all the people around us.