

“Healthy Habits of the Heart for a Godward Life”

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

November 27, 2011

Over the last couple weeks I have been making statements like:

- ✓ Gratitude is the overflow of a Godward life.
- ✓ Gratitude is the aftertaste of savoring God and delighting in His Word.

This morning I would like to wrap up our last Sunday of the 1 Thessalonians challenge by reflecting on 1 Thess. 5:16-18, “*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*” Let me just remind you that Paul did not write these verses with our Thanksgiving holiday in mind. They were written long before the first American Thanksgiving. These verses dictate what the daily demeanor of every believer’s life should be.

Let’s consider 3 healthy habits of the heart that create a Godward life:

1. **A Healthy Heart is a Rejoicing Heart** (1 Thess. 5:16).

It would be far too easy for me to understate how essential it is for us to develop the habit and even the discipline of rejoicing in the Lord.

I Thess. 5:16 ~ “*Rejoice Always*”

Phil. 2:18 ~ “*I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.*”

Phil. 3:1 ~ “*Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord...*”

Phil. 4:4 ~ “*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, rejoice!*”

2 Cor. 13:11 ~ “*Finally, brethren, rejoice...*”

What does it mean to rejoice?

“Rejoice” is the verb form of the noun joy.

**To rejoice is the choice to find and express joy.** It literally means “to give joy; to make joyful.”<sup>1</sup> Rejoicing is choosing and expressing a disposition of joy.

If we are going to find joy and express it, then we must know the source of joy, which is ultimately found in the Lord. Rejoicing gets our eyes off of ourselves by looking to God for joy. It is essential for us to practice joy, to exercise joy. Have you ever thought of joy as a spiritual discipline? Rejoicing is a healthy habit of the heart that will transform the quality of your life because it will empower you to begin living above your circumstances.

Let’s take the apostle Paul’s life as an example. He describes his circumstances in 2 Cor. 6:10: “*in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger... regarded as deceivers and yet true...punished yet not put to death, as **sorrowful yet always rejoicing***”

In Romans 5:3 he says, “*we also **rejoice in our sufferings**, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit*”

What I want you to see here is the context in which Paul found joy. It was not in the absence of sorrow and suffering but in the midst of sorrow and suffering. I Peter 4:13 says that our response to suffering is to “*keep on rejoicing.*” That’s how we survive. In Matt. 5:12, Jesus said that when we are persecuted we are to “*rejoice and be glad*” that our reward in heaven is great.

**Myth:** The way to have joy is to rid your life of joyless things (i.e. depression, discouragement, financial problems, strained relationships, anxiety, etc.)

**Life Principle:** Joy is not the absence of pain in our lives, but the result of welcoming the presence of God into the real circumstances of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Webster’s dictionary

*So how do we rejoice when life seems out of control?*

- We rejoice in who God is (compassionate, gracious, just, wise, sufficient).
- We rejoice that God always has good purposes to fulfill in us through the trials of life.
- We rejoice in God's promises to meet our needs and to mature us.
- We can rejoice at all times because God is always with us, Christ has secured our future, and the Holy Spirit dwells in us to bear the fruit of joy.

God's will for you is to face everything that comes your way with irrepressible joy!

*Illus:* Jeff's email (permission granted): "It was a rough morning – I overslept, and then the Pacifica would not start. I let Sid take the bicycle to school and I started walking to work – Mary Kay left for work by 6:30 am with the Impala. I started to recite 1 Thess. 5:16 as I walked. I talked out loud to our Father, rejoicing over the fact that the car broke down in our garage and not last night at the OMC parking lot. I rejoiced that I had Dave Hassig as my mechanic. I rejoiced that I could walk to work. I rejoiced that I was healthy enough to walk to work. I rejoiced that Amy had the day off. I rejoiced that I did not have to go deer hunting to feed my family. I just kept rejoicing over more and more things. I kept this up till I got a block from the bank – by then my attitude was corrected."

You really can choose to rejoice, and it really will impact the quality of your life.

## 2. A Healthy Heart is a *Praying Heart* (1 Thess. 5:17).

Not just a heart that prays, but a heart that does not cease praying.  
1 Thess. 5:16-17 ~ "*Rejoice always; Pray without Ceasing.*"

What does it mean to "pray without ceasing?"

## ➤ **Unceasing Prayer is Persistent Prayer**

(Luke 18:1-8a) "*Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'"* And the Lord said, "*Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.*"

Don't make the mistake of comparing the judge to God in this parable. They are opposites. God is not like this unwilling judge that we have to wear down with our persistence to do anything for us. The point of this parable is to compare us to this widow. We are desperate for someone to meet our need because we can't possibly do it ourselves. We are dependent on the mercy of someone greater. And if even an uncaring, unwilling judge can be moved with a widow's persistence, how much more should we expect that God who loves us and has promised to meet our needs will be moved with compassion by our cries for help.

At all times we ought to pray and not lose heart. God honors persistent faith.

## ➤ **Unceasing Prayer is Perpetual Prayer.**

Perpetual prayer is the result of being conscientiously aware that God is with us at all times in all circumstances.

We can't possibly be on our knees in formal prayer 24 hours a day. We still have to go about our daily responsibilities.

But we can go about our responsibilities in an *attitude of prayer*. In other words, the goal is for us to be continually aware of God's presence at all times in all places so that our automatic response is for our minds to turn to the Lord. We want a *mindset of prayer*, where we *think in conversation with God*.

- Thank you, Lord, for providing this parking spot
- Lord, show me what decision to make here
- Lord, help me to be humble as I talk to this person.
- Wow, Lord! These fall colors are awesome!

I think this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote:

- “*Pray without Ceasing*” (1 Thess. 5:17)
- *With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.*” (Eph. 6:18)
- “*Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;*” (Col. 4:2)

An attitude of unceasing prayer comes from living on the basis of two fundamental realities:

- My constant need for God
- God's constant sufficiency for me

David Williams: “*Prayer acknowledges our utter dependence on God and the utter dependability of God in all circumstances.*”<sup>2</sup>

Our dependence and God's dependability together make up a life of unceasing prayer.

*Illus*: Perhaps the best picture I can give you is my son when he was learning to walk. I can still see my wife standing in the kitchen making supper with this little guy hanging onto her pant legs with every desperate ounce of strength his little hands could muster. It

was as if he was saying, “I can't stand without you.” That's a picture of our prayer life: “God, I can't stand without You, so I'm going to cling to you every moment.”

### 3. A Healthy Heart is a *Thankful Heart* (1 Thess. 5:18).

If we are to give thanks in all things, then it begs the question:

“*How can I give thanks in the midst of adversity?*” Let me give you several suggestions:

#### ➤ We Must Think Clearly About God.

It's extremely important that we think rightly about God because He is the Creator (everything comes from Him). So if we don't think correctly about God, everything else will be skewed as well.

Two attributes are especially critical in the midst of adversity.

- The Sovereignty of God
- The Goodness of God

If you take either of these attributes out of the equation, you will plunge into spiritual bondage.

- **Sovereignty – Goodness = Hardened Heart (bitterness)**  
If God is sovereign but not good, then you will blame God saying, “*God's responsible for the bad things in my life*” and you will plunge into the spiritual bondage of **bitterness** and the hardening of heart that follows.
- **Goodness – Sovereignty = Hopelessness (despair)**  
If God is good but not Sovereign (in control), then you will say, “*If God can't intervene in my situation then nobody can*” and you will plunge into the spiritual bondage of **hopelessness** and the depression that follows.

<sup>2</sup> New International Biblical Commentary, 1-2 Thess, p. 99.

But the truth is that God is both Sovereign (in control) and good. Sometimes you will need to preach to yourself from verses like:

#### A. Sovereign<sup>3</sup>

Psalm 103:19 ~ “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; And His **sovereignty** rules over all.”

Job 42:2 ~ “I know that You can do all things and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”

#### B. Good

Psalm 119:68 ~ “You are **good** and only do **good**.”

Psalm 34:8 ~ “Taste and see that the LORD is **good**; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.

Psalm 106:1 ~ “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is **good**; his love endures forever.

Romans 8:28 ~ “And we know that God **causes all things** to work together for **good** to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

#### ▪ Sovereignty + Goodness = Hope

The devil wants to use the perplexity of understanding how God’s sovereignty and goodness work together in the midst of adversity to drive us to doubt and debilitate our faith and imprison us in either bitterness or hopelessness.

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<sup>3</sup> David Williams: “To be able to give thanks in all circumstances presupposes a recognition of God’s sovereignty, that in all these circumstances (whatever the appearance might be) He is working “for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). [NIBC; 1 & 2 Thess., p. 100]

**But the reality is that together the sovereignty of God and the goodness of God give us our very reason to give thanks in the midst of adversity:** “O Lord, I’m so thankful that in the midst of this mess You are in control and You are good—so I can trust in You; I have hope.”

We must think clearly about God, that He is both sovereign and good, so that we can give thanks that we have hope in Him.

#### ➤ We Must Think Comprehensively about our Lives.

We must not allow our current circumstances to consume our whole perspective.

*We must look to the past* and remember God’s faithfulness.

*We must look to the future* and remember His promises.

#### Past Faithfulness + Promised Future = Hope

Psalm 92:1-2 ~ “It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High; To declare Thy lovingkindness [Hesed; covenant faithfulness] in the morning, And Thy faithfulness by night”

What a great prescription for how to live each day with hope:

- ✓ Begin by setting our faith on God’s promised faithfulness
- ✓ Ending by celebrating God’s faithfulness with thanksgiving

#### ➤ We Must Center our lives on Our Creator rather than our Circumstances. (See Insert)

Big Picture: “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

God’s will for you is to live every day joyful, prayerful, and thankful. His desire is that you walk in the joy of a Godward life—keeping Him at the center, and welcoming Him into every circumstance.

All three of these healthy habits of the heart are essential. Yet I'm going to suggest this morning that we must begin mastering the one that probably gets the least attention in our lives: the habit of rejoicing. Here's why:

Rejoicing empowers our praying, which results in Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is the caboose; Prayer is the train (living in communion with God); and rejoicing is the engine that puts it all into motion. The more you rejoice in who God is and what He has promised, the more your faith will grow to pray confidently out of a heart of belief. And the more effectively you pray the more reason you will have to give thanks.

Simply put, if God's will for you is to give thanks in everything, then you better pray in all circumstances. And if your praying will be effective, you must rejoice, strengthening your faith, by centering your heart and mind on who God is and what He is able to perform.

In other words, *Gratitude is the aftertaste of savoring God & delighting in His Word.*