**Give Thanks in All Circumstances**

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Key Verse 5:18

“...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Happy Thanksgiving! Though several countries have Thanksgiving festivals around the fall harvest time, the American Thanksgiving has very deep spiritual meaning, as you probably know, relating to the early Puritan Pilgrim settlers. Their faith, commitment, suffering, and thankfulness helped set the course of American history and is a big reason we are so blessed. When we think about the pilgrims, one reason they are such important spiritual ancestors is that they embodied the teaching in today’s verses. These verses have three short directions, but they are very powerful. They are closely inter-related, and in some way, they encompass the whole of Christian life. Let’s meditate on why God wants his people to give thanks in all circumstances, and how we can practice that.

I. Rejoice Always (16)

These verses are from the book of 1 Thessalonians. We just finished studying Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth. Thessalonica was another prominent Greek city where Paul pioneered a church. This letter is not as difficult as 1 and 2 Corinthians; it’s full of warm affection and encouragement for the young Thessalonian church.

As Paul comes to the end of his letter, he wants to somehow sum up all the directions for Christian life in just a few sentences. The Holy Spirit helped him, and as a result we have today’s verses. Look at verse 16. It says, *“Be joyful always.”* Somehow, these positive and wonderful words challenge us greatly. It seems that while living in this world of trouble, joy is always a very short-lived phenomenon. We feel lucky if we can grab just a little taste of joy every now and then. But this verse says, “Be joyful always.” How is it even possible?

First of all, we should know that there are two kinds of joy: spiritual joy and worldly joy. Worldly joy has many varieties. Some book titles explain this: “The Joy of Cooking,” and “The Joy of the Game.” (That one is about sports, apparently.) These are mostly harmless worldly joys. But they are not enough to make our life truly full or joyful all the time. There are also destructive worldly joys—the pleasures of sin—which bear the fruit of misery and death, such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual immorality, and gambling. Why do so many people fall prey to these false joys? It shows that people are really in need of joy, and when they don’t know where to find true joy, they will even try to find joy in things that destroy them.

We do need joy, because that’s what God created us for. When God made man, he put him in the Garden of Eden. The word “Eden” literally means “joy” or “delight.” In Eden there was no death or disease. There was no sin, no hatred, no envy, no greed. All that people had to do was to love God, love one another and work hard in their God-given mission, and then joy would be their natural state. But Satan’s temptation appealed to their pride and planted doubt, and people fell into sin. Sin broke their love relationship with God. They were cast out of the Garden of Eden and into a world of sorrow, distress, fear and worry. There was no more joy.

This is the current condition of human beings, and that’s why to restore our joy we need a spiritual solution. Thankfully, God saw mankind in our misery and helplessness, and decided to extend his mercy and saving grace. God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to save us from sin and eternal destruction. At the birth of Christ, angels appeared to shepherds living out in the fields and said, *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord”* (Lk 2:10,11). After he grew up, Jesus proclaimed the good news of God’s kingdom, Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sin. This seemed to be a very sorrowful event. But on the third day, he rose again in order to show that he had won salvation and eternal life for us all.

Because God has solved our problem of sin and death by sending a Savior, Jesus Christ, our joy can be restored. When we repent of our sins and accept the forgiveness of God through the blood of Jesus, our relationship with God is restored, and we receive the joy of salvation, tasting God’s perfect love. That’s why, before he died, Jesus told his disciples, *“I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”* (Jn 16:22) Even when we have trouble in this world, we can have spiritual joy because of God’s salvation.

In the original Greek of the New Testament, the word “rejoice” has the same root as the word “grace.” For a Christian, rejoicing really means to be happy because of God’s grace. It doesn’t mean we are always laughing or silly all the time. True Christian joy starts on the inside, in the heart. It’s not always visible on the outside, but it’s always there, welling up like a spring to eternal life. In the gospels, we don’t see Jesus laughing or joking a lot. But was Jesus joyful? You bet he was! Jesus’ joy was always there, like an undercurrent, coming from his fully trusting relationship with God. It was his power source.

One of the things that draws people to faith most strongly is that they sense in Christians an inner joy that other people do not have. Of course, we still feel sad or grieved or angry sometimes, and sometimes those feelings are appropriate. But in Jesus, but the inner root of joy in salvation is always there. Sometimes we lose our joy because of sin. This happened to King David once. But David repented with tears and prayed in Psalm 51, *“Restore to me the joy of your salvation”* (Ps 51:12). Then God forgave him and joy returned. So, when Paul says, “rejoice always”, how is it possible? It is possible when we keep returning to our spiritual joy of salvation in Jesus. The more we focus on Jesus, the stronger and deeper the joy in our hearts becomes.

II. Pray Continually (17)

The second command in today’s verses is “pray continually.” This one could also be seen as very difficult, at least from a practical point of view. Do you know what I mean? Someone might say, “I have to work, and eat and sleep. I can’t be praying all the time!” But don’t worry. “Pray continually” doesn’t mean we need to be mumbling prayers under our breath every moment of every day. Technically, that would be called praying “continuously.” Praying continually, on the other hand, means again and again, regularly and persistently, without giving up.

Jesus emphatically taught his disciples to pray continually. He gave them a famous parable about praying and not giving up—it’s in Luke’s gospel. It was about a widow who had an adversary who was taking advantage of her, and so she came to the town judge to get justice, to get a ruling to stop her adversary. However, the judge was corrupt and didn’t care about anybody and he didn’t do anything. But the widow did not give up. She kept coming to the judge over and over again, saying “grant me justice.” Eventually, the judge got worn out and did what the widow asked. The moral of the parable is that if such persistence can get what it needs even from a corrupt judge, how much more will persistent prayer gets us what we need from God. The best encouragement to pray continually is knowing that it gets answers! Here is one way to start to practice this command to “pray continually”: first, let’s remember what it is we really want from God. That may require some thought, because maybe it’s something we gave up on a long time ago. Then, let’s resolve to keep praying about it until we see God’s answer.

There’s more to prayer than that, however. Praying is more than just presenting our own needs and wants to God. If we look at the model prayer Jesus gave us, which we call the Lord’s Prayer, our needs are not even the most important part. How does the Lord’s prayer teach us to pray? *“Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* (Mt 6:9-10)

The simplest definition of prayer is talking to God. Prayer is the purest expression of our relationship with God. Jesus taught us that we can address God as our Father, fully trusting and confiding in him as one who cares for us personally. Prayer is turning back to God, presenting ourselves to him, and ultimately learning to see things through his eyes, aligning our desires with God’s vision.

Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” True prayer, as a turning to God, takes us out of our self-centered concerns. It sets our mind on things above. It will protect us from temptation. It’s how we live in the light of God’s presence and not just inside our own worries and fears. It’s related to the previous command, “Rejoice always,” because we can keep being joyful when we keep returning to God our Father in prayer, and giving all our concerns to him. And it will make us useful for God’s kingdom. Psalm 27 talks about the inner life of prayer when it says, *“My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek.”* (Ps 27:8) So let’s always be re-tuning our mind to God’s frequency by praying continually, and then our whole life will also come into tune with God.

III. Give thanks in all circumstances (18)

Let’s read the key verse all together. *“give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”* Of the three commands, this one is the most active. Giving thanks is something we do, first with our heart and then with our mouth. Real thanksgiving is not habitual but is the fruit of turning toward God and really reflecting on his grace. Unlike complaining, which comes very easily and naturally, giving thanks requires a little bit of work. It may be a little bit of work to write our Thanksgiving testimony, remembering and reflecting on what God has done for us this year. But the benefit is very great. That’s why the song says, “count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”

By explicitly saying “In all circumstances,” Paul shows that he is well aware that a lot of circumstances are not that good. In fact, some are downright terrible and even tragic. But in Jesus, we have reasons to thank God in all circumstances.

What are some reasons we have to thank God? First of all, God is the creator and the source of everything. Everything good we enjoy in our life comes from God: the air we breathe, water, food, family, friends, meaningful work, culture and art, beautiful nature, and all good things. Pastor Ron Ward said that we can thank God that Chicago is the windy city even in the cold winter, because the strong winds blow away all the smelly and dirty air so we can enjoy fresh and clean air, unlike New York and Los Angeles. Our very life itself, the chance to exist, is an amazing gift of God if we just think about it.

Above all, we must thank God who solved our problem of sin and death through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. The cross itself shows that God often chooses to do his greatest work through the seemingly worst circumstances. The faith that allows us to give thanks to God in all circumstances may be expressed best by Romans 8:28: *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* Giving thanks to God is so fundamental to spiritual life; it is the reflection of a right relationship with God, showing that in Jesus we have been reconciled to God and trust his sovereign good work in us and in our world.

On the other hand, if someone lives life day after day without giving thanks, they become very sick in mind and heart. Paul describes how far sinful people fall when they won’t give thanks to God in Romans 1:21: *“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”* An unthankful mind is like an infectious disease that eats away all the good things in a person until they are decrepit and miserable. It’s not always easy for us to give thanks. But to have a thankful heart is a spiritual battle that each of us must fight.

When the think about the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, they fought this spiritual battle. 102 of them had come on the Mayflower to escape persecution from the official church of England and to start a colony where they could live out their faith. But the circumstances they faced during their first year in this land were trying beyond our imagination. They arrived in November, just before winter set in. They found good water and good land, but there was no time to plant crops. They found a cache of corn that helped them to not starve completely, but at one point they were down to 5 grains of corn per meal. That winter, 47 of them died from illness—almost half of their original number. Through all of this, they loved God and kept their covenant to support each other as God’s people. They kept their Sunday worship service, acknowledging God even during all their grief and loss.

Then, in March of 1621, Samoset of the Abenaki tribe walked into their colony and said, “Welcome, Englishmen.” The next day he brought Squanto, who had previously been captured and taken to England. In England, Squanto he had learned English, become a Christian, and found a way to come back. When he did, he found that all his tribespeople were dead from a plague. But now he found a mission from God in helping the pilgrims, teaching them all about how to survive in wild North America. That year the pilgrims planted crops and traded with the Indians and reaped a bountiful harvest.

So, in October 1621, Governor Bradford declared a day of public Thanksgiving. They invited the neighboring Wampanoag tribe to celebrate with them, who turned out in larger-than-expected numbers but thankfully also brought a lot of food. It’s kind of like what I’ve heard happens at Harper College when our disciples meet there. There was a great feast. But the Pilgrims also remembered the previous hard winter and God’s grace. The first course of the meal which was set before each person was a plate with 5 grains of corn on it. After the dinner, they had contests—foot races, wrestling, and other games. They had such a good time that the Indians stayed for 3 days.

From this we see that for the Pilgrims, being thankful didn’t mean that they forgot all their troubles; on the contrary, they made a point to remember them. But they acknowledged that God was working for good through them. In the midst of their overwhelming problems, they fought the spiritual battle to see the hand of the sovereign God working in and through them. This is true thanksgiving. In this way they were spiritually healed and laid a good foundation for this new country. Let’s pray that as we look back on the past year, we may be able to give thanks to God even for the sufferings, seeing with spiritual eyes how he has worked for good in everything.

I really like the last part of our key verse: “For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” I like it because sometimes we think like God’s will is a big mystery that is so hard to figure out. But fundamentally, God’s will for us is simple, because what God really cares about is the attitude of our heart. He is able to take care of other things. If we are becoming more joyful, prayerful, and thankful, we cannot be far from God’s will. May God bless you with a joyful, prayerful and thankful Thanksgiving and forever afterwards as well.