

Simple Yet Difficult

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

INTRODUCTION

For the month of November, we are focusing on the theme of thanksgiving. **We often treat thanksgiving as a noun but in reality thanksgiving is a verb. Giving thanks is too often demoted to a secondary place in the lives of people, especially in the lives of God's people.** Truthfully, we are quick to make our requests and slow to thank God for His answers. Because God so often answers our prayers, we come to expect it. We forget that it is only by His grace that we receive anything from Him.

The Bible repeatedly stresses the importance of giving thanks. Ingratitude is a characteristic of those in rebellion against God. It was because of grumbling and ingratitude toward God that Israel was laid low in the wilderness (**1 Cor. 10:10; Ps. 95:8-11**). In Paul's treatment of human depravity, **ingratitude** is included in the awful list of sins that lead to God unleashing His wrath upon society. On the other hand, Christ-followers are expected to be grateful people. **Thanksgiving is mentioned approximately 140 times in the Scriptures.** The clear teaching of Scripture is that a spirit of joyous, continual thankfulness ought to characterize the children of God. In fact, **giving thanks to our gracious God should not be seasonal, but perpetual.**

For this morning, please turn in your Bible to **1 Thess 5:16-18**. In short yet powerful commands, we are challenged to live our lives in a very specific and intentional manner that will conform to the will of God (**v. 18**). **Each verse is in the form of an imperative, a command.** God is not asking us to consider these principles for possible adoption and implementation; rather it is His expressed expectation, His will that these activities become a vital part of who we are. Paul is not really talking about our feelings; for the most part, we can't control our feelings. Paul is addressing our mindset, our focus. **It also is interesting to note that the verbs in each verse are in the present tense, calling for continuous action. Verses 16-18** give particular attention to the inner life of the believer.

What we have before us are **simple yet difficult** commands from the Lord. **Simple...** We know God wants us to be joyful, praying, and filled with thanksgiving. However, the modifier of each directive is what makes these commands **difficult:** we are to be **ALWAYS** joyful; **CONTINUALLY** praying; and thankful in **ALL** circumstances. In other words, rejoice always, pray always & grateful always. **Simple...yet difficult.**

Let's take a look at them individually...

I. _____ always (5:16)

Paul addresses the subject of joy over two dozen times in his letters. It is the dominant theme of Philippians where he tells us: **"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice" (4:4).** Joy is a mark of one who has experienced God's transforming grace through Jesus Christ. The word **"always"** is a favorite of Paul's in this letter. He uses it 4 other times (**1:2; 2:16; 3:6; 4:17**). It means **"on every occasion" or "in every set of circumstances."**

Joy is not the same as _____. Joy is not based on the situation in which we find ourselves. Some situations are bad, painful, they hurt. Joy is based, rather, on the fact that we are in Christ and what we are experiencing is the will of God for us (**v. 18**).

Joy is _____ than happiness. It is unrelated to the circumstances of life, and it is anchored to our relationship with God. It is that exhilaration of spirit that derives from our deep-seated confidence in God's love, power, and His work in our lives. The deeper our roots extend in our relationship with God, the more joy we will know.

So, let's state the obvious. If you don't have a true and vital relationship with God, you cannot know this kind of joy. **The prerequisite to joy is a true and vital relationship with God through Jesus Christ.** In other words, if you are still putting your confidence in your own abilities, if you think you can **"do it on your own"**, if your faith is more of an academic issue than a vital relationship in your life, you will never find this kind of joy.

We often miss out on joy because we try to create it ourselves. When we try to “**produce**” joy we are working against joy. You see, when we look to our activities and our devices to bring us joy we are NOT looking at the Lord. When we are relying on external things we are distracted from the internal work of God’s Spirit. The harder we work to find joy the further we drift from the Lord and that joy we are looking for.

It’s like a person who is drowning. They need to trust the lifeguard who comes to save them. The more they struggle to “**save themselves**” the more difficult it is for them to be saved. Or maybe it is like the patient in the hospital. They wake up from surgery and find tubes in them. The more they fight the tubes and pull at them, the longer it will be before they get better. Instinct says to fight, but in this case instinct is wrong.

So, it is with joy. Our instinct is to try to **DO** things to produce joy. The harder we try to create joy the more elusive it becomes. **Joy comes from resting not running. It comes from trusting not working.**

First command: rejoice always...next,

II. _____ always (5:17)

The second command is to pray continually or as the King James puts it, “**pray without ceasing.**” Many dismiss this command quickly as ridiculous hyperbole or exaggeration. They reason if anyone prayed all the time, they would actually be quite useless in the world. They would not function.

It is unfortunate that this verse is prone to be misunderstood and thereby becomes a source of discouragement rather than encouragement. **Paul does not mean that we should constantly spend our lives in a prayer meeting or in formal prayer.** He isn’t saying we should always be on our knees or have our eyes closed. That is only one kind of prayer.

The verse challenges us to be constant and consistent in our prayer life. **Prayer is to be a regular habit, a close companion.** Prayer can be understood essentially as a “**breathing exercise.**” When we inhale, we **listen** to the voice of

God in His Word illuminated by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. As we exhale, we **speak** back to the Lord sharing out heart, telling Him what is on our mind. We should include (in this order) **praise** and **petition.** We should regularly come into the presence of our Lord praising Him, honoring Him, adoring Him for who He is and all that He has done. We praise Him for His **person** and **work.** We acknowledge that He alone is God and that He alone is worthy to be praised. Then, we can approach Him who is Father asking for what we need and interceding on behalf of others.

Prayer is that incredible _____ which connects earth to heaven and man to God. I do not understand all of its mysteries and how it is that the prayers of finite humans can move an infinite and sovereign God. What I do know is God says pray, and when I pray I become stronger spiritually. I am blessed and God is pleased.

First command: rejoice always; second command: pray

always; last but not least...

III. _____ always (5:18)

Here is perhaps one of the most difficult commands in the Bible to obey. The demand seems absurd. There must be a mistake. And yet, there it is: *“in everything give thanks. . .”* **Let’s be brutally honest...** is easy to give thanks when the sun is shining, and the birds are singing. It is easy to give thanks when our families are healthy, and our income is plentiful. It is easy to give thanks when all well with our world. **However, what we do when it is dark as night and our loved ones are suffering; when our fortunes turn down and our world is turned upside down reveals the fidelity of our faith and the content of our character.**

Like joy, our thankfulness is anchored to our relationship in Christ rather than to the circumstances of life.

No matter what happens in life we can be grateful **that**:

1. *We are forgiven and loved in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14)*
2. *Nothing can separate us from God’s love (Romans 8:38)*
3. *God is working in every circumstance (even in the circumstances that aren’t good in and of themselves) for our good (Romans 8:28)*
4. *God will supply our needs (Philippians 4:19)*
5. *God will give us the strength we need (Philippians 4:13)*
6. *We will live even though we die (John 11:25)*
7. *No one can snatch us from His hand (John 6:39)*
8. *God will finish the work He started in our lives (Philippians 1:6)*
9. *We have been extended mercy rather than justice (Romans 5:6-8)*

CONCLUSION

What can we take with us this morning? I struggle with these commands. Too often I find myself swallowed up by complaints rather than gratitude, a sour mood rather than an attitude of deep-seated joy. I admit that at times I have to remind myself to talk with God.

However, what Paul commands of us; what God desires from us; is not unreasonable and certainly not impossible. We must stop looking at these verses as if they were grand exaggerations. We **CAN** be joyful always; praying without ceasing; and we can always be grateful. It all depends on our relationship with God.

So, it is time for us to get serious. Let’s be honest with ourselves. Here are **3 realities** that we need to acknowledge and **correct**:

- *We lack joy because we _____ sight of God*
- *We become lax in _____ because we think too highly of ourselves*
- *We find gratitude elusive because we have put our _____ in the wrong place*

We must remember that doing the will of God starts by being the person God has called us to be. If you want to do His will the place to start is to develop an intimate relationship with Him.

The thing about these three commands is: if you really start working on one, the others will tend to follow. If we find our **joy** in the Lord in all circumstances we will want to talk with Him and we will be grateful. If we adopt an attitude of **gratitude** we will find ourselves giving thanks at all times and our attitude and outlook will be one of joy. If we learn to **pray** without ceasing we will find the joy of our relationship with God will overshadow the trials of our lives and it will lead us to a constant sense of gratefulness.