

A Track on Which to Walk

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

Strong & Ready! (Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

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livinghopechurch.net

Introduction: Open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians 5. I want to bring a teaching to you tonight entitled: “A Track on Which to Walk!”¹

“Do any of us find a deadness, coldness, or lukewarmness in us? Is there a spiritual stupidity and senselessness coming upon us? Well, there is no better way for our healing than this, a fresh view of the glory of Christ and abiding therein.”

- John Owen

Reading of Holy Scripture

1 Thess. 5:16-22, “Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.”

Introduction

Paul moves the discussion from the Thessalonians’ interpersonal relationships with one another to their spiritual relationship with God. He gives a series of six imperatives directed at each member’s personal devotion to God. All these imperatives are stated in the present tense, calling for continuous action. Because they are in the imperative, they are clearly meant to be commands and not suggestions. Therefore, these are not habits that the Christian is to clearly meant to be commands and not suggestions. Therefore, these are not merely habits that the Christian might practice occasionally; these are **identifying characteristics that mark** a Christian’s way of life. Paul underscores this fact when he asserts, “For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:18b).

1. Be Joyful in focus (5:16)
2. Be Persistent in prayer (5:17)
3. Be Grateful in attitude (5:18)
4. Be Sensitive to the Spirit (5:19)
5. Be Obedient to Scripture (5:20)
6. Be Committed to discernment (5:21-22)

¹Some of the outline and many thoughts for this study come from Howell, Mark (2015-01-13). *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) B&H Publishing Group.

I. **Be joyful in focus**, (5:16)

1 Thess. 5:16, “Rejoice always.”

“The injunction *Be joyful always* is at first sight a little surprising coming from one who had had to suffer as much and as continually as Paul. But he learned that affliction and deep joy may go together (2 Cor. 6:10; 12:10), and he rejoiced in tribulations (Rom. 5:3; Col. 1:24; cf. Acts 5:41; 16:25).”²

A Change of Focus and Worldview

Joy is one of the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:22-23. A Christian is by nature joyful. Because of the Spirit’s work of repentance, there is a new focus that never changes. Our eyes have been opened to the ultimate realities of eternity.

Joy is a vital sign of Christian maturity. “No event or circumstance in the Christian’s life, apart from sin, can or should diminish his true joy.” – John MacArthur³

Focus Your Joy on Christ Now

In a real sense, the Bible says in Eph 1:13-14 that we are given heaven now. The Holy Spirit is the down-payment for heaven. We are not to wait until heaven to enjoy heaven. What makes heaven to be truly heavenly is Christ. We have Christ right now. Eph 2 says we are “seated” in the spiritual realm with Him right now.

Strangled by Suffering

A Christian’s joy is not a natural joy that ebbs and flows according to the circumstances that surround us, but a supernatural joy that comes from God and is rooted in our relationship with him. It is a joy that fills our hearts even in the midst of persecution. Joy was one of the marks of primitive Christianity, which amazed the heathen world and attracted men to Christ. Paul is concerned that the joy of the Thessalonians might be strangled by suffering, so he urges them to rejoice not in what was happening to them, but in their Savior and all that he has done for them.⁴

Spiritual Dryness

Spiritual dryness leads to misery. “... in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psa 16:11). John Owen said this: “Do any of us find a deadness, coldness, or lukewarmness in us? Is there a spiritual stupidity and senselessness coming upon us? Well, there is no better way for our healing than this, a fresh view of the glory of Christ and abiding therein.”⁵ After having buried ten of his children he would write, “A due contemplation of the glory of Christ will restore and compose the mind.”

² Morris, L. (1984). *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An introduction and commentary* (Vol. 13, p. 103). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2002). *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (p. 185). Chicago: Moody Press.

⁴ Shenton, T. (2006). *Opening up 1 Thessalonians* (pp. 108–109). Leominster: Day One Publications.

⁵ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, (Kindle Locations 2461-2464). Kypros Press. Kindle Edition.

Scrap the “Woe is Me” Attitude

Don't just sit around wishing your troubles would disappear. Plan and calculate, like a general preparing for battle, how to engage and defeat the enemy. We are promised that all things work together for good. Believe it. Ask God to help you strategize how to bring glory to Him through suffering. “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom 8:37).

Using Joy as a Spiritual Weapon

Nehemiah 8:10 demonstrates the power of joy when it says, “...the joy of the Lord is your strength!” God wants you to use this spiritual force as a weapon to deal with difficulties you may be facing in life.

King Jehoshaphat

We can see this spiritual weapon at work in 2 Chronicles 20:14-25. King Jehoshaphat was faced with an invading enemy army that vastly outnumbered his troops. The situation looked like certain disaster was imminent. But God gave him some strange counsel – the king was to place the singers out in front of the army and they were to sing *praise* to God and rejoice! Praise to God is a way of giving expression to inward joy. This spiritual strategy of using *joy as a weapon* was the key that turned the situation around. Suddenly, the enemy army turned on each other and they destroyed themselves! The victory that King Jehoshaphat experienced that day was tremendous and it had all resulted from God's counsel to express joy in the face of overwhelming difficulty.

How Can We Achieve Christian Joy?⁶

“Joy is not something that we work on; Joy is something that we live in.”⁷

John 15:7-11, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Step 1: Be a Christian.

“Abide in me...” If you trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, you are “in Christ.”

Step 2: Read God's Word.

“If you... and my words abide in you...” Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, so take in more Bible than food.

Step 3: Pray answered prayers.

“If you... (do steps 1 and 2), ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” If God's words abide in you, you'll pray them. And he'll answer them.

⁶ Stephen Altrogge and Bob Mundorff, "Six Surefire Steps to a Joy-Filled Life," blog article. Accessed 6 July 2016.

⁷ Howell, Mark. Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 161). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Step 4: Prove your faith by bearing much fruit.

“If you... bear much fruit and so prove...” Fruitful work for Christ brings both glory to God and assurance of salvation.

Step 5: Abide in Jesus’ love.

“If you... Abide in my love...” How? See step 6.

Step 6: Keep Jesus’ Commandments.

“If you keep my commandments...” This fulfills step 5. Jesus said that we abide in his love by keeping his commands. A very necessary final ingredient in the recipe for joy. Surrender to Christ and His way is where complete joy is.

Result – Guaranteed Joy.**More Concerned about the Glory of God**

The joyful Christian is more concerned about glorifying God than about avoiding temporal difficulties (Rom. 8:18; cf. Heb. 11:13–16, 25). He thinks more of his spiritual riches and eternal glory than he does any present pain or material poverty (1 Peter 1:6–7; 4:13; James 5:11; cf. 2 Cor. 6:4–10; 1 Peter 5:10). Believers who live like that will fulfill the command to **rejoice always**.⁸

II. Be persistent in prayer, (5:17)

1 Thess. 5:17, “pray without ceasing.”

Luther

Martin Luther, when pressed by huge volumes of work, did not use it as an excuse to stop praying, but said, ‘I have so much to do that I cannot get on without three hours a day of praying.’⁹

Lightfoot said, “It is not in the moving of the lips, but in the elevation of the heart to God, that the essence of prayer consists.”¹⁰

Impossible!

“The command to ‘pray constantly’ has also been the source of misunderstanding and confusion. Does Paul mean that you should always be praying— like 24/ 7? Or is he suggesting that you memorize written prayers and recite them incessantly, as is the practice of some religious groups? What is at the heart of this imperative? We know that Paul does not have in mind that Christians should be praying at every single moment of the day. This, of course, would be impossible.”¹¹

Paul is not advocating the “vain repetitions” of memorized prayers. The Bible condemns such a practice (Matt 6: 7 KJV).

⁸ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2002). *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (p. 185). Chicago: Moody Press.

⁹ Shenton, T. (2006). *Opening up 1 Thessalonians* (p. 109). Leominster: Day One Publications.

¹⁰ Morris, L. (1984). *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An introduction and commentary* (Vol. 13, p. 104). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹¹ Shenton, Opening, 109.

Leon Morris give us the solution: “It is not possible for us to spend all our time with the words of prayer on our lips, but it is possible for us to be all our days in the spirit of prayer, realizing our dependence on God for all we have and are.”¹²

Keep Asking, Searching, Knocking

When Paul commands that we pray, we are to keep on praying— earnestly, passionately, and expectantly. Jesus commands you to pray in this way: “So I say to you, keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who searches finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Lk 11: 9-10, HCSB; see also Lk 18: 1-8)¹³

Certain Expressions of God’s Power Only via Prayer

“God has determined that certain expressions of His power will only be exercised in response to prayer. Simply put, God won’t do it unless you pray for it. We have not because we ask not.... The greatest tragedy in life is the prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked.”¹⁴

Why Must We Keep Asking?

Why must we wait? The fact that Paul commands us to pray in this manner reveals two significant truths about God.

First, God wants to hear from you. Let that thought soak in for a moment. The God of this universe wants to hear from you. On the basis of your relationship with Jesus Christ, you have been granted an all-access ticket into His presence (Heb 10:19-22).

Second, if God expects that you will ask Him for things, then it follows that He has the ability to give you what you ask. In fact, He has the ability to give you more than you ask (Eph 3:20). Think about your most pressing needs, your most formidable opponents, or even your most out-of-reach dreams. If God desires that you bring those matters before Him, then you can be sure that He has more than enough ability to do something about them. As Jeremiah so aptly puts it, nothing is too difficult for our God (Jer 32:17).¹⁵

“Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! **Nothing is too hard for you**” (Jer 32:17).

III. Be grateful in attitude, (5:18)

1 Thess. 5:18, “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Give Thanks IN Not FOR All Circumstances

When we read the verse carefully, however, we might be surprised to learn that Paul says we are to “give thanks in everything” and not for everything. This imperative speaks more about our perspective toward life than it does about our attitude toward our circumstances. To obey this

¹² Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 104.

¹³ Howell, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 161.

¹⁴ Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker: Praying Circles Around Your Biggest Dreams and Greatest Fears* (Nashville: Zondervan, 2012), 17.

¹⁵ Howell, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 162.

command we must keep the big picture in view, and to keep the big picture in view we must understand how God’s providence works.¹⁶

Description of Providence

J. I. Packer defines providence as:

“The unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill, He upholds His creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory.”¹⁷

Calvin states it a little more succinctly when he writes,

“For what is fitter or more suitable for pacifying us, than when we learn that God embraces us in Christ so tenderly, that he turns to our advantage and welfare everything that befalls us?”¹⁸ Truly God is working every detail in the lives of His children for good.

God Oversees Every Detail

Only God could take the thousands of details of a person’s life (some good and some bad) and weave them into the beautiful tapestry of His perfect plan. From the human perspective, many of life’s occurrences— especially the painful ones— appear to have little intrinsic value. However, if we had God’s perspective, we would be able to view each of these details in a different way. Providence affirms that no detail is irrelevant or insignificant. God is using everything for our ultimate good and His everlasting glory (Rom 8:28). Hence, to “give thanks in everything” is to affirm our resolute belief that God is overseeing every detail of our lives.

Paul, by no accident, concludes this verse by reminding us that such an attitude is “God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:18b). What more could please the heavenly Father than for Him to know that we trust Him so much that we are willing to live each moment in a constant state of thankfulness?

IV. Be sensitive to the Spirit, (5:19)

1 Thess. 5:19, “Do not quench the Spirit.”

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¹⁶ Howell, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Packer, J. I. “Providence.” Pages 990– 91 in *The New Bible Dictionary*. Second edition. Edited by J. D. Douglas. Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982.

¹⁸ Calvin, John. *1 and 2 Thessalonians*. Edited by Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer. Wheaton: Crossway, 1999.

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V. Be obedient to Scripture, (5:20)

1 Thess. 5:20, “Do not despise prophecies.”

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VI. Be committed to discernment, (5:21-22)

1 Thess. 5:21-22, “but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.”

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