

A Threefold Command I Thessalonians 5:16-18

The calendar on our kitchen wall says that this week is Thanksgiving. I don't know about how it is for you, but this is arguably the busiest time of the year for me. I can become so consumed in the doing that I neglect the being. By that I mean that I get so caught up in selecting passages for Thanksgiving and Christmas as well as beginning the preparation of what we will look at in the new year that I forget to slow down and enjoy the blessings of the season. There are so many things to be thankful for.

With the special church events that really kicked off last week with our shoe box packing party, this is a busy time of the year for everyone, and it can be challenging to slow down enough to reflect on the many blessings for which we can be thankful.

Not all that long ago, Robyn and I discussed the past year and particularly about the summer. Aside from all the rain and the poor garden I told Robyn that in comparing the summer of 2020 and 2021 there wasn't much difference. It may just be me but there seems to be a prevailing Eeyore cloud hovering over everything. Yes, with restrictions lifted this past summer allowing extended travel and opportunities to eat out, there still remains an ominous feeling. Maybe you sensed it as well.

I think part of it for me was trying to stay positive amidst the staffing challenges that Robyn faced. It made planning for family outings difficult. I never knew when she was going to get a call that a nurse or a tech couldn't make it in to work. With staffing concerns throughout the region, it was difficult to get needed help on the spur of the moment. So, because she is a nurse and knowing the need to take care of patients, she would get up at 2:30. Some nights I didn't know when she would be home, which made dinner time uncertain. I could wait for her, but then we might not be eating until 8. When you go to bed around 8:30 or 9 to get up at 4:30 one tends to turn into Mr. Grumpy.

Now I know my way around the kitchen well enough to fix hot dogs and fries. I can even fix up a

mean bowl of tomato soup with a great grilled cheese sandwich. Some evenings I might get a text from her that she was getting ready to leave. I took that to mean she would be arriving in about 15 minutes and so I tried to be helpful and fix dinner, only to find that "on her way" was secret code for about an hour because she got way laid by some emergency that came up. So, there I was, food getting cold and me getting hot. In the moment it's difficult to be both supportive and thankful.

On top of her complicated schedule, most of you know that at the end of April into May, I came down with COVID myself, which landed me in the hospital for four days trying to get an infusion therapy. After my wife-imposed quarantine, it still took roughly another month to get over the fatigue.

We've all faced trials and tribulations in this past year. The passing of friends and loved ones. The uncertainty about job status. The delay in scheduling important appointments. Shortages of certain commodities and the increase in the cost of consumer goods.

It has been hard to see through the fog of our own hardships and appreciate the reality of songs like *He Giveth More Grace*.

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,

He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;

To added afflictions He **addeth His mercy**,
To multiplied trials, His **multiplied peace**.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,

When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

Fear not that thy need shall exceed His provision,
Our God ever yearns His resources to share;
Lean hard on **the arm everlasting, availing**;
The Father both thee and thy load will upbear.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

I think our hymnal left out the most important stanza of the song. **Ephesians 3:20-21** conveys God's abundant provision and our need to express His glory. **"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."**

Our need will never exceed God's provision. He longs to share His resources to meet our needs. He invites us in our difficulties to lean on His everlasting arms and our burdens He will carry. His matchless grace knows no boundary, it has no limits, it is supplied through the infinite riches of Jesus. Rightly does Paul say that **"God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus."** (Philippians 4:19)

Those lyrics undergird the text I have chosen today from **I Thessalonians 5:16-18**. Within these verses, there is a threefold injunction for the believer that commands our response when life is hard, when circumstances don't make sense, or when we think we can't go on. They're not suggestions to try when we have time or when we can get to it or when everything is going great or when nothing else has worked. The adjectives used reveal the urgency and necessity for the Christian to be joyful, to be prayerful, and to be thankful all the time.

I. A CHRISTIAN IS TO BE JOYFUL ALWAYS – v. 16

The KJV uses the word **"rejoice."** In the Bible, joy appears 158 times and rejoice appears another 198 times. The Old Testament Hebrew has 27 different words to describe joy. A basic meaning is to run around with delight or shine with the brightness of the sun.

Missionaries to the northern part of Alaska found that the Eskimo language did not have a word for joy. So they looked for the most delightful experience in the village. They discovered that the happiest, most joyful moment was in the evening when they fed their sled dogs. The dogs would leap

and wag their tails and yelp for joy. This also made the Eskimos smile. From their observation, they found a way to translate the word joy. In Luke where it says **"After the resurrection, the disciples saw Jesus and were full of joy"**, the Eskimo translation reads **"when the disciples saw Jesus, they wagged their tails with delight."**

I knew someone who, when asked how he was, would say "if I had a tail, I'd be wagging it."

Are you a tail wagger? Are you a person who demonstrates a joyful spirit, a heart that rejoices? What brings you joy? What causes you to rejoice? More importantly are you the kind of person who takes to heart this command to rejoice all the time?

Too often I allow my circumstances to dictate the measure of my rejoicing.

When the sun is out, I'm joyful.

When my team wins the championship, I'm joyful.

When the promotion comes, I'm joyful.

When the child or grandchild comes along, I'm joyful.

But how about when the rain washes out my plans, when my team blows it in the last quarter and loses, when I'm passed over for the promotion, or when the baby won't stop crying in the middle of the night?

We learned from our study in James to **"consider it pure or unmixed joy when we fall into various trials, knowing this, that the testing of your faith works patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire or complete, lacking nothing."** (James 1:2-4)

Unfortunately and all too often I want to bypass the trials and get right to the end result, the perfection of my faith because I don't have the patience to wait for the process to go on and on through the many trials that are designed for my spiritual benefit.

Peter said something similar in **I Peter 1:6-7**.

We find it easier to rejoice outside of trials, when in fact the command Paul issues is that at all times we are to rejoice – **"Be joyful always."** Now that doesn't mean that I can't ever grieve or be sad. Jesus wept. He was grieved over the hardness of

people's hearts and for their unbelief. But we also know that He joyfully did the will of the Father. But yet, here we are told to always be joyful. There isn't any contingency plan, no excuse clause, no what if. The word **"always"** doesn't have a hidden meaning, some underlying implication that gives us a way out. It means just what it says. **"Always rejoice."**

Paul has been talking about the certain but unknown date of the Lord's return. In an earlier chapter some had come in and erroneously taught the believers that the Lord had already come and that those who had died before His return had missed it, essentially teaching that you had to be alive in order to go to heaven. Others had suffered persecution. Paul is saying that in all of life's circumstances be joyful.

But I find the word **"always"** troubling, especially knowing that it's a command. It's troubling because I fall far short of always. It's more like sometimes, when things are good, when life is easy, when trials are absent. In those times I effortlessly sing along with Oscar Hammerstein:

Oh what a beautiful morning
 Oh what a beautiful day
 I've got a beautiful feeling
 Everything's going my way

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But in reality I'm more likely and all too often singing along with Buck Owens and Roy Clark:

Gloom, despair, and agony on me
 Deep, dark depression, excessive misery
 If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all
 Gloom, despair, and agony on me

"Rejoicing always" seems impossible and in fact it is – when I attempt to rejoice all the time in all kinds of circumstances in my own power. I allow my emotions to determine my rejoicing. Jonty Allcock in his book Impossible Commands, shares about getting a T-shirt that read "Mr. Happy." He said that people would read the shirt and notice a disconnect between it and how he was acting. He went on to state that there is the same disconnect with many Christians who believe one thing but who in fact live differently. We believe and teach that we are to be joyful always, but in reality don't.

I'm more likely to be akin to Eeyore than Winnie the Pooh. But the fact remains that God is serious about our rejoicing. It was built into the Old Testament. We read in **Leviticus 23:40** that the Israelites were commanded at an annual festival to take branches and rejoice for an entire week. No work. No school. They were to take the whole week off and along with everyone else think about God's blessings on the nation and be joyful. **Could we do that for a day?** The Bible tells us that we will rejoice for an eternity. We get it then because all the bad stuff will be gone and we'll have plenty to be joyful about. But Paul's injunction doesn't say to rejoice later on, or only when we get to heaven, it is something we are to do now, today, with the implication that it's in the middle of trials. That's what we saw from **I Peter 1:6-7**.

Psalm 33:1-4

With the command comes the expectation of obedience. **But you say how in the world can I do that when my world seems to be crumbling around me? How is that even possible?** Let's remember that the ability to rejoice or be joyful is not based on any circumstance, it doesn't come from a feeling.

Jonty Allcock writes **"Joy is something that you do before it is something that you feel."**

The implication of the opening verse of **Psalm 33** is that joyfulness is something God's people do. Essentially then, when I am not obeying the command to rejoice, I am being disobedient. If we still think that being joyful all the time seems impossible, let's remember the example of Jesus who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. He was rejected, scorned, beaten, endured the agony of sin and death on the cross and yet could experience joyfulness in obeying the will of the Father so that we could have eternal life.

Is it possible to rejoice in the bitterness of life experiences? Habakkuk thought so.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 **"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the**

Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

Can you identify with the dismal condition he describes? Even though life was in the pits, the situation was bad, he would be joyful in God.

I can't think of anyone more joyful despite hardship than my mom. Three bouts of cancer over a span of 30 years, radiation, chemo and an amputation. Many would consider her condition a barrenness of life, but in it all she chose to be joyful and live rejoicing in the goodness of God.

The choice is ours whether we will be filled with joy or with despair, to look at all the blessings or to only see the burdens, to be obedient or disobedient to how we respond. But we can't be joyful in our own power. Let's never forget that the kind of rejoicing Paul is talking about isn't part of our physical DNA. It is a divinely produced trait made possible only through the indwelling Holy Spirit.
Galatians 5:22 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...”

It's my belief that we can never have peace in our trials unless we first exhibit joy. Peace and joy go hand in hand.

When we realize all the blessings we have in Christ over against the trials we are encountering, we will rejoice always.

Circumstances change and when we let them dictate our joy, our joy will change. Paul's command implies that joy is not contingent on circumstances. But when our focus is on the Lord, when we allow His Spirit to do His work of producing joy in us, we can rejoice in all things knowing that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose (**Romans 8:28**).

If you find it difficult to rejoice because of trials, let me offer some reasons that should help instill a joyful spirit.

1. Rejoice in God's unchanging nature/character
Malachi 3:6 “I the Lord do not change.”
Hebrews 13:8 “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

2. Rejoice in Christ's complete redemptive work. What He did comes from a God who is forgiving, merciful, gracious, loving, and compassionate.

Luke 2:10-11

Romans 5:1-2

I Peter 1:8-9, 18-19

3. Rejoice in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us, through us and for us.

Romans 14:17

Romans 8:26-27

Galatians 5:16, 22-23

John 14:26-27

Acts 1:8

4. Rejoice for all the spiritual blessings we have.

Ephesians 1:3-8

Colossians 2:13-14

II Peter 1:3-4

5. Rejoice in God's sovereign providence in us.

Romans 8:28-30

James 1:2-4

6. Rejoice for our future glory.

Psalms 16:11

Matthew 5:11-12

Luke 10:20

Philippians 3:20-21

Jude 24-25

7. Rejoice in answered prayer.

Psalms 66:20

8. Rejoice for the gift of God's Word.

Colossians 3:16

Jeremiah 15:16

Psalms 19:8

Psalms 119:14-16

9. Rejoice for real Christian fellowship.

II Timothy 1:4

Philemon 7

II John 12

10. Rejoice in the proclamation of the gospel.

Philippians 1:18

When we take time to consider all the blessings we

have through Christ, the temporary things, even the painful things give us pause to rejoice. They will result in praising God at Christ's appearing.

As a follower of Christ, I have work to do when it comes to rejoicing always.

A.J. Mason writes "The Christian who remains in sadness and depression really breaks a commandment: in some direction or other he mistrusts God – His power, providence, forgiveness."

Are you a joyful Christian?

Paul gives a second command, one that I am only going to mention since my intention is to spend more time on it in the next year. The command is for the Christian to be prayerful continually.

II. A CHRISTIAN IS TO BE PRAYERFUL CONTINUALLY – v. 17

The continuous nature of prayer involves a constant awareness of what is going on around us including the ever-abiding presence of the Lord to whom we offer our prayers. This isn't an audible prayer with eyes closed and head bowed, but rather a mindset of prayer where we have a constant connection with the Lord, knowing that we are always in His presence no matter where we are and knowing that we always have access to Him through prayer.

Whenever I change the oil on our vehicles, I ask the Lord to help me safely get the car up on the ramps and then I thank Him when I did.

If you are logged into the church's wifi, the minute you walk out the door and drive down the road, you will lose that connection. That is not so with God, we are always connected to Him through prayer.

Praying continually also acknowledges our dependence on the Lord. It can be a simple help me in this thing or thank you for that or teach me or forgive me or I need wisdom. Continuous prayer is not prayer without disruption, but rather prayer that continues whenever possible.

I like what John Phillips writes: "God can read the

unformed words of a praying heart."

We glorify God when we pray.

We demonstrate a desire for fellowship with God when we pray.

We request God to meet our needs when we pray. We acknowledge our dependence on God when we pray.

We receive the peace of God when we pray.

Look at your hymnal for a moment – Hymn #630 – *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. Notice the constancy of prayer throughout the lyrics.

Leaving it right there for the time being, the question to ponder for now is this: as a Christian, am I continually prayerful?

The third command issued by Paul for the Christian is to be thankful in all circumstances.

III. A CHRISTIAN IS TO BE THANKFUL IN ALL THINGS – v. 18

Implied in this verse is the who, and the where.

The Christian is the one who is to give thanks.

The where is any place you find yourself where thanksgiving is in order.

The what is thanksgiving.

The when is always.

The why is because what is happening to you at any given moment is God's will for you.

The how of our thanksgiving is through Christ.

This verse shows us the sovereignty of God.

Everything that happens to us is God's will and for that we are to give Him our thanks. It is meant for our good and His glory. **Romans 8:28** reminds us that it will turn out for good if we love God and are called according to His purpose. Those who are in Christ because of their faith in Him for salvation, should understand that everything happens for a reason designed by God so that from it, He receives the glory and we, in some way are benefited by it.

Hebrews 13:15 "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess His name."

In every circumstance of life, we are to offer God our thanksgiving, which we find easy to do when

everything's going our way. But how about in the disappointments and distresses of life.
 When we are late for an appointment.
 When we are stuck in traffic.
 When we get a flat tire.
 When we are sick.
 When we lose our job.
 When the meatloaf is burned.

Warren Wiersbe says that an increase in our offer of thanksgiving comes because of the application of God's Word in our lives. The more we understand and obey the Word of God, the greater our ability to see God's sovereignty in the events of life and our willingness to offer Him thanksgiving.

Now I want you to notice something from the verse that is key in this.

Ephesians 5:20 tells us to always give thanks to God **FOR** everything.

Our verse tells us to always give thanks to God **IN** everything.

The word "**FOR**" gives the impression that we give thanks after it's over.

The word "**IN**" helps us to see that we give thanks when we are right in the middle of whatever it is we are going through. The Greek word means being or remaining in.

It isn't normal for a Christian not to be thankful. Of all people, the Christian has the most to be thankful for. An unthankful heart is disobedient to God and Paul goes so far to say that an unthankful heart is an unregenerate heart (**Romans 1:21**).

On the other hand, thankfulness should be part of the heart that is made new by God through Christ. In **Ephesians 5:3-4** Paul says there are a number of things that should be absent from the life of the believer. But he ends the passage by saying that one thing which should characterize the believer is a heart of thanksgiving.

II Corinthians 4:15 gives us another reason to be thankful. When people respond in faith to the gospel, resulting in God receiving glory, we are to give thanks. We are to join the angels in praising God when a person gets saved.

II Corinthians 9:11 says we are to be thankful for the generosity of others.

Paul told the **Colossians (2:6-7)** to be overflowing with thanksgiving.

Colossians 3:15-17 – Be thankful when the peace of Christ rules your heart. When His Word richly lives in you sing with thanksgiving. And we are to give thanks to God when we do our work in the name of the Lord.

How do we give God thanks for cancer or COVID or sickness or an injury or even death?

Thank God for His sovereignty and grace while we deal with that illness.

Thank God that the accident wasn't more serious.

Thank God that the loved one was a believer and is in His presence.

In everything give thanks, because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

When we choose to give thanks to God in all things, we keep bitterness away. We cannot be thankful and bitter or resentful for circumstances at the same time. When we encounter hardships, we can thank God for strength and grace (**II Corinthians 12:9**). We can thank Him for the promise to work all things for good (**Romans 8:28**).

Thanksgiving in all things focuses on the blessings we have instead of the problems we are facing.

Ps. 69:30 "I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify Him with thanksgiving."

Thanksgiving is a time to reflect on the past year and consider how God has walked with you during each life event. **Are you offering Him your thanksgiving in all things because it is His will?**