

8. Joy, Thankfulness and the Will of God

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, let's turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. We have just a short passage to read today. You'll find this on page 988 in our Pew Bibles.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5. And I want to read verses 12 to 22 today, though our passage will be simply verses 16 to 22.

So 1 Thessalonians 5, reading from verse 12. We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.

[1 : 0 8] Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything.

Hold fast what is good. abstain from every form of evil. This is the word of the Lord. Well, now, we'll begin at verse 16 today, and really I want to pick straight up from Paul's thought where we left him off at the end of our session last week.

Now, if you were here last week, and let me just remind you if you weren't or tell you what we noticed if you were not here, we were studying verses 12 to 15, and here Paul the Apostle begins his closing section of rapid-fire ethical instructions to the church of Thessalonica.

Now, he's been teaching ethics ever since chapter 4, verse 1, but when he gets to chapter 5, verse 12, he begins to fire out his ethical instructions at a great rate of knots. And I think in verses 12 to 22, he covers some 9 or 10 areas of practical Christian living.

So last week, we saw his instructions in verses 12 and 13 about respecting and valuing pastors, loving them and esteeming them. And in verses 14 and 15, there were various instructions about relationships between the Christians in the church, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, and so on.

[2 : 3 7] Now, an important point to bear in mind throughout this section is that Paul is writing to the Thessalonians as a congregation. He's describing their shared life as a body of Christians.

And all these imperative verbs in Paul's Greek are in the plural. He's not writing to an individual here, but rather to a church. And that is always the Apostle Paul's way.

Paul is a Jew who knows the Old Testament like the back of his hand, and he knows that God has always dealt with his people as a corporate group, as a great congregation, right from the time of Abraham onwards.

So although these ethical instructions, of course, have to be worked out in our individual lives, Paul is thinking first and foremost of Christians learning to do these things together.

So look, for example, at the second half of verse 18. Now, the you there is plural. You as a body of believers.

[3 : 39] Now, we tend very much to individualize the idea of knowing and following the will of God. If somebody says to you one day, what do you think is the will of God for my life?

They usually mean, do you think I should be a missionary, or a nurse, or a farmer, or do you think I should perhaps move house from Pollock Shores to Bear's Den, or even do you think I should ask Theodosia Brown to marry me?

Now, those are big questions, aren't they, and very important questions, of course. And, brother, if you happen to be courting a girl called Theodosia Brown, it's important to her whether or not you're going to pop the big question to her, isn't it?

But let's allow the Apostle to give us a rather different angle on what it means to do and to know the will of God. In this passage, at least, doing the will of God is not so much about jobs that we might take or places to live in or marriage questions.

It's about rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances. So, even if your courage fails you and you never ask the beautiful Theodosia to marry you, you can still be regularly doing the will of God as you live a life of rejoicing and prayerfulness and gratitude in the company of your fellow Christians.

[5 : 01] So, let's look at the details of the passage under the title Learning to Do the Will of God. I want to take it in two sections. First, the way we live, and second, the words we listen to.

So, first, the way we live, from verses 16 to 18. Now, just run your eye once again over those three short verses, and I wonder how you react to them. I wonder if you feel like echoing the famous or infamous words of John McEnroe, the tennis player, which he said to the tennis umpire, I think at Wimbledon about 25 years ago, when he looked up and he said, you cannot be serious.

Perhaps we feel like saying, Paul, brother, you cannot be serious here. How can we rejoice always? How can we pray without ceasing? How can we possibly give thanks in all circumstances?

Now, it's not so much the verbs of command in themselves, it's the qualifying phrases that make these instructions so astonishing. You see, if Paul had written, rejoice when the sun is shining and you're feeling well, and pray occasionally, and give God thanks when special blessings are given to you, now, if he'd said that, we'd have had nothing particular to surprise us, would we?

It's the idea that we should rejoice always and pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances. It's that that makes our jaw drop open in surprise.

[6 : 28] But Paul is serious. If we say, brother Paul, are you really serious? His reply is, of course I'm serious. Now, let's think of the first instruction first. Rejoice always.

Now, we can take it as a given that the Apostle Paul practiced what he preached. He's not asking the Thessalonians to do something which he didn't do himself. So, think of his life.

What was his life like? Did he rejoice always? Well, his life was full of suffering, wasn't it? As he puts it in 2 Corinthians chapter 11. Remember that famous passage where he writes of his labors, his imprisonments, his beatings, of how he was often near death?

He says this, Five times I received the 40 lashes, less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked.

For a night and a day I was adrift at sea on frequent journeys in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers.

[7 : 36] In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Now, how could any human being endure that? Only by the grace of God. It wouldn't be possible otherwise. Did Paul enjoy being beaten and stoned and shipwrecked?

Of course not. Those things would have been just as traumatic for him as they would be for you and me. And yet, in that same letter, 2 Corinthians chapter 6, he writes, We are treated as impostors and yet are true, as unknown and yet well known, as dying, and behold we live, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful and yet rejoicing.

So, we need to see this command to the Thessalonians to rejoice always in the context of his own life. He had learned to rejoice in the midst of his sufferings and hardships.

Few people in the last 2,000 years can have suffered quite as much as the Apostle Paul did and yet he had learned the secret of rejoicing in the midst of his sufferings.

[8 : 57] Now, we can be sure that the Thessalonian Christians also had causes of suffering. We know from the earlier chapters of this very letter that they were being fiercely persecuted by their own countrymen because they'd turned to Christ and they would have had, aside from persecution, they would have had their own personal sufferings, illnesses and bereavements and financial hardships and all the rest of those things that put pressure on human life.

And yet, Paul counsels these people, indeed commands them, to rejoice in the midst of their sufferings as he had learned to rejoice in the midst of his. So how can people do it?

I think like this. Even during our times of greatest hardship, there are certain great truths about God that are always a reason for joy.

So, for example, it is always true that Christ died to win our eternal forgiveness and our place in glory in heaven. It is always true that God loves each individual Christian passionately and devotedly and that Jesus knows each of his sheep by name as the good shepherd.

It is always true that a Christian is at peace with God, justified by faith, is a member of God's eternal people, is already part of the new creation, and will receive at the end a glorified and resurrected body.

[10 : 27] Now, these great facts are just as true when you are lying on a hospital bed desperately ill or when you are at the funeral of a loved one as they are when life is sweet and sunny.

Some of you, I know, are suffering badly at the moment from some kind of illness or painful circumstances in life. All of us, I guess, are suffering to some degree.

It's the human condition, isn't it? And yet, these great truths of the gospel are always true. So, while one part of our heart and life will be filled with pain because of our real sufferings, the other part of our heart can simultaneously relish the great truths of the glorious gospel and rejoice in God because of them.

Then look on to verse 17. How can Paul be serious about praying without ceasing? Well, surely he cannot mean that Christians should be talking consciously to the Lord for 24 hours a day.

That is simply impossible. I mean, we have to spend at least a few hours of sleep, don't we? And if we did nothing but pray throughout our waking hours, we couldn't get our work done. We couldn't attend to the nuts and bolts of life.

[11 : 40] We wouldn't be able to do the shopping and the cooking if we do that sort of thing anyway. So, surely when Paul says, pray without ceasing, what he means is never cease to be prayerful people.

Never give up being people who pray regularly and frequently. Never give up being a person whose lines of communication to the Lord are often buzzing with busyness.

Perhaps it's a little bit like eating and drinking. We eat and drink several times every day. We have to. If we were to cease eating and drinking, our future on earth would be short.

Eating and drinking are essential to our continued existence. But we don't eat and drink 24 hours a day, do we? There would be a series of explosions if we did, wouldn't there? But we must keep on eating and drinking regularly to live.

And in the same way, regular praying is essential to a flourishing, developing, ongoing Christian life. So Paul is saying, don't cease from having a prayerful life.

[12 : 40] Let your praying be always a highly significant part of your life. It's perhaps a little bit like the marriage relationship. If a man and his wife are to enjoy a healthy and happy and developing marriage, they need to be frequently talking to each other.

Now, they can't talk to each other all day long. That would be simply impossible. But by regularly talking together, they keep their relationship sweet and happy and developing so that when they've been married for 50 years, they are even more delighted with each other than they were when they were newlyweds.

That's a little bit like that with the Lord. We keep talking to him and listening to him so that when we're old, we're even more delighted with him than we were when we were newborn Christians.

Then look at verse 18. Give thanks in all circumstances. Now, Paul expresses himself very carefully there. He doesn't write give thanks for all circumstances.

He's not teaching us to thank God for all the horrors that are around us in the world. It would be nonsense, wouldn't it? It would be perverse to thank God for the dreadful situations that we're so much aware of in the world.

[13 : 53] Paul is teaching us to thank God in the midst of the horrors and despite the horrors. Why? Because the gospel is always true and because God is always to be trusted.

Let me press this point home for a moment if I may. Think of the most difficult thing that you're having to face in your life at the moment.

Now, that'll be a very painful thought for some of you. I know that. But this is where Paul's teaching counts. Paul is asking you to say to God, Lord, my life circumstances are in some ways very painful.

I'm living with this distressing trouble day after day. But I thank you so much that you have destined me for the new world where pain and tears are gone forever.

And I thank you as well for Jesus, for the good news about him. I thank you for accepting me and adopting me. I thank you for the Bible. I thank you for my Christian friends and for all those who bring strength and joy into my life.

[14 : 59] Do you see what Paul is saying? He's saying the way to live the Christian life is to be thankful in all circumstances, however difficult they are. because however great our difficulties, there is always so much to be thankful for.

And I think experience teaches us that thankfulness as a way of life, as a theme tune throughout one's life, is the great antidote to grumbling and bitterness.

Let me suggest that the next time you feel a dose of grumbling and bitterness coming on, why don't you kneel down on the floor and thank the Lord for all the ways in which he has blessed you.

It's a great antidote to being a grumbler. So there's Paul's teaching on the way Christians are to live in our fellowships and our congregations. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

So the will of God, if we want to live in his will, we shall learn to be people who do these things, to rejoice always, to pray without ever ceasing to be people of prayer, and to give thanks in all circumstances.

[16 : 11] And if individually we can learn more and more to be people of this kind, we shall bring great blessing to our churches, our fellowships. I know that if I'm a grumpy old curmudgeon known in my church as a complainer, I'm going to dampen the enthusiasm of my brothers and sisters for the gospel and for the work of the Lord.

But if I'm a person of rejoicing and prayerfulness and thankfulness, then even if in my personal circumstances I'm suffering, I shall be a blessing to my church and my influence will be to strengthen others and put fresh heart and courage into them to persevere.

I'll never forget years ago when I was a young minister in Manchester meeting a man called Sir Norman Anderson. Some of you may remember the name of Norman Anderson. He died perhaps 10 or 15 years ago.

He wrote a number of fine Christian books. Sir Norman was professor of Islamic law at London University in the 1960s and 70s. And when he came to visit our church in the early 80s in Manchester, he'd recently retired and he'd come up to spend a weekend with us preaching and teaching.

And on the Saturday afternoon, for some reason, I had been delegated as the junior minister to give him tea. He hadn't brought his wife with him, so it was just the two of us. And so I took him back to my house and over the jammy dodgers and the cups of tea, I asked him a few questions and tried to make conversation as best I could.

[17 : 35] And at one point, I said to him, I said, Sir Norman, tell me about your family. And there was a pause. And he looked at me and he said, very gently, he said, well, my wife and I had three children, but all of them have died.

And he told me the story. They'd all reached adult years, a boy and two girls, I think, and they'd all died in their 20s and 30s. One had been ill, one I think was involved in an accident, I forget the third.

But three children all died. Now, can you conceive of that? Even to lose one child must be a dreadful thing, but to lose all of your children having reached adult years.

Only the grace of God could have brought him and his wife through such a long, dark tunnel. But, but, here was this man, 70 plus, when I knew him, and there he was going around the country preaching and teaching the gospel, charming, delightful, and full of joy.

It was lovely to see. Terrific. All right, so the way we live, the way we live. Now, secondly, the words we listen to, I'll be briefer on this, the words we listen to from verses 19 to 22.

[18 : 52] In verses 16 to 18, and especially verses 17 and 18, Paul is talking about the way Christians speak in prayer and thankful utterances. But in verses 19 to 22, he's thinking about the way Christians listen.

His concern is to build up the life of the congregation at Thessalonica. So he's very concerned that they should listen to the Lord as well as speak to the Lord. The spirit of the Lord is the very breath of the Lord, and it's the breath of the Lord that bears his word to us, his words to us.

So to quench the spirit is tantamount to shutting our ears to what the Lord has to say. Now, Paul seems to have in mind in these verses the congregational meetings of the church at Thessalonica.

The verbs continue there to be all in the plural. This is corporate activity. So what sort of speaking does Paul have in mind here? What does he mean by prophecies in verse 20?

Is he talking about formal public preaching such as most churches have Sunday by Sunday? Or is he thinking of less formal moments when Christians share with each other some message that they believe that others ought to hear?

[20 : 04] Well, I turned to my commentaries for help in answering that question. One of my commentaries said, by prophecies we are to understand the preaching of the word. In other words, formal public preaching.

Another commentary said, prophecy is not the same as preaching. In other words, disagreement amongst the experts. For what it's worth, I'm inclined to think that the second of those two views is probably the right one.

In other words, that Paul has in mind utterances other than formal public preaching, though he certainly wouldn't exclude preaching. Churches vary in their habits, don't they? Some churches have a more structured type of Sunday service or weekday service with the preacher preaching.

Other churches, the congregation is encouraged to bring a message of encouragement from different members to challenge the gathering or to bring something from the Lord to them. And we can allow a variety of practice in these things.

It's not up to us to insist that all churches follow the same pattern. No doubt there was plenty of variety in the first century churches. But even if we can't be sure about what Paul meant by prophecies in verse 20, we can be sure that he's teaching Christians to listen carefully to each other when we speak spiritual and biblical truth to each other.

[21 : 22] And we commonly do that in a number of ways. Formal preaching is one of them. Informal conversations. Sometimes one Christian says to another, do you remember such and such a verse from the Bible?

Isn't that what you need to hold on to in your life at the moment? Believe that verse and trust it so we share a verse with somebody else. Or maybe in a Bible study group in somebody's home, you sit around with the Bible open on your knees, the very words of the Spirit, and as we discuss the passage together, we're helping each other to understand it and apply it to our lives.

Or sometimes one Christian will write a letter or send an email to a Christian friend who's in difficulty and the writer refers to a Bible passage and presses the truth of that passage home.

So we share the Spirit's message which is the Gospel message, the Bible's message with each other in several different ways. And Paul's point in verse 20 is that we mustn't look with disdain upon such attempts to help each other.

But neither must we assume that everything that is said in these communications, and this includes public preaching, is necessarily right. Why?

[22 : 33] Because Paul immediately goes on to say, test everything. So when we listen to each other, whether it's formal sermons or other communication of the Bible's message, let's do so willingly, because verse 20 teaches us not to despise such messages, but let's also have a corner of our minds open to the possibility that the speaker might be wrong at one point or another.

We must test the message and its emphasis against what standard. Well, there's only one standard, and that is Scripture itself. And then once we've tested the message against the perfect standard of Scripture, then, verse 21, we hold on to what is good and we follow it because it blesses us, but we shun everything that is wrong.

I think a good example of this is what we do in our Cornhill training course, where we get our students, poor students, to prepare their sermons, full sermons and short sermons and gobbets, as we call them, and they have to stand up in front of the class and in front of one of the tutors and give us the fruits of their labors.

And we sit around and we try to discern what is good and what is bad. So when a student gives a good exposition of verse 10 or verse 15 or whatever, we say, well done, brother or sister. We appreciate that.

But then we say, I think you got verse 12 a bit muddled up, didn't you? And, you know, we do this lovingly, but it's serious because we're trying to hear the voice of God. We're trying to understand what the Lord really is saying to us.

[23 : 59] That's just one example of how we go about this kind of thing. Well, friends, we must stop. But let me just say this in closing. Paul's vision here of a church is of a congregation that is very much alive.

These verses glow with life. The congregation listens eagerly and discerningly to the voice of the Lord, and the congregation lives a life brimming with joy and prayerfulness and thankfulness, even in the midst of real sufferings.

This is a way of life that is very different from the way of the world. Let's pray together. Dear God, our Father, how we thank you that these words of the Apostle, written almost 2,000 years ago, are so full of life for us, full of encouragement and challenge, how they open up to us a picture of Christians who are actively loving each other and loving you, rejoicing in the gospel and getting on with the service of the gospel in their community.

We do pray, dear Father, for our own churches, all the congregations represented here today, and we ask that in our churches this way of life will more and more be seen and that you will help each of us to make a real and significant contribution towards it.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.