

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 (NTE)

This, my dear family, is the request we make of you. Take note of those who work among you and exercise leadership over you in the Lord, those who give you instruction. Give them the highest possible rank of love because of their work. Live at peace among yourselves. And, my dear family, we beg you to warn those who step out of line. Console the downcast; help the weak, be warm-hearted and patient towards everybody. Make sure nobody pays anyone back evil for evil. Instead, always find the way to do good to one another, and to everybody.

Always celebrate, never stop praying; in everything be thankful (this is God's will for you in the Messiah Jesus); don't quench the spirit, don't look down on prophecies, test everything, if something is good, hold it fast; if something looks evil, keep well away.

Invocation

Seriously God? Even with all the crud in the world? You tell us that in the rock-paper-scissors of life joy cuts sorrow, crushes despair and swallows crud. Grieve first you say... and joy comes with the morning, you promise. Duuuuude... These are hard days. Sigh – so open our hearts, be in our minds, help us to listen for the joy that is bigger than these days. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and redeemer.

Sermon: Devotion Delivers

As a convert, teacher, preacher, and mentor to the churches that he planted – in all that he did and wrote - the apostle Paul's purpose is show his people how to follow Jesus, to present timeless truths, and to explain and defend the common ground of the Christian faith. Today's reading comes at the end of a letter that is overflowing with encouragement and that implores the Thessalonians to nurture Christian life through mutual care and cooperation. In short, Paul is telling us that devotion, delivers.

In this text he is encouraging three “acts of devotion” and he underscores them with imperatives: Always celebrate, never stop praying; and in every thing be thankful. Or in the translation with which you may be more familiar - "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances - for this is the will of God-in-Christ - for you."

Now - Such orders strike us as odd and (a little) “out-of-touch”, maybe tone deaf even - with the painful realities of our lives, don't they? Illnesses, breakups, failures, financial insecurity, job loss, grief, greed, white supremacy, racism, injustice, climate crisis – a global pandemic. Given what we know - we might prefer it if Paul said "rejoice often" ... "pray regularly" ... and "give thanks whenever good things happen."

But instead, he says that we are to rejoice, pray, and give thanks *constantly*, no matter the circumstance, and without regard to the difficulties of our lives; for this is the will of God for you. God's will for you... the Greek word for will <thelema> translates to God's desire, God's wish, God's purpose. God's intent for you – to rejoice, pray, and give thanks - imperatively.

But, seriously? How is this even possible?

Well, let's go back to the text to clarify...In 1 Thessalonians, Paul was writing to a Christian community suffering from intense persecution—more so than most of the churches he shepherded. And yet, even to these siblings, Paul encourages giving thanks in all circumstances.

Notice though that in verse 18 he does not tell us to give thanks *for* all circumstances but “*in* all circumstances.” Evil, injustice, and cruelty exist every day in this world. Life gets life-y and we humans, no matter how much we are rejoicing and praying and churching - carry around a lot of pain and heartache. But Scripture does not instruct us to give thanks *for* these sinful, painful, hurtful, circumstances but to give thanks *in* them. Continuing the practice of gratitude even in times of suffering can help us keep our eyes on God and remember that God's presence is always with us, even in the darkest day.

When we can look for the God in things, even the hardest things, and when we do that guided by love and faith (and each other) we can always find a lesson or a love or a light - within it – and for that we can choose to give thanks. The reality is, God's love does not shield us from the trials and troubles of life. Jesus promises that not only will we have troubles, but that we are likely to have *more* suffering when we are committed to living lives that sacrificially pursue love and justice for everyone—even and especially the vulnerable and our enemies.

It can be difficult to find a reason to be grateful; to give thanks to God in such times. And when that happens, if we have preemptively exercised our gratitude - we will have the muscle memory for it; or maybe I should say the Spirit memory for it. It will become our practice. And we have spiritual guides to help us get there.

We have the Holy Spirit - found - by the way - whenever two or more are gathered; like here – in community. We have the Holy Spirit to be our comforter, to be our guide, to be our direction - filling us with the fruits of faith - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Through community and prayer - the Holy Spirit ministers to us in the midst of loss and pain and challenge and difficulty. Giving thanks in all circumstances –especially during suffering - can help us keep our eyes on God - and call upon the Holy Spirit - as we journey through dark valleys. This is not a way of plugging our ears and closing our eyes, refusing to acknowledge pain and brokenness; rather, like a small child, we raise our hands to the Spirit in humility and honesty, asking for help—and receiving fruit in our inner selves to sustain us. In this way, when we choose gratitude – it changes our attitude.

As challenging as it is to choose gratitude when life is hard, it is nonetheless refreshing, to stumble upon a section of Scripture such as this that *clearly and simply* lays out God's truth for our hearts and God's directive for our lives. Acknowledging again, that simple does not always mean easy - Paul does give us this very simple imperative: *rejoice, pray and give thanks*. No gibberish, no jargon. Basic, yet powerful, truths.

Paul's imperative here is so simple that it's disarming. So let's dig a little deeper into this text that proclaims God's will for your life and what God considers to be at the core of faithful, Christian practice. You can think about the rest of this sermon as a “How To”.

"Rejoice always." Although this is clear and simple, the word "rejoice" is not one we hear outside of a Christian or religious context. Perhaps another way to say "rejoice always" is to say that Christians can, because of Jesus, "choose joy" whenever possible.

Every day, we have opportunities before us to choose the posture of our heart, in response to the actions of others and the events in the world. Will we choose bitterness? Will we choose jealousy? Will we choose greed? Will we choose worry? The follower of Jesus Christ acknowledges this menu of *à la carte* choices in front of

them. And when it approaches, they aim, time and again, to grab the same snack: joy. That's what Paul is saying.

And do you know what makes choosing joy easier amid the myriad of other options? What makes it easier is choosing first to surround oneself with other people who have the same aim. Think about it: If we're trying to lose weight, it might not be the best idea to hang out with people who start the day with bacon burgers and fries. This is why the fellowship of meetings is such an important part of the 12-step recovery practice and it is why gathering in worship is such an important part of our faith.

I have single-parented two humans who I think are pretty great. One of the most important things I ever taught them was that we are the average of the five people we spend the most time with! The power of community is too strong for our individual willpower to overcome. The same is true with our attitudes. If you want to choose joy, choose first to surround yourself with joyful people.

And what about *prayer*? Is it even possible to pray continually as Paul urges? Not even the most devout of monks in the most serene of monasteries prays without ceasing. A brother's got to sleep, after all.

Paul's words here speak more to our attitude as Christians than anything else. An attitude of prayer without ceasing might look like this: A mindfulness that we're in the presence of God - each moment - of every day. It's like the cross-country road trip you took in college with that friend of yours. Sometimes you chatted for hours, other times it was quiet between you for miles. But no matter what, your friend was there right beside you. Kind of sounds like a good marriage, too!

What if we lived with this same kind of awareness, that God is beside us, at all times, and, as a result, can be called upon at any given moment, be it for five seconds or 15 minutes? That's what Paul's talking about.

While Christians are not the sole purveyors of this practice - the ancient "breath prayer" offers us a simple pathway to Paul's intention. The idea is very simple. To help one live out a life of constant prayer, calling upon the Lord and recognizing God's enduring presence, we are encouraged to find a short, simple phrase that can be vocalized, softly, with every inhale and every exhale. We might choose something that we need, in that moment (like calm or courage) - or it might be something that just gives us a sense of God's presence (like mercy or grace).

For example, one might choose in a particularly difficult season in life, "Lord have mercy, Give me courage". When I need to get quiet and calm, my go to breath prayer is: "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy" And then, as often as possible, one would breathe those words with every exhale, choosing to believe that the God hears and responds. So let's practice this together... "Lord, I love you, Make me grateful." Choose you own... or use mine and let's breathe together for three breaths....

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See how easy it is to pray in all things?

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Now, we have already talked a little about the difficulty of this third imperative. It is one thing to *give thanks*. It is quite another to give thanks **no matter the circumstance**. Is Paul saying, in contrast to Ecclesiastes, that there's never a time to mourn or complain? No, not at all.

Paul is saying this: Even when it's time to complain or to weep, there's still some reason to give thanks. Paul's not saying that the job of the Christian is to ignore pain and sorrow, but to give thanks to God even *within* the pain and sorrow. We tend to focus only on "big" reasons to be thankful: when the baby is born, when the promotion comes, or when we're healed of a disease. However, Scripture encourages us to start small with our gratitude. Why is that? Because there's always a small blessing to lay hold of. *Always*.

So, let's try this. What if, as you list off your blessings, or in contemporary vernacular – a gratitude list - you started with the most mundane and overlooked of life's gifts? What if you started *really* small?

For instance - Have you ever given thanks for eyelashes? Think about what they do. Eyelashes are a first line of defense for your eyes, keeping airborne dirt, dust, lint and other debris from reaching the delicate eye tissues. With eyes open, eyelashes catch some airborne debris, but when closed, eyelashes form a nearly impenetrable barrier against foreign irritants in the eye.

What about that first sip of coffee in the morning? Isn't that the best?

What about the smell of bacon, or cut grass? How about the sweet, sweet smell of your baby (biologically designed to keep you from freaking out on said poop machine) or the indescribably unique smell of your beloved's pheromones?

Do you give thanks when you get to open the windows in the house after a long, cold winter?

Take a moment – what are some really small things you are grateful for this morning??

Examples from the congregation

The key to a life of gratitude is not that you always have some big thing for which to praise God. Sometimes you don't. The key to a life of gratitude is giving thanks for the small things that you never run out of, and then working your way up the list as far as you can.

Looking to God's creation – we can see yet another reason to be grounded in gratitude in all circumstances; a metaphor for our own experiences – for in God's economy there is abundance. Author Catherine McNiel writes about the spiritual value to be found in every season of life, *including* seasons of dormancy or loss, because in God's creation "nothing is wasted. Fruits and vegetables may be harvested to provide life for another creature, but even if left to rot...they... fall and feed the soil, the worms and fungus recycling them back into the ground, readying them to spring forth into new life. Nothing is ever wasted or destroyed: only transformed. If this is the way God acts throughout creation, mightn't we expect God to work this way in our spirits as well? All our efforts, all our disappointments, all our victories, and all of our failures—in God's Kingdom, nothing is wasted. God is taking it all, shaping it, forming us, steadfastly working toward God's own harvest festival in a world made new. ... Is this why God exhorts us to rejoice 'in all circumstances?' ... Because God is always, always making things new?" (Catherine McNiel, *All Shall Be Well: Awakening to God's Presence in*)

Beloved, God IS always and IN everything making thing new, and in this truth is God's desire for you - Joy. Prayer. Gratitude.

So - Choose joy (v. 16) — Because when we're in a positive state of mind internally, it's a lot harder to be negative toward others and our circumstances.

Talk to God (v. 17) — Because Prayer moves us toward the mind-set of God. When we see every aspect of our lives as belonging to God, then we see others as children of God, too. Constant communion with God keeps our

focus outside of ourselves so that we can engage others, even the ones who challenge us, with the kind of grace and love that Jesus lived and taught.

And “Give thanks in all circumstances” (v. 18) — Because an “attitude of gratitude” is contagious. Thankful, positive people see opportunities where others see problems. When dealing with difficulties, think of the opportunity you’ve been given to speak a word of grace in the world and into the lives of others. Give thanks for your challenges because every time we choose love we move ourselves more in the direction of Christ’s example.

On April 10, 1944 – a day when the RAF dropped a record 3600 tons of bombs in a single raid on Germany, France and Belgium - J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in a letter to his son Christopher: “I sometimes feel appalled at the thought of the sum total of human misery all over the world at the present moment: the millions parted, fretting, wasting in unprofitable days -- quite apart from torture, pain, death, bereavement, injustice. If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet would be enveloped in a dense dark vapor, shrouded from the amazed vision of the heavens! And the products of it all will be mainly evil -- historically considered. But the historic version is, of course, not the only one. All things and all deeds have a value in themselves, apart from their "causes" and "effects." No [one person] can estimate what is really happening viewed in relation to the eternal. All we do know, and that to a large extent by direct experience, is that evil labors with vast power and perpetual success -- in vain: preparing always the soil for unexpected good to sprout in.”

--J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 76.

Beloved, the wisdom from Paul does not tell us we need to feel thankful in all circumstances. Giving thanks has nothing to do with feeling grateful. In fact, where I come from Gratitude is an action word, a commission to live that gratefulness through how we treat others and the world around us.

You know this - Jesus commanded it – Love God and Love Your neighbor, go out into the world and be the good news of God’s Love and Amazing Grace!

Joy. Prayer. Gratitude. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has defeated the powers of darkness and set us free to pursue these very simple things.

Choose joy, talk to God. and give thanks for eyelashes. An attitude of gratitude will change everything. And, it will grant you peace - of mind, body, and soul.

May it be so for you.