

“Holiday or Holy Way” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

One day two friends bumped into each other on the street. One friend looked depressed and on the verge of tears. His friend asked, “What has the world done to you, my friend?” The sad fellow said, “Let me tell you. Three weeks ago, my uncle died and left me forty-thousand dollars.” “That’s a lot of money,” his friend replied. “But two weeks ago, a cousin I never even knew died, and left me eighty-five-thousand, free and clear.” “Sounds like you’ve been blessed,” his friend said. “You don’t understand!” he interrupted. “Last week my great-aunt passed away and I inherited a quarter-of-a-million.” Now his friend was really confused. “Then why do you look so glum?” “This week...nothing!”

This is a funny story, yet it is so true to our experience. Even though we are abundantly blessed, we seem to expect more with every passing week. We’re not as joyful as we should be because we don’t recognize what we’ve already been given. This leads to discontentment in our finances, our job, and our marriage. This restlessness only ends up hurting us because we carry burdens that the Lord never intended for us to bear (Matt 11:28-30; 1 Pet 5:7), and in the process we become unhappy people, devoid of joy and gratitude.

In 1 Thess 5:16-18, Paul gives us the remedy to our ills. In these three short verses, he explains that Thanksgiving may be an American holiday but it’s also intended to be a holy way of living. Another way of saying this is: Thanksgiving is good; thanks-living is better.

1. Be Joyful (5:16). Paul begins this section by saying, “**Rejoice always.**”¹ To “rejoice” (*chairete*)² means “to be in a state of happiness and well-being, to be glad.” This word is an active present tense imperative and is accompanied by the adverb “always.” This means that we are commanded to exercise a continual attitude of rejoicing.³ How is this possible? It’s not, apart from God’s Spirit working in our lives. We must first realize that Paul uses the word joy differently than we do. He is not referring to a consistent, emotional high. It is impossible and unrealistic to live on that plane. Furthermore, that kind of living would be harmful to us physically, since it is abnormal. God did not design the human body to tolerate excessive amounts of adrenalin being released into our psychological system. Emotions fluctuate, not only because of difficult circumstances, but due to physical drain that accompanies the normal responsibilities in life. So Paul refers not to some euphoric state, but to an unusual sense of contentment and inner peace that every Christian can experience in spite of life’s circumstances, inner turmoil, grief, stress, or even physical pain (cf. 2 Cor 6:4-5, 10).⁴

The Thessalonian Christians to whom Paul is writing have already suffered with joy (1 Thess 1:6), as had Paul himself (3:9). From a human perspective they had every reason not to be joyful—persecution from outsiders and friction among themselves. Yet in Christ, Paul exhorted them to be more and more joyful.⁵ This is equally applicable to us. In spite of what you are going through, you are commanded to “rejoice.” While happiness depends on what is happening around us, joy is independent of happenings and circumstances. This means we must remember that nothing merely happens by chance. God is working out His sovereign plan in our lives, therefore we must rejoice. This doesn’t mean life won’t hurt, but even in the midst of the hurts we can rejoice, because we know that God is at work and in control.⁶

Consistent rejoicing is only possible if we remember three things. First, we must remember who God is (Phil 3:1). Nehemiah 8:10 states, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Joy has its roots in a deep thankfulness for who God is. If we focus on God’s character and attributes (e.g., sovereign, merciful, faithful, loving), we will always have plenty of cause to rejoice.

Second, rejoicing is possible if we then begin to recall what God has done, is doing, will do. We can especially rejoice in what God has given us in Christ (John 4:36; Acts 13:48; Phil 4:4).

As we focus on our Lord, we will exude joy. Someone once said, “A coffee break is good; a prayer break is better; a praise break is best.”⁷ Can you rejoice in the Lord today?

Finally, we can also rejoice in what God is doing in and through other believers (1 Thess 2:19-20; 3:9; 3 John 4). As we begin to keep our finger on the spiritual pulse of God’s kingdom program, we will observe that He is doing great things in and through believers at Emmanuel, in our city church, and throughout our country and world. Even though you may not feel like God is at work in your life, can you take your eyes off of yourself and see how He is at work elsewhere?

Why is rejoicing so important? Not because God needs it. God is not like the parent who is insecure and needs to be constantly praised and thanked by his children so he can feel validated. God needs nothing; He is complete in Himself. We need to rejoice so that we can be spiritually healthy. God is pleased when we rejoice in Him—not because it validates Him, but because it shows that we are becoming more spiritually healthy and mature.

Rejoicing is also important for the following reasons: (1) Rejoicing will affect your worship. Our corporate worship celebration isn’t built around trying to “get you up” in an attitude of joy. We come to worship together because we have been worshipping and rejoicing throughout the week. Our joy is merely amplified when we are together. (2) Rejoicing will affect your friendships. People don’t want to be around gloomy people. Have you noticed that? Show me a gloomy person and I will show you somebody who has a difficult time having any friends. People are attracted to those that manifest joy. A complaining Christian is a contradiction in terms. (3) Rejoicing will affect your evangelism. Former pastor and author, A.W. Tozer, has said, “The Christian owes it to the world to be supernaturally joyful.”⁸ If you want to win your world, exude joy. People will wonder what makes you tick. This opens doors to share Christ and the difference He makes in your life.

2. Be prayerful (5:17).⁹ Our second exhortation is a command to pray, “**without ceasing.**” The word translated “pray” (*proseuchomai*) is the general term for prayer. It includes confession, praise, thanksgiving, petition for others, and personal requests to God. Most of us know what it means to pray even though most of us rarely practice prayer. But what does it mean to pray, “without ceasing?”¹⁰ Most of us misunderstand this verse. We’re like the boy who said to his Sunday school teacher, “I’m sorry I sneezed during your prayer today.” His teacher assured him sneezing was no problem but said she appreciated his apology. The little boy then responded, “Well, I know you like us to pray without sneezing.”¹¹

What does it mean to pray without ceasing? First, let’s talk about what it doesn’t mean. It does not mean praying under one’s breath at all times. The person who is constantly praying aloud can be a nuisance. This type of lifestyle can also lead to hypocrisy and bondage. It also doesn’t mean to be in an attitude of prayer without ever actually praying. If we find a way of praying that is not really praying, we shall neglect actual praying!¹²

To pray without ceasing likely means two things: First, praying without ceasing means praying repeatedly and often. The idea of the present tense imperative is not that believers should pray every minute of the day, but that we should offer prayers to God repeatedly. We should make it our habit to be in the presence of God.¹³ The Greek word translated “without ceasing” (*adialeiptos*) is used outside of the New Testament of a hacking cough.¹⁴ How many of you have had a cold recently? Then, you know what it’s like to cough spontaneously, right? There are times you just can’t stop yourself. The same ought to be true of prayer. We should be continuously offering up prayers to the Lord because we just can’t help ourselves.

If you're a stay-at-home mom, this may mean that you pray when you're getting ready in the morning, when you're home schooling your kids or driving them to school, when you're cleaning the house or doing the dishes. If you're a career man or woman, you can pray during your commute, when you stretch at your desk, during your lunch break, before you return home for the day.

Second, praying without ceasing means not giving up on prayer (Luke 18:1-8). Don't ever come to a point in your life where you cease to pray at all. Don't abandon the God of hope and say, "There's no use praying." Go on praying. Don't cease. This is critical for your own spiritual wellbeing and for that of others. May we be a people of prayer who encourage others to persist in prayer.

A minister dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him is a guy dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Saint Peter says to this guy, "Who are you, so that I may know whether to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?" The guy replies, "I'm Joe Cohen, taxi driver, of Noo Yawk City." Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the taxi driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The taxi driver goes into Heaven with his robe and staff, and it's the minister's turn. He stands erect and booms out, "I am Joseph Snow, pastor of Saint Mary's for the last 43 years." Saint Peter consults his list. He says to the minister, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." "Just a minute!" says the minister. "That man was a taxi driver, and he gets a silken robe and golden staff. How can this be?" "Up here, we work by results," says Saint Peter. "While you preached, people slept. While he drove, people prayed."¹⁵

3. Be thankful (5:18). The two previous commands deal with one's time ("always" and "without ceasing"); this command deals with one's circumstances. Paul begins this verse with the phrase, "**In everything give thanks.**"¹⁶ The apostle Paul didn't say to give thanks "for" all circumstances, but "in" all circumstances. All of life's circumstances are not good, but there will always be something in those circumstances for which to give thanks.

A little boy was asked to say a prayer at Thanksgiving dinner. After thanking God for food and family, he ran out of things to say. Then he prayed, "Now let me tell you some things I'm not thankful for."

Most of us separate everything into two categories—the things we are thankful for and the things we aren't thankful for. Yet, God says that we need to combine everything into one category and give thanks for all of it.¹⁷ "In everything" is an all-encompassing phrase that includes every good gift (Jas 1:17) and every persecution and trial. We are to give thanks in all circumstances.

A famous English Bible scholar named Matthew Henry was once attacked by thieves and robbed of his purse. He wrote these words in his diary: "Let me be thankful. First, I was never robbed before. Second, although they took my purse, they didn't take my life. Third, although they took my all, it was not much. Fourth, let me be thankful because it was I who was robbed and not I who did the robbing."¹⁸

This testimony shows that thankfulness is not determined by our circumstances. We need to be thankful for all things, every day. (1) Thankfulness acknowledges that God is our provider. (2) Thankfulness prevents a complaining spirit. (3) Thankfulness creates a positive outlook on life. (4) Thankfulness invites joy to dwell in our hearts.¹⁹

So, is "giving thanks" just mumbling a few words? Not necessarily. People express their thanks in many ways. *USA Today* printed a story of the ways that adults express thanks that includes: praying: 45%, being a good role model: 39%, volunteering: 36%, participating in a place of worship: 35%, and giving money to charity: 30%.²⁰ Many of us may need to begin to express our gratitude in other ways than the typical verbal "thank you."

In addition to this, you can begin a thanksgiving list; prioritize thanksgiving in your prayer life (Col 4:2); utilize spiritual songs (Eph 5:18, 20); reflect on and serve those less fortunate than you; and hang around grateful people.²¹

If you and I choose to ignore or neglect God's command to be thankful, not only will we struggle in this life but we will also be a part of the decay of our society. Some of you may be saying, "Wait a minute, Keith, that statement is overkill. You're exaggerating this matter." Oh really? In Rom 1:18-32, Paul described how a culture slides into disintegration and one of the first sins that Paul mentioned was man's failure to give thanks to God (1:21-22). Later, in 2 Tim 3:1, Paul predicts a great apostasy that will come upon the earth. In 2 Tim 3:2, Paul states that one of the signs of this apostasy will be ungratefulness.²²

A failure to be thankful is a serious sin, isn't it? I think we sometimes try to shrug it off as if it were no big deal. "Well, that's just my temperament." If that is the case, I want to tell you something: You need to get your temperament fixed. You need to let the Holy Spirit take control of your temperament. We excuse ourselves so often, don't we? We say, "Well, that's just the way I am." Or, "It's my environment." Or, "It's what I experienced when I was growing up."

Listen to me: If I understand the Bible correctly, the Holy Spirit cuts through all that stuff. He slices right down the center of you and begins to create within you a new spirit that is not your own, because it is God's Spirit, God's own characteristics in you. When the Spirit of God controls you, gratitude will start to exude from your life. It may even catch you by surprise. It will certainly catch others by surprise when they notice your change in attitude. You will then know what is coming forth from your life is not something that is naturally yours. It is the supernatural evidence of the Spirit of God at work in your life.²³

William Law, writing centuries ago, made a very good point when he said, "Would you like to know who is the greatest saint in the world? It isn't he who prays most or fasts most. It isn't he who gives most. But it is he who is always thankful to God, who receives everything as an instrument of God's goodness and has a heart always ready to praise God for it."²⁴ The greatest saint is the one who is always thankful.

The closing explanation, "**for this is God's will²⁵ for you in Christ Jesus**" (cf. 1 Thess 4:3) could refer to the third command, "give thanks." This makes sense because the word "this" is singular. Yet, it likely refers to all three commands. The three imperatives form a tight unity. As constant rejoicing is related to prayerfulness so it is also related to a thankful heart.

This verse clearly says, "this is God's will for you." Most of us want to know what God's specific will is for our lives—who we're supposed to marry, where we're supposed to live, what job we should have. Yet God tends to give us freedom in these areas. But if He does want to reveal Himself more specifically to you, He isn't about to do so until you first obey His general will. His general will is that you be joyful, prayerful, and thankful.

Paul writes that God's will is "in Christ Jesus."²⁶ Here, he is saying that God's will is made known in Christ, and it is in Christ that we are given the dynamic that enables us to carry out that divine will.²⁷ He becomes the very source and motive for obedience. It is through our union with Christ that we find the capacity to fulfill the will of God.

Most of us who frequent libraries have brought back overdue books and paid the few pennies fine. It's irritating, of course, but it's what we get for being so forgetful. But a New York man, named George, has taken overdue books to a new dimension. Police finally were called to get him after old George failed to return over 500 books he had checked out of the New York University Library. That's right, 500 books. And the fine exceeded \$31,000! So, George was hauled into court where he now faces grand larceny charges, meaning possible jail time if he is convicted.

The 44-year-old malingerer was also charged with possession of stolen property. George was a continuing education student when he began checking out books four years ago. A library spokesperson said it's not unusual for students and professors to check out between 100 to 200 books at one time, especially if they are doing research. The library has now put a limit on how many books can be checked out at each visit. Most of George's books were on history and philosophy. It's a funny story, in a way, and yet irritatingly sad. How can a man let so many books be overdue?

But, I suspect that most of us have overdue things in our lives such as: gratitude to God for all His blessings, words of thanks to long-suffering parents who have given and given to us, appreciation for mates who give of themselves day after day, courtesy to those around us, whether they have it coming or not, and the list goes on and on. The Bible talks about the urgency of today.²⁸

Beginning this Thanksgiving holiday will you become a person who practices thanks-living? Will you be a person who is joyful, prayerful and thankful? For this is God's will for your life.

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Notes

¹ This is the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament. Many people think that this distinction belongs to John 11:35 (“Jesus wept”). But John 11:35 contains three words while 1 Thess 5:16 contains only two words made up of 14 Greek letters.

² Gk. *chairete*: this word is one of the most important words in the Greek New Testament. The Greek words for “grace,” “forgive,” “give thanks,” and “gifts of the Spirit” are all derivatives of this root word. See Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity, 1984 [1956]), 107.

³ Paul is engaging in hyperbole. He doesn’t literally mean that we should do this absolutely every second, or we couldn’t sleep, drive in heavy traffic, or do anything that demands our full attention. Hyperbole is an intentional overstatement of the case, in order to allow you to feel the weight and importance of the statement.

⁴ Gene A. Getz, *Standing Firm When You’d Rather Retreat* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1986), 157-158.

⁵ Joy is also a part of the fruit of the Spirit’s control as described in Galatians 5:22-23. It is linked with love, peace, longsuffering, and kindness. In other words, the capacity to love people, and be longsuffering and kind is directly related to inner joy. Thus, it is needed always.

⁶ Some of the grounds for rejoicing as Christians are: the Lord Himself (Phil 3:1; 4:4), His incarnation (Luke 2:10), His power (Luke 12:17), His resurrection (Matt 28:8; Luke 24:52), His presence with the Father (John 14:28), His presence with believers (John 16:22; 20:20), His ultimate triumph (John 8:56), the believer’s salvation (2 Cor 8:2), enrollment in heaven (Luke 10:20; Phil 4:3), liberty in Christ (Acts 15:31, cf. Gal 5:1), hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:2), and his prospect of eternal rewards (Matt 5:12; Luke 6:23).

Some of the occasions for rejoicing for Christians are: hearing the gospel (Acts 13:48), receiving the Lord (Luke 19:6; Acts 8:39), suffering with Christ (Acts 5:41, cf. 1 Pet 4:13), the preaching of the gospel (Phil 1:18), suffering for the gospel (Phil 2:17; Col 1:24), the conversion of sinners (Luke 15:7; Acts 15:3), the manifestation of grace (Acts 11:23), the godly walk of believers (Rom 16:19; 2 Cor 7:4; 3 John 3-4), godly submission to admonition (2 Cor 7:9), the godly order of an assembly (Col 2:5), receiving support and fellowship (Phil 4:10), the rejoicing of others (Rom 12:15, 2 Cor 7:13), hearing of the well-being of others (2 Cor 7:16), hearing of the kindness of believers to one another (Phlm 7), honor due to others (1 Cor 12:26), and the triumph of truth (1 Cor 13:6).

See Hampton Keathley III, *An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary on First Thessalonians*:

<http://www.bible.org/docs/nt/books/1th/jhk3/1th-10.htm#TopOfPage>

⁷ John L. Benson, *I, II Thessalonians: The Prospect of Glory* (Denver: Accent, 1987 [1980]), 74.

⁸ Quoted in Dwight Edwards, *Releasing the Rivers Within* (Colorado Springs: Water Brook, 2003), 35.

⁹ In this letter Paul speaks about his own constancy in prayer (1 Thess 1:2-3; 3:9-13; 5:23-24; cf. 2 Thess 1:11; Rom 1:10; Col 1:3, 9). Not surprisingly, he also wished his converts to be devoted to prayer (cf. 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1; Rom 12:12; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2-3).

¹⁰ The word translated “without ceasing” (*adialeiptos*) can also be translated “without interruption” or “constantly” (Rom 1:9; 1 Thess 1:2; 2:13).

¹¹ Revised from Preaching Today Citation: Jody Capehart, Dallas, TX, *Today’s Christian Woman*, “Heart to Heart.”

¹² Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Scriptures: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Scotland: Sovereign World, 1997), 81.

¹³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 521.

¹⁴ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 80.

¹⁵ Preaching Today Citation: Ed Rowell, Franklin, Tennessee; heard from a friend.

¹⁶ Cf. Eph 5:20; Phil 4:6; Col 3:17; 4:2.

¹⁷ Kent Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 160.

¹⁸ Preaching Today Citation: John Yates, “An Attitude of Gratitude,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 110.

¹⁹ Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity*, 161.

²⁰ Preaching Today Citation: Research done by Yankelovich Partners for Lutheran Brotherhood, reprinted in *USA Today* (11-23-99).

²¹ See Gary DeLashmutt, *Gratitude: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*:

<http://www.xenos.org/teachings/nt/1thes/gary/1thes5-3.htm> (11/28/03).

²² Another interesting passage is 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 where Paul demonstrates that God considers complaining an exceedingly grievous sin. In fact, murmuring was a primary sin that caused the Israelites to die in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:10)!

²³ David Jeremiah, *God in You* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1998), 163.

²⁴ Quoted from Jeremiah, *God in You*, 163.

²⁵ “Will” (*thelema*) refers more to the “gracious design” of God rather than His sovereign purpose or resolve (*boule*).

²⁶ Gk. *en Christo Iesou*. Paul uses this phrase 46 times.

²⁷ Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 108.

²⁸ Preaching Today Citation: Dan Betzer, “Are Your Books Overdue?” from radio program “ByLine with Dan Betzer” (1-27-00), (c) 2000 Media Ministries of the Assemblies of God, reprinted with permission.