**Rejoice, Pray, and Give Thanks**

October 11, 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:14-18

Key Verse 5:16-18 “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

St. Paul says very directly, “Give thanks in ALL circumstances.” No exceptions, no excuses. With obvious exceptions of personal sin, St. Paul is saying no matter what happens to you in life, be thankful. No matter what circumstances, no matter what struggle and trial, be thankful; give thanks. No matter what the situation, we are to find reasons to thank God. When we looked in the Bible about thank offerings and giving thanks to God, we notice an interesting pattern. We see that being grateful and thanking God for his blessings are not just an obligation or duty, but it is intended by God to be a way of life for Christians. It is a lifestyle. As we follow Jesus and think about the great sacrifice that he made for us, it is moving from just giving thanks to living it out. It is moving from Thanksgiving to Thanksliving. Thanksgiving is the essence of Christian life and attitude. On this Thanksgiving Sunday, let’s think about why giving thanks is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus.

**First**, being unthankful is the very essence of the ungodly. Romans 1:21 says, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.” The ungodly refuse to do what is the basic duty of a man, that is, to thank God for everything, God who created everything, God who gives him life, God who has revealed himself to him in conscience and therefore given him a standard of right and wrong, God who gives every good and perfect gift, is the one and the only one to whom all thanks should be given. But the ungodly refuse to give thanks to God. Rather some people think that things happen as a result of luck. If things do not go the way they want, they become bitter and complaining and angry and hostile. Some others are fatalistic people who believe in destiny which they have no control over. They live in sorrow and fatalism. Then there are those who believe that somehow they control their life. They are the positive thinkers. They are the usually successful people, and they attribute their success to their own skill and smart mind. Unthankfulness is the characteristic of the ungodly.

But when a person becomes a Christian, it is characteristic of the believer to thank God for everything. All of a sudden there is a new heart and a new soul and a new inner life, and there is something different about the inner man. Built into that newness is a heart of thanksgiving. It is so hard to find someone more thankful than a brand new Christian. Thanksgiving becomes a part of the fabric of our new life. It is the fruit of the work of the Spirit within us. But Christians can become unthankful. An ungodly person to be unthankful is normal. But a Christian to be unthankful is abnormal. Because we can fall to the sin of ingratitude, the Bible repeatedly calls us to thankfulness. The overarching principle of why we give thanks, is Romans 8:28, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” No matter what happens, it will be by God working together for our good. It may in itself not be good but God will take a bad thing and turn it to a good purpose for our good and our eternal glory. If you live believing that God is at work, sovereignly controlling all of our life, blending them all together both good and bad things, then you can handle anything in life and be thankful because you know that it fits in to the ultimate plan.

**Second**, rejoice, pray and give thanks. Look at verses 16-18. “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” St. Paul gives three exhortations for our Christian life.

The first exhortation is “Rejoice always.” In English Bible, John 11:35, “Jesus wept” is the shortest verse. But if you consider the Greek letters, “Rejoice always” is the shortest verse in the Bible. This sounds pretty challenging. Sometimes we can be joyful, but always? We experience so many trials and painful events, and hear so much terrible news every day. How can we be joyful always? Shall we be like dramatic actors and cover our sorrowful faces with a smile mask? We don’t need to do this. It is because God gave us enough reasons to be joyful always. The main cause of sorrow and grief are the power of sin and death. God forgave all our sins by shedding Jesus’ blood for us. Whenever we are sorrowful due to our sins, we can come to God and receive forgiveness. Then our sorrow turns into joy. How can we rejoice always? The answer is: “Fix our eyes on Jesus!” Because everything is under the control of God, everything is worked out; it is all working together for good to us who love God and are called according to his purpose.

The second exhortation is, “pray continually.” Prayer is communication with God. It is not just sending a text message with requests. It requires us to listen to God as well as to talk to God. Prayer is possible because God opened the way for us to come to him through Jesus. This is why we pray in Jesus’ name. Jesus said, “…whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you” (Jn 15:16). We have a great privilege to call God “Abba, Father.” Any time, and in any place, we can approach God in prayer in Jesus’ name. He gives us grace and mercy in our time of need (Heb 4:16). We can have the confidence that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us (1Jn 5:14). We usually come to God in our time of need. But God wants us to come to him continually, not randomly. “Continually” means at regular or frequent intervals, again and again, without giving up. It is different from “Continuously” which means, “Non-stop.” Jesus taught his disciples that “they should always pray and not give up” (Lk 18:1). We have many prayer topics for ourselves, families, community and nation. Let’s pray continually without giving up.

The final exhortation is, “give thanks in all circumstances.” It is not easy for us to give thanks in all circumstances. It is so easy for us to complain or blame others in times of difficulty. Complaining is like a contagious disease. One person’s bitter complaint spreads like a cancer. Not only does that person become sick to death, but they make others sick. On the other hand, when we give thanks to God and others, we become happy and a blessing. We can overcome hardships. We have many reasons to thank God. God provides air, water, land, food, housing, families, and especially life. Furthermore, God gave us eternal life and a living hope in his kingdom through Jesus Christ. In comparison, the things we complain about are very small. Still, often times, we struggle with giving thanks. What hinders a thankful heart?

Firstly, doubt about God: doubt about God’s wisdom, doubt about God’s love, doubt about God’s power. You are not thankful because you don’t believe that God can overrule the problems that you have to bring about his glory and your good. Wherever there is ingratitude in your life, no matter what’s going on, wherever there is a failure to thank God, there is a serious sin taking place, because to doubt God is to say that you can’t trust what he says about himself. A second thing that hinders gratitude is self-centeredness. It is not being able to say what Jesus said, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Self-centeredness says, “I really don’t care what your will is, this is what I want.” It is really a kind of God complex. “I want to be God and I want to call the shots. I want to make the choice.” That will hinder your gratitude. Self-will, if it dominates you, is more important to you than God’s will. What you want is far more important than what God wants, even though you have no clue as to what is best. Another thing is a critical spirit. If you are a negative person, if you are a bitter person, if you have generally a sour attitude in life, it will destroy a thankful heart. It will blind your vision. It will destroy your relationships. It will make you really an ugly person to be with; and you will become useless to people and useless to God. A critical attitude, a judgmental attitude steals gratitude. Another thing that will rob you of gratitude is impatience. People don’t give thanks because their perception is that God is not operating on their schedule. “Come on, God, I don’t have time to be wasting time here; move.” They want everything on their schedule, on their timetable. People do silly things like, “Lord, show me the answer by next Tuesday; and if I don’t get a reply by Tuesday, then I will not believe.” They want everything fixed in their timeframe. Their impatience makes them really grumpy.

The opposite of all these things should be obvious. What produces a thankful heart is trust in God, not doubt; a servant attitude, unselfishness, a focus on Jesus Christ, a loving attitude – forgiving, gracious, kind tender-heartedness; gratitude wells up in a heart that is marked by great patience. God is good, and he is working everything for our good. God is holy; He is perfect; He never makes a mistake. Psalm 97:12 says, “Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous, and praise his holy name.” We are reminded to give thanks to the One whose name is holy. Another reason to our gratitude is God’s goodness and mercy. He is so merciful toward us and so gracious toward us and so good to us, that we have every reason to believe that even in our pain and our suffering he has good intentions. Psalm 106:1 says, “Praise the Lord! Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; his love endures forever.” You can give thanks to God because he is good, and that means everything he does is for our good. Everything is planned, everything is settled; we have nothing to worry about, nothing to be anxious about. In everything we can give thanks.

**Third**, we rejoice together. Paul’s exhortations to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances are not just personal; they are given to the church. When we rejoice together, pray together and give thanks together, God is pleased with our community and pours out his blessings upon us. Therefore, we should all do our best to create a joyful, prayerful and thankful environment in our church. It is an essential part of evangelism. If each of us carries our sorrows, ingratitude and grumpiness into this fellowship and adds them to those of others, it will be a terrible meeting. Newcomers will feel very uncomfortable, run out the door and never come back. But when they see that we are joyful, prayerful and thankful in all circumstances, they will be amazed and happy, thinking it is a glimpse of heaven.

In order to build a healthy spiritual community, St. Paul gives several practical guidelines. Look at verses 14-15. “and we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong with wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” Some people become idle by misunderstanding Jesus’ second coming as an excuse to avoid doing their own duties. When they become idle, they naturally become busybodies who are needlessly involved in other people’s affairs and become disruptive. Through this, Satan works. There is an expression, “An idle mind is the devil’s playground, and idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” This is why we should work hard to support ourselves and our families, to serve others, and to be a blessing. We are to encourage the disheartened. People become disheartened for various reasons, including ongoing persecution, the death of loved ones, personal failures, or broken relationships. Disheartened people are very vulnerable to the devil’s temptation. They need encouragement. People can be weak in faith, in conscience, in their bodies, or mentally. They need help. However, we have a sinful tendency to judge and criticize the weak. This only crushes them. To help them, we need to understand them and accept them as they are. We need to find the way to build them up until they become strong. Especially, we need to be patient with everyone. Love is patient. If God was not patient with us, we would have been handed over as slaves of sin long time ago, destined for eternal condemnation. Just as God has been patient with us, so we should be patient with everyone.

Look at verse 15 again. “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” Though each member of Christ’s body is called “saint,” we are sinners when we are together, because we still have a sinful nature and vestiges of self-righteousness. As we interact with others, we offend them intentionally or unintentionally. We all experience offending and being offended. If we offend others, we should acknowledge our fault and apologize. What about when we are offended? We may be tempted to repay wrong for wrong—verbally, in writing (like e-mail), or in other unspeakable ways. If we do this, revenge begets revenge and a vicious cycle continues. One relationship breaks, and networks of relationships are damaged. Eventually the church will be destroyed. As Christians, revenge is not an option at all. Instead, we must forgive, as Jesus forgave us. We are encouraged to always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. When we do so, the church can be built up and become healthy, and we can rejoice together.

Thanksgiving is the essence of Christian life and attitude. It is a way of life for Christians. A Christian to be unthankful is abnormal. It is sin. May God help us to move from Thanksgiving to Thanksliving.

Big Idea: Thanksgiving is a way of life for Christians