

1 Thessalonians 5:15-18 "Give Thanks Continually. It's God's Will For You In Christ Jesus"

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was meant to be very practical and encouraging. Practical in the sense that he gave them specifics as to what was required of them by God. But with the practical Paul gave them the proper motivation by which they were to walk.

In fact, in the very beginning of this letter Paul reminds them in 1Th.2:12 that they should "walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory."

Our walk with God and for God should spring from our love and gratitude that He has called us and justified us and sanctifies and will ultimately glorify us to be with Him forever, because the alternative is eternal separation from Him outside of Christ.

And that's part of Paul's message of comfort for the Thessalonians as well; knowing that Jesus Christ will come back for us. He's not going to leave us stranded or rotting in a grave. The moment we die we will be with Him, ultimately to be resurrected back to Him on the last day, and we who are alive on that last day will be caught up with Him when He comes back with those saints who have gone before.

And so, Paul has been weaving a tapestry of many different colors, but it has a common thread of hope and the love of God which has been given to us in Christ. A love which Paul says in 1Th. 4:10 is to grow more and more.

And this love for God grows more and more as we consider and meditate upon His love for us and the grace which has been extended to us in Christ.

But, that love for each other also grows more and more as we understand that our lives are to be conformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ, who is our example, and who gave Himself for us, so that we can give ourselves to each other.

This is what it is to live in holiness, which means that we are set apart for the work God has called us to and to do it out of love for Him and in a way that honors Him.

And so Paul can say in 1TH 3:12-13 "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so

that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones."

And this is what this letter is all about: living holy lives before God out of thanks and gratitude for His great salvation, which demonstrates itself in practical agape love toward all men, especially those of the household of faith.

This is God's will for our lives. And so, as Paul begins to close his letter he reminds the Thessalonians, as well as us, how that works itself out in relationships. The relationship we have with God and the relationship we have with one another.

1TH 5:15 "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else."

This may sound like an odd command given to children of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, who have been given the Holy Spirit as a Comforter to encourage us to love one another. And yet, even in the early church, people were still people with an old sin nature which needed to be crucified daily as we put off the old man and put on the things of God by faith.

There is still a tendency to act in such a way that we lash out at people, whether they are Christians or not. Paul say's, don't pay back wrong for wrong. This is almost identical to what he told the Romans.

ROM 12:17-18 "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

As F.F. Bruce says, "This is basic Christian teaching." It goes back to the words of Jesus.

MAT 5:44-48 "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In fact Jesus' teaching comes from another part of His word in the Old Testament.

PRO 25:21-22 "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. 22 In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you."

The idea here is, again, not to take vengeance on those who are against you by repaying evil for evil.

HEB 10:30-31 "For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

But, you say, 'you don't understand Drew. This person has no regard for God and has done despicable things to try and harm me or discredit me.'

Well, you're right. I may not understand all of the details of how people have tried to extend their evil desires toward you. But, what I do understand is that our attitude toward them should not be to take vengeance upon them according to what God says here in His word.

That doesn't mean we don't have recourse in such matters. It just means any recourse we take must be in accord with what God has to say about the matter, and it must not be done in a way that tries to do evil in return for the evil they've done to us. And so a lot of it is our attitude toward people.

And in most cases where people have hurt you, it really takes spending time with God and asking for His grace and love to kick in because the natural man wants to rip someone's head off.

But, if we pursue what Paul speaks of in verse 15 of 1Thessalonians 5 we'll be able to shine for Christ even under the adversity we experience from the hands of unbelievers, as well as from the hands of "brothers and sisters in the Lord".

The natural tendency is to give up on people because of bad experiences. I've talked with more people who have not gone back to church because of a bad experience they've had with Christians and then they get into the false persecution complex by avoiding anything which has to do with God and His word.

What I've found over the years is that many people who claim to have been hurt by others often brought part of it on themselves. Now, I'm not condoning other people's behavior who react to us, I'm just saying that maybe our involvement in their reaction played a part, at least as they perceived it.

Peter warns against this. 1PE 4:12-16 "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."

Suffering as a Christian, representing Christ, is one thing. Suffering because you've sinned against someone else is an entirely different matter.

But, we need to realize that no matter how bad people have treated us, God will never forsake us, and for the sake of our relationship with our Lord, we need to continue doing things His way and not give up on Him because of what someone else has done.

And so, as we seek after that which is good for one another and for all men, as Paul tells us here in our text, we won't have time trying to repay others with the evil they've done to us. And this kind of attitude can only grow as our love for God grows. All throughout scripture we are commanded to love, but did you realize we are also commanded to hate?

Listen to what Paul tells the Romans, ROM 12:9-10 "Love must be sincere. ***Hate what is evil***; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves."

It doesn't say hate those people who are evil, but to hate what is evil; the evilness in the world and the evilness which comes from men.

Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between the evil and the people who do the evil, but we know God is glorified in our lives when we avoid all evil in our own lives as we seek after the good, not only for us, but others as well.

I've had people do a lot of evil to me over the years, but I've learned to simply blow a lot of it off and move on with my relationship with God. I don't want that to be affected by anything or anybody in a way where God is not honored in my life.

"Rejoice always" v.16

This is another practical aspect of our walk with Christ. This joy or rejoicing cannot be grounded in the things of this world. In other words, to base your happiness or joy on how things go for you in this world will drive you nuts, because life will not let you be joyous for very long.

There will always be something to try and bring you down. But when your joy is solidly based on the One who created all things, and the one who has purchased our salvation, then we can persevere in His joy, knowing that it will never be taken from us and it gives us joy knowing that one day we will have our full reward in the Kingdom of God on the new earth.

And so, this present world is not our home, or as Larry Norman put it on one of his album covers years ago, "I'm only visiting this planet". We can praise God that this is just a stop-over for our final destination when this present cursed world will be redeemed to a new earth and new heavens. But as Paul has told us, until we meet our Lord we must be serving Him here and now as we wait for that hope to be fully realized in glory. This is the source of our joy, God Himself.

Paul put it another way when he wrote to the Philippian church.

PHI 4:4-7 "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Our joy in our God should cause us to want to communicate to Him constantly in the way of praise, in the way of thanks and in the way of asking for His help and assistance for our daily needs. This communication is what the bible calls prayer. Prayer with thanksgiving to God.

And this is what Paul tells the Thessalonians. Are you noticing that Paul's message to the Thessalonians is the same as the message to the Romans which is the same to the Philippians and the rest of the people he writes?

The message is basically the same, because every one of us needs to hear the same message of what it is to be living practical Christian lives which honor Christ.

And so Paul says to the Thessalonians in verse 17, "pray continually;

Pray continually. How in the world do you do that? After all if this is a command from God Himself, how do we begin to please Him in this area of communicating with Him, especially if we've got other things to do throughout the day? That's a reasonable question.

When I was a young believer I remember encountering this passage and feeling really guilty because I was hard pressed to be able to come up with 5 minutes worth of things to even think about praying for.

But, as I read God's word and I was instructed by faithful men who taught me from the word of God, I began to realize that prayer is not simply a set time in coming to God, even though that is part of it, but it's an attitude we carry with us throughout the day.

Some of the most beautiful prayers we see in the scriptures are found in the Psalms. Many of those psalms were prayers where we see the psalmist on his bed as he cries out to God at night before he goes to sleep.

In the midst of battle the psalmist speaks to the Almighty God who desires to do battle for us in His strength. We see people praying on the spur of the moment for something they want to thank God for.

When God used Peter and John to heal the lame man, they came back to the brethren and shared all of the different things that happened to them and how the religious leaders tried to harm them.

ACT 4:24-29 "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them." 25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. [That is, Christ or Messiah]' [Psalm 2:1,2] 27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 29 Now, Lord, consider their

threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

Prayer is something that can be planned, and it can be something spontaneous. It can be the result of an immediate need or it can be for any reason at all. It can be for praise, it can be for petition. But it should always be with an attitude of thanksgiving. Praying without ceasing is always being ready and willing to acknowledge and honor God.

It's being at work and thanking God that you've got a job. It's being in a grocery store and thanking God that we live in a country where we have so much bounty and being able to enjoy it. It's driving down the road and praying for someone who may come to mind that could use our prayers. Or it may be at a bible study and lifting your voice to God at prayer time.

But at the heart of our prayer is understanding that we are speaking with a person who loves us and died for and rose for us and who is constantly making intercession on our behalf.

HEB 7:25-26 "Therefore he is able to save completely [Or forever] those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. 26 Such a high priest meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens."

Think about that. Our Creator and Lord and Savior making intercession for us before the Father. I wonder what kind of prayers He prays for us? We have an idea of what kind of prayer He prays for us as we consider the prayer He prayed to the Father shortly before He went to the cross.

JOH 17:14-23 "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. 15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. 20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Jesus Christ literally prays without ceasing on our behalf. We as imitators of Christ should take the attitude of coming to our Lord often and praising Him and praying for ourselves and others as we take the opportunity.

Our joy in Christ should prompt us to come to Him often in thanks, not just because we need something, but realizing that we are approaching our God and creator who is able to change things as well as receive our praise with delight.

This is God's will for us Paul says. Rejoicing always, praying often, and giving thanks for His presence in our life and the hope of eternal life we have in Him.

1CH 16:11 "Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always."

If you and I will seek the Lord continually we'll find our joy in Him will be increased and thanksgiving will naturally flow. If we will not seek Him continually, then we will be like the person who tries to find his strength and joy in the only other thing left; ourselves or this world.

That's putting our trust on a foundation of sinking sand. It won't last, and it will disappoint.

PSA 22:5 "They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed."

God will not disappoint you. Don't disappoint Him by putting your faith in the things of this world instead of in Him who made it.