

Week 9: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–28

Hook



Main Point: Until Christ returns, believers are called to live in Christian community in peace and purity.

Teacher, ask “What should you do if your clothes catch on fire?” Responses will likely include “stop, drop, and roll” – a simple, memorable catchphrase that will help solve a dire problem. Ask your LifeGroup if they can think of any other memorable slogans that teach how to solve problems.

Form small groups and task them with creating a catchy slogan with instructions as to what to do in the following situations:

- A water line breaks, and your house is flooding
- You’re outside and lightning begins to strike
- You forgot your spouse’s birthday
- Car keys are missing
- You realize you forgot to wear deodorant at work

Provide a few minutes for the small groups to share their work with the rest of the LifeGroup.

Transition: In today’s lesson, Paul will provide concise, memorable instruction on how to live the Christian life.

Week 9: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–28

Book

Main Point: Until Christ returns, believers are called to live in Christian community in peace and purity.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Rejoice, pray, and give thanks in all circumstances.

Q: How can we “pray without ceasing” without neglecting the other things we need to do with our days?

Q: How do “rejoicing always” and “giving thanks in all circumstances” relate to each other?

These are three seemingly simple but all-consuming demands. Note how each one has a sense of doing these things *at all times* – rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, give thanks *in all circumstances*. These three things – joy, prayer and thanksgiving – should be the constant attitude of those who trust in Christ because we have no reason to not be joyful or give thanks – even when things are hard. Prayer is our lifeline to the Father, with whom we are in constant communion. When you live a life of *abiding* in Christ, prayer isn’t just a once- or twice-daily obligation; it’s all-day long, without ceasing, in and through everything we do. Prayer isn’t just what happens when we bow our heads and close our eyes. It’s communication and communion with God *through* all that we do.

As we noted last week, because of the original structure in Greek, verses 14–22 are written out line-by-line, like a bullet-point list of three sets of imperatives in some Bibles:

- Verse 14 contains four imperative verbs for how to live peacefully together in community – *admonish, encourage, help, be patient*.
- Verses 15–18 contains three imperatives for how to live according to “*the will of God in Christ Jesus*” (v. 18) for your spiritual life – *rejoice, pray, give thanks*.
- Verses 19–22 contain five exhortations related to prophetic ministries – *do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies, test everything, hold fast to good, abstain from evil*

This section was most likely written this way to be easy to memorize. Verse 14 gives instructions about how to live together in community, and verse 15 is about forgiveness, which we talked about last week. Verses 16–22 have a unique structure within this structure that seems to show that it had a liturgical use, meaning for use in a worship

service. British New Testament scholar Ralph P. Martin notes that this structure and the alliteration of the “p” sound at the beginning of each line in verses 16–22 (seen in the Greek) mean those verses were a passage that was probably recited together regularly in worship: “When the passage is set down in lines, it reads as though it contained the ‘headings’ of a Church service” with the emphasis on the introductory note of ‘glad adoration’ with prayer and thanksgiving.”ⁱⁱ

Rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving are the framework for worship and for the Christian life. As British biblical scholar F. F. Bruce wrote, “The Christian life is to be lived in an atmosphere of continuous joy, prayer and thanksgiving.”ⁱⁱⁱ These three imperatives are all described as “the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (v. 18). So often today, we talk about “God’s will for us” as if it’s about what career He wants us to have, where He wants us to live, or whom He wants us to marry. Those are important choices, but no matter what we choose about those things, His will for us is our sanctification – to abide in Him, keep His commands, and love one another (John 15).

In Scripture, finding God’s will doesn’t seem to concern as much about figuring out details of our life’s path as it concerns following Jesus in everything we do. Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks in every circumstance. Loving God and loving others at all times – no matter what career, relationship or situation we are in. Paul said we can only know God’s will when we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice and allow Him to transform our minds (Romans 12:1–2), that we can understand what the Lord’s will is when we walk with Christ in His wisdom (Ephesians 5:15–17), and that the will of God is serving Christ (Ephesians 6:6–7). Earlier in 1 Thessalonians, he said God’s will for us is our sanctification (4:3). Not once do any of these passages about God’s will talk about career, home or marriage partner choices. God’s will for us in Christ Jesus is about our holiness and spiritual growth, no matter what we choose. Not that God doesn’t care about those things; He knows every hair on our heads (Luke 12:7). But those are not His primary concern for us. They are tools He uses for His purpose – to grow us in spiritual maturity.

This is why the apostles’ prayers are for their people’s sanctification and knowledge of God (Hosea 4:6), not the details of life circumstances, as our prayers for ourselves and our friends often are. We can and should pray for those things, but we should always pray for God’s will and remember that His will for us is our sanctification. Which may come from getting that new job we want or marrying the girl of our dreams. Or through suffering and struggle. A heart that truly understands that God can use both things we think of as “good” and things we think of as “bad” for our sanctification can truly pray for God’s will and mean it, and can truly rejoice, pray, and give thanks in all circumstances.

Q: In what ways do you personally struggle with rejoicing at all times? What practical steps can you take to change your attitude and actions?

Q: How can you practically pray at all times? What would that look like in your daily life?

Q: How would your life be different if you focused more on gratitude? What difference would it make to keep a gratitude journal and write things down every day?

Q: Describe people you know who exude joy and/or gratitude no matter the circumstances. What kind of effect do they have on the people and world around them?

Q: Describe people you know who are prayer warriors. What impact do they make?

1 Thessalonians 5:19–22. [Read]

Talking Point 2: Test all the messages you hear; hold on to what is good; reject what is evil.

Q: Why is it important to test every prophecy?

This section is all connected to having discernment when it comes to “prophecies” that we hear. The context and the grammar of “*hold fast to what is good*” and “*abstain from every form of evil*” point to their being connected to the command to test the prophecies, meaning when you test the prophecies, hold fast to the good prophecies and abstain from the evil ones. This takes discernment and wisdom. But “abstain from ‘all kinds’ of evil” expands the meaning beyond just good and evil *teaching* to apply this generally to all things. Abstain from evil teaching, but also abstain from all kinds of evil.^{iv}

The verb “quench” is related to quenching a fire, one of the most common symbols of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. The Spirit came upon the disciples as tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2). And those same disciples, who feared for their lives the night of Jesus’ arrest, suddenly were preaching with passion and no fear (Acts 4:13). The disciples were “on fire” for Jesus and their message spread *like wildfire* all over the world. Paul encouraged Timothy to “fan into flame” of the gift the Holy Spirit in him (2 Timothy 1:6), to not lose that passion, that zeal, that boldness, that power. Here Paul told the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit (v. 19) – don’t put that fire out. Don’t stop the message the Spirit is trying to speak (v. 20).^v

The Greek word for “good” here is the same word used for a genuine (as opposed to counterfeit) coin. We use the same method to discern false teaching as we do to test counterfeit money. When experts are learning to spot a counterfeit, they don’t study the counterfeit. There are too many different kinds, and they change too frequently. They study the real thing so thoroughly that they can immediately spot a counterfeit.

The same is true for recognizing false teaching. When we study God’s Word well, we can immediately tell when teaching doesn’t match it.^{vi}

Q: What dangerous false teachings have you heard in the world around us today?

Q: Why is important to call out false prophets and maintain our churches’ teaching of sound doctrine?

Q: How have you personally seen false teaching affect a church or a person?

1 Thessalonians 5:23–28. [Read]

Talking Point 3: The God of peace can and will sanctify us no matter what happens.

Q: Why is sanctification important? How does it relate to the Day of Judgment?

Q: How does God sanctify us? What role do we play in our sanctification?

Paul closed this letter with the same kind of prayer from earlier in the letter, a “wish prayer” – because it is written in the optative mood (potential or wish) rather than the imperative (command). It is not a demand of God, but a hope that God would sanctify the Thessalonians completely. And yet, it’s not *only* a wish. It’s an *expectant* hope. They know “*He will surely do it*” (v. 24). Our sanctification is God’s primary purpose for our lives. His goal is to make us more like Jesus every day. As Paul wrote earlier in the letter, “*so that He may establish [our] hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus*” (3:13). We will never become perfect in this life, but that we can stand justified before Jesus at the Second Coming – the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment.

Our justification is a one-time event that happens the minute we accept Christ as our Savior and Lord. Our relationship with God is justified (made right) by the blood of Jesus. Like a bank statement that has been reconciled because Christ paid our debts. By grace, through faith, we have been justified, *declared* holy (Romans 5:1). Yet the Holy Spirit will spend the rest of our lives *making us* holy (sanctification), making us more like Jesus every day. Sanctification is a process. We will never arrive at perfection until our glorification – when we are given new bodies in the final kingdom of God, but we are made holier every day. Paul prayed for complete sanctification, every part of a person – spirit, soul and body (v. 23).

The apostle closed the letter with a request for prayer (v. 25), a greeting (v. 26), and a final doxology (v. 28) that repeats the same “grace” from the greeting of the letter. He

asked that the letter be read to all the believers in Thessalonica so everyone could hear their instructions and teaching (v. 27).

Q: How have you seen the Spirit grow you since you first became a Christian?

Q: In what ways is God still working on you, growing you to be more like Jesus?

Q: Knowing that the Holy Spirit does the work of sanctification, what role can you play?

Q: How does this language – the Church being the Bride presented to Christ – point to our sanctification not just as an individual thing, but something that happens as a community?

Q: How does that affect the way we think about sanctification and our church community?

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Took

Main Point: Until Christ returns, believers are called to live in Christian community in peace and purity.

The hymn “Count Your Blessings” was first published in 1897 and has become a staple in Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist hymnals.^{vii} The chorus provides a simple and powerful way to help the Christian find reasons to rejoice:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;
Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.^{viii}*

CHALLENGES

THINK: How can you truly rejoice in all circumstances, no matter what is going on in your life? How can you have joy in your sufferings, as James said? How can you find contentment and peace, whether you’re hungry or well-fed, rich or poor, as Paul described? Where does that kind of joy come from? If you don’t have it, where can you get it?

PRAY for God to sanctify you, to work in those areas of your life that need to be refined, purified, made more like Jesus. Spend some real, deep time in self-examination, being open and honest with yourself and God about the things in your life that are not of Him, things that need to change, ways that you need to submit to His lordship and authority. Pray for strength from the Holy Spirit to be made new and for the wisdom to know if there are any steps you need to take, like talking to a mentor or accountability partner or Christian counselor, establishing some boundaries in your life, or cutting things out of your life.

ACT: For the next week, until our next class, keep a gratitude journal. Keep a small notebook with you and write down everything you think of to be thankful for. Or perhaps simply write things down at the end of the day during your prayer time. Notice how intentionally looking for things to be grateful for changes your attitude during the day.

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- ⁱ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians, Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).
- ⁱⁱ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1979).
- ⁱⁱⁱ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians, Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).
- ^{iv} George Milligan, *St Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: MacMillan, 1908).
- ^v David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (New Zealand: Harper Collins, 1985).
- ^{vi} John MacArthur, *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Crossway, 1994).
- ^{vii} <https://www.umc.org/en/content/count-your-blessings-an-antidote-to-despair>
- ^{viii} https://hymnary.org/text/when_upon_lifes_billows_you_are_tempest