

There Is No Joy Where There Is No Thankful Heart

Galatians 5:22; 1 Thessalonians 5:18

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It is inevitable that we who truly know our past slavery to sin, the curse of the law that we deserved, and the eternal wrath of God in Hell that awaited us cannot help but give thanks and praise to the One who has graciously set us free. One sin that we as Christians may not often consider that we commit throughout the day is that of an unthankful heart and life. For we do not have to speak out bitterly against God in order to be unthankful, all we need to do is to forget to express our praise and thanks to our God for His many tender mercies toward us and our family throughout the day. We may never forget to give God thanks for our food when we sit to eat, but for us to be thankful in terms of all that we have freely received from the Lord, it is our duty and our privilege to be expressing a joyful heart of thanksgiving to the Lord daily in all circumstances. In fact, this is clearly revealed as God's will: "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

As we continue our study of the fruit of the Spirit, we now find ourselves considering the fruit of joy. The fruit of joy in the Lord is watered by a holy contentment (a reposing in Christ's all sufficiency for every need) and by a holy thanksgiving (a praising the Lord for Christ's all sufficiency for every need). These two graces (implanted in our life at regeneration) work together to produce a joy of the Lord that is our strength in all adversities of life. Just as there will not be an evident joy of the Lord apart from a holy contentment in the Lord, so there will not be an evident joy of the Lord apart from a holy thankfulness in the Lord.

As we consider the grace of thanksgiving (which like contentment is learned in the Christian life), let us consider the following two main points: (1) A Thankful Heart Is a Necessary Part of Joy in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:18); and (2) A Thankful Heart Is an Assured Evidence of Faith in the Lord (Luke 17:15-16).

I. A Thankful Heart is a Necessary Part of Joy in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

A. Note that our text does not stand alone, as if we are simply commanded to be thankful—period—without any context. But rather the command to be thankful in everything was placed by the Holy Spirit within a context.

1. **The historical context** of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 was that the Apostle Paul had received a report from Timothy (his dear child in the faith) that the Christians in Thessalonica were standing fast and firm in the face of fierce persecution, and Paul sends this Letter to the Thessalonian Church to express his thankful heart for them and for their encouragement to his joy in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 1:2,6; 2:14; 3:9; 5:18). Thus, Paul was filled with a thankful joy because these recent converts were persevering in the onslaught of the enemy's attacks against them.

2. **The textual context** of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 is that as Paul brings to a close this inspired Letter of thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians, he exhorts them (and all of us as well) with three brief, memorable commands: (1) "Rejoice evermore" (1 Thessalonians 5:16); (2) "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17); and (3) "In everything give thanks" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Note the following about these three brief commands.

a. **First, these three brief commands are bound together by the same Greek tense**—the continuous present tense ("Continue rejoicing evermore"; "Continue praying without ceasing"; and "In everything continue giving thanks"). In other words, these three short commands are to characterize you as Christians. These are not intended by the Holy Spirit to be the character that only "super Christians"

possess. These are the divine inheritance of every child of God (who is a joint heir of God's blessings with Jesus Christ).

b. **Second, these three short commands are bound together by the same**

Scriptural warrant—"for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you". Many Christians claim to want to know the will of God for their lives ("What would the Lord have me to do or not to do in this or that situation"). Here, my brothers and sisters, is the unquestionable will of God for you. Many of us want to know the will of God for our lives, but how many of want to do the will of God in our lives (without making excuses as to why we cannot do it). Why should the Lord reveal to us His will in a questionable matter when we are not even doing His will in an unquestionable matter?

c. **Third, these three short commands are bound together through the same relationship one to another**—a continuous joy of the Lord in all circumstances is realized as we continue to pray without ceasing and as we continue to give thanks in everything. Thus, the order of these three short commands is not accidental, but intentional and instructive to us all. If the joy of the Lord would be our strength in our prosperity and adversity (in our gains and in our losses), the Holy Spirit leaves us at least the following necessary aids and helps to such a blessed joy and delight in the Lord: Continue your praying without ceasing and Continue your giving thanks in everything.

d. But you say, "That is impossible!" Yes, it is impossible if we strive only in our own strength, determination, resolution, and human resources ("For without me ye can do nothing" John 15:5). But it is not impossible for us to reach a mature level and degree (not a perfect level and degree this side of heaven) of praying without ceasing and giving thanks in everything, as these commands are rightly understood ("I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" Philippians 4:13). Dear ones, to eliminate at the outset the possibility (yea the certainty) of you praying without ceasing and giving thanks in everything is to consign yourself to defeat from the very beginning, and even worse, it is to call God a liar, who through Paul says we can by God's grace do all such these things through the power of Christ. Therefore, let's not make excuses, dear ones. Let's not flee the battle over a hopelessness and despair engendered by an unbelief in the God who works that which impossible to man.

e. How can you believe God created all things out of nothing in the space of six 24-hours days, and yet not believe that He will grow you to rejoice in all circumstances, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in everything? Will your lack of faith in God's love, power, wisdom, and promises to sanctify you also lead you to become an evolutionist? God forbid! Let such a lie of the devil not abide in your heart or fall from your lips (Psalm 78:19).

B. Rejoice evermore (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

1. My remarks on this first command will be very brief since we have already examined this same command in a previous sermon in Philippians 4:4 ("rejoice in the Lord always").

2. "Some take such a view of religion that it is to them a sacred duty to be gloomy. . . . Turn this Book over and see if there is any precept that the Lord has given you in which He has said, "Groan in the Lord always, and again I say, groan" (Charles Spurgeon, "Rejoice Evermore" May 23, 1886). Indeed, we are to mourn over our sin in order that we may be comforted with God's mercy and comfort in Christ Jesus, but mourning is not that which is to characterize the life of a Christian. It is the joy of the Lord that is to characterize the life of one who trusts alone in Christ alone.

3. This is simply a command to continue finding your chief delight in the Lord in all of the circumstances you face in life, and not in the things of this world ("The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever" Question 1, *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*). All that is in the world is temporal and perishing and cannot bring a continual joy (whether people, power, prestige, possessions, work, exercise, education, or amusements). Only the everlasting and infinite God can satisfy the hunger and thirst of man with a joy that reaches to the innermost recesses of man's being now and forevermore.

C. Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

1. As Matthew Henry notes, “The way to rejoice evermore is to pray without ceasing. We should rejoice more if we prayed more” (Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

2. This is not a command to never cease from formal praying with heads bowed, knees bent, and in our private prayer closet 24 hours every day (though we dare not put aside those designated times of prayer in private, with our families, and with Christ’s Church). If that were the case, there would be no time to fulfill all of the other commands of the Lord to our family, calling, church, and community. This is rather a command to live throughout the day in an atmosphere of God’s presence breathing in the love, mercy, righteousness, power, faithfulness, and wisdom of God, and breathing out in spontaneous prayer a praise, a need, a confession, and a communion with Jesus Christ. Live in the presence of the Lord as you work throughout the day, so that there is nothing that hinders a spontaneous prayer being offered to the Lord at any time. Just as we breathe air from the invisible atmosphere that surrounds us, so we are to breathe prayer from the invisible God that surrounds us as we work, drive, attend classes, recreate, sit, talk, and walk.

3. Dear ones, our lives as Christians will be lifeless to the degree that we fail to breathe in God’s Spirit, God’s grace, God’s love, God’s promises, God’s holy character and attributes and breathe out our prayer and communion with Him throughout the day. And this is simply a glorious habit that we learn and practice in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. We learn (by God’s grace) to pray without ceasing, by practicing (by God’s grace) prayer and communion with the Lord every day. How many good habits are used by you that you did not have to learn (and learn by practice)? Whether playing a musical instrument that draws people to the sound, driving a car that safely and expeditiously gets you to your destination, cooking a meal that is tasty and healthy, making a bed that does not look like it was just slept in, performing work on the job in a way that receives the praise of others, or reaching a level of exercise that few others are able to accomplish—it all takes practice. And so it is with learning to pray without ceasing throughout the day.

D. In everything give thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

1. First, giving thanks is not offered to a nameless power or force (“It was my good luck or fortune”). It is not simply to be thankful in the abstract without identifying to whom one is thankful (“I’m so thankful”). It is to humbly offer to the one true living God of the Bible our sincere, cheerful gratitude for benefits received from His gracious hand, and bestowed for no merit in us.

2. Secondly, note that the command is “IN everything give thanks”, not “FOR everything give thanks”.

a. Certainly, we are not to give thanks unto God for our sin, for our disobedience, for our rebellion, for our unbelief, for our prayerlessness, or for our thankless heart (NOT “I give thanks for my thankless heart”). Nor are we to be thankful for persecution for persecution’s sake. Nor are we to be thankful for adversity for adversity’s sake. Nor are we to be thankful for affliction for affliction’s sake.

b. The command is rather that we continue to give thanks “IN everything” (i.e. in everything that we face in this life, we are to see the hand of God working so that even when we fail the Lord, we can be thankful for the Lord’s infinite love, forgiveness, and mercy; even when the world around us or within our home is falling apart or when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not fear, for the Lord is with us, Psalm 46:1,6-7). No matter how bad the situation you face, it is only due to the merciful restraint of God that it is not even worse (and let none of us think that our trials cannot get worse—they certainly can, but for God’s merciful restraint). Dear ones, this grace of giving thanks in all circumstances is once again a grace that we must learn by practicing it. It is implanted at regeneration, but it must be worked out by the Holy Spirit through much blood, sweat, and tears.

c. To give thanks “in everything” means that we are to thank God, not only in the big things of life, but also in the small things; not only in extraordinary things in life, but also in the ordinary things (even when we take a sip of water, the beat of our heart, the breath that we take). It means that we are

to thank God, not only for mercies presently received, but for past mercies as well, and even for the everlasting joy that is reserved for us in heaven. It means that we are to thank God, not merely in blessings we receive, but also in blessings others receive. It means that we are to thank God, not merely in times of gain, but also in times of loss. But especially we are to be thankful for Christ—God’s unfathomable gift to us.

3. Thirdly, what is it in your life and mine that hinders and prevents a thankful heart throughout the day?

a. **Unbelief and doubt.** Do you believe the Lord’s mercies are new every morning and every day (Lamentations 3:22-23)? Do you believe the Lord is working out that which is good for you in what you are presently facing (Romans 8:28)? What do you have to be thankful for if you do not see (with the eye of faith) God’s love and provision for all your needs (material, but especially spiritual)?

b. **Worldliness.** Being consumed with the things of this life will blind you to the mercies of God all around you. You will be too busy to see them and to be thankful for them.

c. **A critical spirit.** Being consumed with the sins of others, with the failures of others, with the unfulfilled expectations of others to meet your needs, to encourage you, to help you, so that your focus is more upon others than upon your own need of Christ, and your own sins, and your own sanctification.

d. **Discontentment.** We look for joy in that which cannot satisfy (it cannot bring true joy because it is temporal). Only Jesus Christ can never be taken from you. Only making Christ your life and reason for living throughout the day will bring true joy that the world cannot take away. Rather than waiting upon the Lord for what we need, we grow impatient, as if God had to work according to your schedule and mine.

e. **Unrepentant sin** and refusing to walk in loving obedience to God’s commands. There can be no thankful heart in one who walks in unthankful disobedience. Dear ones, a miserable unthankful heart may be due to a wilful and stubborn disobedience.

4. Fourthly, what will promote a thankful heart? For, dear ones, a thankful heart is truly the work of the Holy Spirit—it is not a mere form of godliness. A thankful heart to the Lord in all circumstances is indeed the power of God working within your heart. Mere external acts of obedience may mask our unthankful hearts, but a thankful heart cannot be masked and hidden—it will be expressed.

1. **Trust** in the loving, sovereign, most wise God, who can do you no wrong (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).

2. **Pray** and commune with Christ without ceasing.

3. **Practice** being thankful—do the will of God, don’t just talk about it. It has been noted that if one was told to find small particles of iron that were mixed in a dish of sand, one might run his/her fingers through the sand, might look and look with the naked eye, but would not find any. But if one were given a magnet and used it to sweep through the sand, all of the many particles of iron invisible to the eye would be drawn to the magnet. The unthankful heart (like our fingers in the sand) discovers no mercies of God for which to praise Him; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day (like the magnet) and it will find in every hour some earthly or heavenly blessing for which to praise the Lord.

II. A Thankful Heart Is an Assured Evidence of Faith in the Lord (Luke 17:15-16).

A. Dear ones, it is a mark of the wicked that they have no thankful heart to God for His mercies (Romans 1:21). It is a sign of the antichristian apostasy that men "shall be unthankful" (2 Timothy 3:2). On the other hand, it is the mark of the saints on earth and in heaven that they are full of thanksgiving to the Lord (Colossians 2:7; Revelation 7:12.)

B. The parables of Jesus were intended to teach certain truths, and the healings Jesus performed

were likewise intended to teach certain truths as well. In this instance of healing that we are briefly considering at this point, I submit that the Lord teaches that a thankful heart to God is an evidence of saving faith in our lives. Ten lepers cried out to be healed. Ten lepers were healed. But only one returned to give thanks to the Lord Jesus, and evidenced his faith in doing so.

1. The Samaritan's thanksgiving was not rehearsed, canned, or vain repetition ("Praise the Lord" can become profane speech when it is used without a genuine expression of thanks to the Lord). A begrudging thanksgiving ("Well if I have to do it I will") is no sincere thanksgiving at all. Dear ones, there is nothing that will more greatly encourage others to joyful service than a sincere word of thanksgiving for their help. It will lighten the load like few things will when one knows that his labors are sincerely appreciated.

2. The Samaritan's thanksgiving was not a silent or hidden thanksgiving, but rather a vocal and expressive giving of thanks, and so should our thanksgiving be. The nine lepers opened wide their mouth to plead for Christ's mercy, but when the Lord Jesus healed them, they became strangely speechless. Earnest thanksgiving to God and others can no more be buried in the soul of a believer than Christ could remain buried in the grave. It will arise even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

3. The Samaritan's thanksgiving was not of a broad, general kind that was directed more in a shot-gun style at life in general ("Oh, I'm so thankful for the food we can enjoy, because many people in poor countries have so little"). The Samaritan fell before the feet of Christ and poured out his praise to the Lord. Learn to itemize the mercies of God to you, so that even when you are passing through severe trials and painful afflictions, you never run out of things for which to be thankful (make lists if necessary).

4. Dear ones, never ever forget you were once unclean (spiritual lepers) before God, cut off from a living union and communion with Christ. There is certainly no need to relive the filth and corruption of your past life so as to sensationalize your testimony for the applause of men. But at the same time, dear ones, there is an ever present need to remember what God has rescued you from and blessed you with (like Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10). Let even each painful memory of your past turn your attention to the mercy of Christ who has rescued you, rather than to a heart of bitterness. We don't live in the past, but we do remember the past, so that we never forget the tender mercies of the Lord. "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

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