

**6.14.20 God's Will in Christ Jesus for You 1 Thessalonians 5.16-28****Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Today is the 8<sup>th</sup> and final sermon in our series on **Leading a Life Worthy of God** based on Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. I hope you've been learning and growing as we've journeyed through the first of Paul's letters. From the opening thanksgiving highlighting the need of the church to **live by faith, be known in love, and to be a voice of hope**, faith, hope, and love are revealed as the pillars of Christian discipleship as taught by the Apostle Paul. Throughout 1 Thessalonians Paul encourages the church to love (3:12, 4:9-10), encourage (4:18, 5:11), and do good (5:15) to one another and to all. Today we're going to hear the conclusion of the letter, **1 Thessalonians 5:16-28** which contains Paul's final appeal. **It involves a list of things we're to do and not to do.**

Are you someone who makes or keeps lists? Most of the time I'm not someone who makes a list and works off it, checking things off. I tend to make lists when the volume of what I need to do gets so large that I'm afraid if I don't write things down, I might forget something important. Often these things will come to me when I'm sleeping or when I first wake up and all of sudden, I realize or remember that I didn't respond to a call, email, or text. I think part of the wisdom and comfort of keeping a list of things to do is that we're less likely to forget something and there's also a sense of accomplishment when you get to cross something off when it's done. As Paul comes to the conclusion of his letter to the Thessalonians, it's almost like he remembers that there are several things he wanted to communicate, things that Christians are to do and not do, so they come in quick succession like a "to do" and "not to do" list for believers. Here it is:

***"Rejoice always, Pray without ceasing, Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not*** quench the Spirit. ***Do not*** despise the words of prophets, but test everything; ***hold fast to what is good; abstain*** from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 **The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.**

**Beloved, pray for us.** Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. **I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.** The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

What’s your first reaction when you hear these words? **“Rejoice always, Pray without ceasing, Give thanks in all circumstances?”** I received an email this week from someone who had asked what I was going to be preaching on and I sent her the scripture. In her reply she wrote, *“if you did a scan of the world right now, I don’t believe those words would come up first. There would be anger, conflict, confrontation, strong emotions, screaming, opinions, grief, fear.”* Part of our first response may be, is Paul serious? Rejoice **always** – how is that possible? What about our need to lament, grieve and mourn – the loss of life, all the losses we’ve experienced of time with family and friends, trips, graduations, games, and concerts. I was speaking with a woman whose daughter died six months ago and whose husband died this week. How is she supposed to do what Paul says? What about parents whose hearts are aching over a child who is struggling and acting out in various ways - are these words for them in their pain and helplessness as they pray for their child?

What if what Paul is telling us is true and wise in all of the seasons of our life whether we’re feeling on top of the world or in the pit of despair? With sadness and anger all around, we need faith more than ever. These are tough times. People are getting slammed spiritually, mentally, physically, relationally, financially. Yet God’s Word is still speaking to us and calling us to live faithfully in our time. Let’s trust that wherever we are in life, God’s Word still has something to teach us if we will have ears to hear, a heart that’s willing to be taught, and will that’s committed to obey.

The final section of 1 Thessalonians 5 is about **Conduct within the Community of Believers**. I talked about 5 things last week - **Be respectful, peaceful, helpful, merciful, and good to one another and to all. How did you do with those five behaviors this past week?** Paul continues to tell the church how to lead a life worthy of God by telling us first to **Remember** several things:

**Be Joyful (5:16) at all times.** Many people rejoice when things are good and complain when things are bad, usually for themselves because human beings tend to

be selfish creatures. Anyone can do that. As a Christian the **challenge is to rejoice always**. How do we do that? **By remembering who God is and what God is like**. We know from the Bible that God Listens and Answers When We Call, God Gladdens Our Soul, God is Good, Forgiving, Powerful, Teaches us Truth, Delivers Us from Trouble and Evil, is Merciful and Gracious, Abounding in Steadfast Love and Faithfulness. God Helps and Comforts Us. There's an old African American Gospel song Mahalia Jackson used to sing called *Trouble of the World* and it's about how one gets through the trouble of the world by focusing on God. We can rejoice always when we remember to focus on God who is always with us. The second thing we're to **Remember is**

**Be Prayerful (5:17) In all things. It's more difficult to rejoice always if we are not praying without ceasing.** "*Pray without ceasing*" a line we may have heard but perhaps don't understand; we can't pray all the time. But prayer has become a constant demand for more and more of us. I suspect many of us have a growing prayer list with the names of people we are bringing before God for a host of reasons. The original Greek meaning of the phrase, "*pray without ceasing*" doesn't mean pray "constantly," which is impossible. It doesn't mean a constant mumbling of prayers (see Matt. 6:7). It means "**continually recurring.**" The same Greek word is used for a hacking cough. This doesn't mean we pray uninterruptedly but that we **pray regularly and frequently.**

We often pray because things aren't good, or we may pray for things we don't have and want or need. Praying without ceasing, involves more than just asking for things (supplication), it's expressing our adoration of and gratitude to God, confessing, acknowledging, and accepting responsibility for our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, taking time in silence for our soul to settle down and to allow God to speak as we listen, even how we do our work can be a form of prayer. True prayer is an attitude of the heart as so many of the Psalms teach us (Psalms 10:17; 21:2; 37:4; 145:19). **When our hearts desire what God desires, we are praying all day long** as the Spirit intercedes for us and in us (Rom. 8:26–27). Our whole life can be an act of prayer and worship if we looked at it that way.

**Remember to: Be Joyful at all times, Be Prayerful in all things, third Be Thankful (5:18): No matter what happens.** When the pressure of life is getting to me,

when losses are piling up and wins are few and far between, when the stress and uncertainty are mounting, one of the things we can and need to do to maintain a sense of balance and perspective is to take time to remember all the reasons we have to be thankful no matter what is going on or taking place. One morning this past week, I began my day with this scripture and thinking about all the reasons I had to be thankful. Simply taking time giving thanks for everything I could think of from my family, health, another day of life, food, shelter, clothing, running water, I went on and on giving thanks.

There is an important distinction to remember, Paul says were to give thanks **in, not for**, all circumstances. Some circumstances are awful. This past Friday was the birthday of a young woman some of us learned about in school named Anne Frank. She was born on June 12, 1929 in Frankfurt, Germany. Had she lived she would have celebrated her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday on Friday. In 1942 on her 13th birthday she received an empty diary in which she wrote about her life as part of a Jewish family, hiding from the Nazis, and in it she shared remarkable wisdom and perspective even in the midst of terrible circumstances. She died in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945 shortly before the end of World War Two. She wrote, *“Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness.”* Character and goodness are shaped and revealed in all circumstances.

**Paul tells the church Be Joyful at all times, Be Prayerful in all things, Be Thankful no matter what happens, 4<sup>th</sup> thing to remember, is Be Careful (5:19–22).**

1. **What not to do (5:19–20) Don’t quench the Spirit (5:19).** The Greek word for “Spirit” (pneuma) refers to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The New Testament uses the imagery of **fire** to describe the Spirit’s presence and activity (Matthew 3:11 *“he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire;”* Acts 2:3 *“tongues as of fire;”*). Paul uses the image of quenching to describe the idea of resisting the Spirit’s work in and among believers. In this passage, the notion of quenching the Spirit likely refers to being open to God still speaking within the church (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21).

**Don’t despise prophecy (5:20).** The Greek word used here (prophēteia), refers to speech inspired by the Holy Spirit to build up the church community (1 Cor 14:4). Some believers at Thessalonica may have felt uncomfortable with the spiritual gift of

prophecy because of their experience with religious cults—such as the cult of the Greek god Dionysus—which practiced a form of pagan prophecy that involved ecstatic behavior. Paul is wise enough to know that not everyone who says, “*The Holy Spirit told me to tell you...*” or “*I have a word from the Lord,*” has actually heard from the Holy Spirit or the Lord. Sometimes people are simply trying to put a spiritual spin on their own opinion or trying to use God language to get their own way. We don’t want to quench the Spirit or dismiss a word from someone without some prayerful consideration, so Paul says **What to do (5:21–22) Be careful to**

a. **Test everything (5:21).** We’re to use discernment in examining all things. This refers to testing the legitimacy of the prophetic speech mentioned in vv. 19–20. In 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions the need for discernment within the church (1 Cor 12:10; 14:29). Just because someone has a religious title and uses religious language, imagery, or phrases in their writing or speaking does not mean that their message is truly of God. 1 Corinthians 11:14 tells us even Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light. We don’t want to be fooled or duped by the enemy, so we need to test everything and Paul says in verse 22

b. **Avoid every kind of evil (5:22).** There’s a phrase to tape to your steering wheel, computer, phone, and tablet. **Avoid every kind of evil.** Evil takes many forms and some of the worst and the most impactful can be very subtle and harder to detect than something obvious like committing murder, adultery, or lying. **Avoid every kind of evil.** If a person isn’t trying to do that in their words and deeds, how can they or we claim that person is a disciple of Jesus?

**Remember to: Be Joyful at all times, Be Prayerful in all things, Be Thankful no matter what happens, Be Careful not to quench the Spirit or despise prophecy, but test everything and avoid every kind of evil.**

After saying what we’re to **Remember** Paul seeks to provide some **Reassurance of what God will do for us (5:23–24).** Paul **Reassures** us that as we humbly and diligently seek to lead lives worthy of God, **God is with us**  
**In the present (5:23a):** Paul prays *May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely.*  
**In the future (5:23b):** God will present us blameless at Christ’s coming.  
**Why God will do this (5:24): Because God is faithful.**

After **Remember and Reassurance**, Paul makes three **Requests** (5:25–28)

- A. **Pray for me** (5:25).
- B. **Greet everyone for me** (5:26).
- C. **Read this letter to all the Christians** (5:27–28).

Paul poignantly asks for their prayers and the instruction to greet one another with a kiss underscores the close relationships that have been formed. No one is to be left out. **All** are to be greeted with a holy kiss and the letter is to be read to **all**. ***“I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.”***

Reading his letter aloud was the only way everyone in the congregation could be acquainted with it. No other New Testament letter **demand**s the public reading of the letter. (Colossians 4:16 gives instructions about *when* the letter is read). Paul’s choice of words is sharp. The Greek verb he uses (*enorkizein*) appears nowhere else in the New Testament and only rarely outside. Paul is insisting that the community take his letter seriously. In a sense by reading the letter in the context of worship in the community they put the letter “on-line” where it’s remained ever since. I think Paul would be amazed that this letter and others he wrote have continued to shape the lives of Christ followers and the church for almost 2,000 years.

He concludes, ***“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.”*** And, with you.

**Blessing:** Walter Rauschenbusch, wrote in “The Culture of the Spiritual Life,” 1897, about The Blessed Life. *“The main thing is to have God; to live in God; to have God live in us; to think God’s thoughts; to love what God loves and hate what God hates; to realize God’s presence; to feel God’s holiness and to be holy because God is holy; to feel God’s goodness in every blessing of our life and even in its tribulations to be happy and trustful; to join in the great purposes of God and to be lifted to greatness of vision and faith and hope with God – that is the blessed life.”*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. How easy or difficult do you find Paul’s instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5.16-18 to *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*

2. Which of the three rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, or giving thanks in all circumstances do you find the easiest? Which is the hardest for you?
3. Why is it important not to quench the Spirit yet to “test everything” and avoid every kind of evil?
4. What does Paul say God will do for us in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24?
5. In “The Culture of the Spiritual Life,” 1897, Walter Rauschenbusch, described the Blessed Life this way. *“The main thing is to have God; to live in God; to have God live in us; to think God’s thoughts; to love what God loves and hate what God hates; to realize God’s presence; to feel God’s holiness and to be holy because God is holy; to feel God’s goodness in every blessing of our life and even in its tribulations to be happy and trustful; to join in the great purposes of God and to be lifted to greatness of vision and faith and hope with God – that is the blessed life.”* Discuss or reflect on this description – how does it speak to you? Challenge you to grow?
6. How will you apply 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28 in your life this coming week?