

The Impossible Made Possible In Christ

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Preacher: Jared Blankenship

[0 : 0 0] So 1 Thessalonians 5, 16 to 18, very simply, Paul says, Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Well, clearly at the heart of this text is this pronouncement that what is being said or what is being commanded is the, quote, will of God.

And that brings a weightiness to this, doesn't it? Of course, we understand the Bible is God's word. Everything that we read there is the will of God in some way, and there are various ways to understand that.

But whenever we come to a statement like this in the Scripture, it really is functioning like a giant flashing sign. It's urging us to pay careful attention to what's being said.

This is the will of God for you. This is what God wants for you. To do anything less is to sin, to be in rebellion against Him.

[1 : 1 9] And we've seen the phrase once before in this very letter. If you remember back in chapter 4 and verse 3, Paul wrote that the will of God is the Christian's sanctification.

Why don't you just set your eyes on it? It may even be on the same page for you there. Chapter 4, verse 3, This is the will of God, your sanctification. Very plain.

Sanctification, of course, refers to our progress in holiness, our progress in purity. We might understand it in the context of this book and the way that Paul has used it here.

We might understand it as living consistently with the purposes for which God has saved us and set us apart for His glory.

Of course, that too has been echoed in the letter. Just turn again back to chapter 2 and verse 12. We exhorted each one of you, encouraged you, and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

[2 : 3 2] That's really what this is about, isn't it? This sanctification, it really means to walk worthy of God, to live consistently with the calling on our life.

That is our calling to salvation. That since we belong to Him as His people, if you're a Christian, there is a particular way that He desires for you to live your life in purity and in holiness.

This is His will, Paul says plainly in chapter 4 and verse 3. Well, when Paul speaks of God's will again here in chapter 5 and verse 18, it's also in relation to the believer's sanctification.

And we know that because of verses 23 and 24. They are working as the climax, not only of this section, really the climax of the whole letter, but especially this section.

Just set your eyes on them. Paul offers this prayer. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely. This whole idea of walking worthy, of living a life that is consistent, of having an existence that is consistent with the calling of God on our lives, he says, may God bring it to completion.

[3 : 49] And may your whole spirit and body and soul be kept blameless. Blameless being another word for sanctification. May it be blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. That's the climax, not only of the letter, but of this section. That's what helps inform us of what Paul is doing with this section.

It has to do with our sanctification. God will be faithful to complete that work when Christ returns. But until that time, the challenge for us is to pursue sanctification, to pursue holiness and purity, blamelessness in the context of verse 23.

That is our part. We are to do that. We are to pursue that in His grace and of course in the power of His Spirit. So again, when we get to chapter 5, there's this repetition.

This is the will of God. And what is it in relation to? Well, ultimately it's in relation to our sanctification again, but it has a narrow focus as well. Here, sanctification means constant joy, persistent prayer, grateful praise in every circumstance.

[5 : 11] The bottom line of all of this is that God desires for His people to actually live like His people. And in these verses, to live as if you belong to God is to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances.

So it's not very hard to see that, is it? It's easy to see, okay, this is what God wants for me. And though as His people, it is always, or at least it should always be, our delight to do the will of God, that doesn't mean that obedience to God's will is always easy.

In fact, there are times where God's commands actually, they seem downright impossible to obey, impossible to fulfill.

And I think this is one of those times. We're so familiar with these three verses that we may take for granted exactly what God is telling us to do here.

Consider the Thessalonian Christians who were the first recipients of these instructions. That they face significant suffering in their lives for their faith in particular is well established.

[6 : 34] We know that. From the very beginning, their faith was rocked by persecution. Paul himself and his team being chased out of town at threat of their life.

Those who had allowed Paul and his team to stay with him, Jason in particular was one man that's named in Acts 17, are dragged before a mob and beaten. Why?

Because they were Christians. And of course, as we've studied the letter, we have found that that has continued. Not only has the persecution continued and not only is it severe, but now they're starting to notice that people that they love, Christians, their brothers and sisters in Christ, are beginning to die and that's brought confusion.

That's brought a different kind of grief to them that Paul has dealt with in the letter. Everything that we know about the Thessalonians and about their context is hard. It's a struggle.

It's suffering. And their suffering, both physical and emotional, showed no signs of letting up. Now it is to those people that Paul writes, God wants you to rejoice.

[7 : 50] God wants you to continue praying. God wants you to express thanksgiving. And surely, as they heard this letter read in one of their gatherings, somebody in that worship service would have thought, God's asking too much.

How is that even possible? Perhaps you're in a season of life that is somewhat like that, where instructions like these, while you get them and maybe you can feign some type of obedience to them, you really know or at least think that I can't do this.

Sure, you know how to get on well enough in Christian settings, but genuinely expressing joy to God, continuing in faithful dependence on Him, offering sincere thanks from the heart, just isn't happening.

And maybe you've concluded that God asked too much. He asked too much of you. Or that these attitudes and actions can only be true of a certain kind of Christian, some kind of super Christian that just has something that you don't have.

Neither of those things is true. We tend to think of these precepts in terms of what we must do. I want to try to correct that, but not entirely, because it's not all wrong, but it is incomplete.

[9 : 19] These are not merely things that we must do, actions that we must perform. By God's grace, I want to show you from this text that it is not only what we must do or that we must do them, but that we can do them.

You actually can. not in a way that is a fake it till you make it kind of situation, but you, those who are in Christ, you can actually do what God is commanding you to do in this text.

You can have authentic joy in the midst of grief. You can have confident, hopeful prayer. You can have grateful praise even in the most difficult moments of your life.

You can suffer with joy. You can pray with confidence. You can find reasons for gratitude when all of your faith, love, and hope rest and are at rest in the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

That's what these verses are about. That's what I hope to point out to you this morning. First thing I want to do, just two main things, but the first thing is this. I want us to look at the essence of the commands here.

[10 : 37] The essence of the commands. Look again, verse 16 to 18. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

Now I want to try to get ahead of a potential misunderstanding that I've witnessed before in some Christians. some have misunderstood these three commands to mean that expressing grief or acknowledging a serious struggle, maybe even a struggle of the soul, darkness of the soul as we would call it, that to experience those things, to feel those things, and to express those things is actually sinful.

They wrongly believe or at least wrongly behave as if joy cannot exist with grief, as if prayers cannot be made in moments of confusion or maybe even doubt, or that thanksgiving cannot be true thanksgiving if it also admits hardship and difficulty.

And what that kind of thinking results in is the appearance of joy that's not actually real. Prayer that is hollow, vain.

Jesus said of unbelievers that it is vain repetition that they think that they will be heard for their much speaking, but it's not prayer that's genuine from the heart.

[12 : 14] It's not informed by reality. It's just words, religious forms. It also results in displays of gratitude that may be misguided.

They may express gratitude for something that God doesn't actually instruct us to be grateful for. Perhaps you've seen somebody who just out of confusion about this, they have the intention of obedience.

They want to be obedient to the passage, but because they misunderstand what God has actually commanded here, they look at their suffering and they express gratitude for the suffering itself as if that's what God's asking them to do here.

I don't think that's what God is asking. Now, I understand there is a way to do that that is genuine and good, but there are some who feel like what God is actually asking them to do is express this kind of feigned thanksgiving and joy for something that he hasn't actually told them that they must be thankful for.

The result of all of that, the aura of all of that, it reeks of vain religion that is out of touch with reality. Now, I'm not suggesting that any of you think that way, but I have seen that.

[13 : 24] I've seen Christians who just, they don't have a good understanding of suffering, therefore they have a complete misunderstanding of what God's actually asking for here. That's not how we're to understand the essence of these commands.

To ignore or to deny the experience of suffering, it actually robs these virtues of their meaning and of their power. Suffering is the backdrop against which Christian joy and hope and gratitude shine the brightest.

A couple of weeks ago, I can't remember what brought it on. Maybe the girls were asking about it or Julie and I were talking about her engagement ring. One of the girls asked how much I paid for it. I don't know, a quarter, whatever it cost at the vending machine, right?

We were talking about it. I remember when I would go to Jared's, that's the only place that I will allow myself to buy jewelry. We'll go to Jared's and what is it that they do with the jewelry?

They pull it out of the case, right? They put it on that black felt thing or at least it's what they used to do. It's probably been 16 years since I've been in a jewelry store. They put it on the black. Why do they do that? They got the spotlights right above.

[14 : 40] They shine it down against the backdrop of that black felt board. The diamond shines brightest, doesn't it? When we think about Christian joy and Christian hope and Christian prayer, Christian gratitude, it shines brightest against the backdrop of suffering.

It's not in ignorance or denial of grief but in the perseverance of joy through incredible grief that is the essence of these commands.

And Paul affirmed this routinely when he spoke of his own suffering. I want to just read to you this one paragraph that he wrote in 2 Corinthians 1. He said, We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.

He's being honest about his circumstance. We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

This is the Apostle Paul, the great Apostle. He's supposed to always be happy, right? I mean, that's who this guy is and he's saying, No, there's been some times it's been so hard that I just wanted to die.

[16 : 00] I just wanted to die. Indeed, he says, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. Oh, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

He delivered us from such a deadly peril and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

You also must help us by prayer so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted to us through the prayers of many.

Do you see what he's doing there? He's not denying serious suffering but he is showing that it is possible for a Christian to have true hope and joy and gratitude in the midst of intense suffering.

The kind of suffering that when you lay at bed tonight you just ask God, Will you just take me already? These three commands are about more than outward religious performance.

[17 : 11] That's not what God is interested in. All of them are written as actions. They're verbs, aren't they? We are to rejoice. We are to pray.

We are to give thanks. All of those are verbs. All of them, however, each action flows from an attitude toward God that is not manufactured.

It's actually something that is settled in the heart of a believer and of a believer alone. There's a transformation of heart and mind that God graciously gives to those he saves.

We read about it in 2 Corinthians 5 in verse 17. Paul says, If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.

All things made new. And we are to put on this new man. What does that actually mean? It means that we live consistently with what God has already done in us.

[18 : 19] This new creation, it includes the disposition of our heart toward God. God does that work in us. We don't do that for ourselves. He does that. So when God says that his will is that we rejoice, he is instructing us to express the joy that he has put in our hearts.

To give voice to something that he has put in us. It's there. If you're in Christ, it's there. It may be hard to see at times, but it's there. And he says, I want you to give voice to it.

I want you to rejoice. When he tells us to pray, he means for us to act upon the hope and faith that he's put in us.

When he commands our thanksgiving, he is instructing us to give voice to the heart of worship that goes far beyond our present circumstance.

What am I saying? These three commands are not about performance. So we need not look at them and say, well, if I'm going to obey God, I've got to find a way to fame joy and continue in hopeful prayer even when prayer is quite difficult and to just come up with some random thing that I can express thanksgiving for.

[19 : 45] No, that's not what this is about. It's not about performance. It's about our attitude of heart towards God. These commands don't require that we ignore or deny the reality of hardship, but that we faithfully persevere in genuine worship through our various sufferings.

And it's in this way that God wills our sanctification in this text, preparing us for Christ's return when he will complete our joy and he will complete our hope and he will complete our thanksgiving in eternity.

But of course, we understand when we come to a text like this, we understand God has done this work, he's asking us to give voice to something that he has done in us, but then we also know that our hearts can grow cold.

Which is exactly why we need this kind of instruction again and again. Paul wrote these things to the Thessalonians in order to awaken in them something that may have become dull, but why would it have become dull?

Well, some of them we know are living in sinful behaviors. Sin can make your heart grow dull. When you have sin in your life, it's going to be hard to express genuine joy and you probably won't want to pray very much because you understand the contradiction between your life and prayer.

[21 : 22] It will be hard to even think about thanksgiving because you're obsessed with this other thing that you want more than you want obedience to Christ. sin dulls our hearts to these things. It's not just sin, there's intense distress happening in the church.

Distress, suffering, can dull our hearts. It's hard to find joy when you can't see a reason to feel joy.

It's hard to pray when you've prayed again and again and again and it seems like God isn't listening. it's hard to express gratitude when you're finding it difficult to find anything that's worth being thankful for.

Of course, we can pull out all kinds of random things that we know we're supposed to be thankful for but that doesn't mean that we're actually doing it. Our hearts can grow dull and cold. Of course, the difficulty here is not so much the commands themselves, it's the modifiers that follow them.

we aren't told simply to rejoice. We're told to rejoice always. We aren't told simply to pray.

[22 : 35] We're instructed to never stop praying. We're not told to give thanks, we're told to do so in every circumstance. That's why these commands, we come to it and we think, if we're being honest with ourselves, we come to it and we think, this is not possible, how can this actually be possible to do the things?

God's asking too much. Who can genuinely do these things at all times? We want to do these things at all times but who truly can?

And the answer comes at the end of verse 18. So we've seen the essence of the commands, now I'm going to show you the basis for the commands. That God is not asking too much of you, he's actually commanding you to do something that he's made possible.

Look again at verse 18. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

What seems impossible is suddenly made possible when we think about this last statement. Think about how Paul could have said this. He could have said, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God for you.

[23 : 59] He could have said that. He doesn't say that. It would be incomplete if he said that. Oh, the addition of in Christ Jesus is of utmost importance to the instructions.

It roots the command for constant joy and persistent prayer and continual thanksgiving. It roots it solely in the good news of Jesus.

The impossible is made possible in Christ alone. God doesn't command us to rejoice because of our sorrow but to rejoice in our sorrow because Jesus has conquered our grief and will bring it to an end that is coming.

That's how we can rejoice in Christ. God doesn't instruct us to pray because he will always grant our request. He makes no such promises.

He invites us to pray. We know that prayer is a means by which he does very often grant our request. But that's not why he says to pray without ceasing.

[25 : 15] He says to pray without ceasing because in Christ Jesus we can pray. We have access to the throne of God through our great high priest Jesus Christ.

Why wouldn't we pray when we have such wonderful privilege? God doesn't demand our thanksgiving because life is always good.

He commands our thanksgiving because Jesus is always good even when life is not. The radical call to rejoice always and pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances really it's fundamentally a call to view every moment in light of the fact that you belong to Jesus.

that's what this is about. Living every moment of our life understanding every circumstance viewing all of life and all that we see and experience viewing it with the understanding that I belong to Jesus.

I am his and he is mine. Isn't that the message that seems to be coursing through this entire letter? Christ is coming back to redeem his people and judge his enemies.

[26 : 43] Things may be tough right now but take heart you belong to Jesus and he will not forsake you over and over and over this is the theme that comes to the surface in this letter to the Thessalonians.

So you can keep rejoicing in the pain. You can keep praying through the confusion. You can give thanks in the suffering because you belong to him and he's coming back and he's going to make all things right and we will be with him in eternity.

That's 1 Thessalonians. The reality of the Thessalonians suffering made these attitudes and actions difficult but the fact of their salvation made them possible.

I want to say that again. The reality of the Thessalonians suffering made these attitudes and actions difficult, maybe even seemingly impossible but the fact of their salvation made them very possible.

Yes, they were enduring significant hardship but consider what else the letter says was true of them. In chapter 1 and verse 4 we're told that they are loved and chosen by God.

[28 : 11] In several places we are told that they are filled by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 1 verses 5 and 6 they are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

A few verses later they are given the joy of the Holy Spirit. When we get to chapter 4 we find that they have been given by God His Holy Spirit.

That's true of them. In chapter 1 and verse 10 we find that they have been delivered by Christ from God's future wrath. In chapter 2 and verse 12 they've been called into God's kingdom and glory.

In chapter 2 and verse 13 they were being transformed by God's word. In chapter 3 and verse 8 they were standing firm in the Lord.

In chapter 3 and verse 13 they were being established in holiness by God Himself. In chapter 4 and verse 14 they received the promise of resurrection on the basis of Jesus' resurrection.

[29 : 16] In chapter 4 and verse 17 they received the promise that whether living or dead they will spend forever in the presence of Christ.

chapter 5 verses 9 and 10 they are destined not for wrath but to obtain salvation. If we spend all of our time looking at 1 Thessalonians and thinking wow what a hard life they lived.

What a shame for us. They didn't think that way. You hear all of that encouragement. Yes things were hard but that's not all that was true of them. No they were in Christ and they were going to receive all the benefits and privileges of being in Christ.

That is what was true of them. That's why Paul could write and say it's God's will that you keep rejoicing in your hardship and that you keep praying in your doubt and that you keep giving thanks in all circumstances because you belong to him.

You can do this in Christ. And if you're a Christian this morning everything that we just read about the Thessalonians that's true of you.

[30 : 28] You too have been delivered from the wrath to come. You too have been given the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. He is in you.

He has put joy in your heart. His word is at work in you. It's transforming you. You have the promise of a future resurrection. You will be forever with the Lord.

You are destined by God, determined by God to obtain salvation in the end. That's true of you. God's will is that you remember who you are in Christ at all times so that in every circumstance you can give voice to what he has done for you and what he has done in you.

Truly, at all times and in all circumstances, you can rejoice. You can pray and you can give thanks because you're in Christ.

Christ. Now, if you're not a Christian, I'm glad you're here and I hope you will come to understand the wonder of this gospel that I'm speaking of now.

[31 : 54] But what I want to say to you now is that Jesus really is this good. He really is. Listen to how he described the salvation that he gives in Matthew's gospel.

These are two of my favorite parables. In Matthew 13, Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which a man found and covered up.

Then in his joy, he goes and he sells all that he has and he buys that field. And then he continues, again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls who on finding one pearl of great value went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Now, what's the point? Jesus is the treasure in the field. Jesus is the pearl of immeasurable value. He really is as good as the word says that he is.

Apart from him, we are all destined for God's wrath. We're destined for that because God is holy and we are born sinners.

[33 : 13] We are in rebellion against him. But on the cross, Jesus, the sinless son of God, bore God's wrath in our place.

He took the place of every sinner sinner who will believe, who will trust in him and follow him as Lord. Only those who are safe in Christ can rejoice always and pray without ceasing and give thanks in every circumstance.

And you can be safe in Christ today and forever. if you will be like that man in the field and like that merchant searching for pearls.

This life, it offers a lot of things. And you may be satisfied to some extent with what it's offered you. But when you finally see Jesus for who he really is and what he really is and what he has done, everything else in this life, as Paul said to the Philippians, will feel like rubbish.

And the great thing about it is he just invites us to receive it. He does all of this and he doesn't even put a cover charge.

[34 : 45] He says, just come to me. All who are burdened and heavy laden, I will give you rest. You will find rest for your soul in me alone so that when everything else around you is falling apart and all the suffering that you're enduring, you can actually have true joy because you have rest in your soul because Jesus has put it there.

In the end, to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances is to live like you belong to God.

That's what sanctification is all about, isn't it? It's God's people living like God's people. But it's not an easy task and we know that and I don't mean to present it as if it is easy.

We do regularly fail to live up to it. we're grateful that the promise even of this chapter is that God is going to complete all of this in us one day and this will not be a struggle anymore.

But for now, it will be a daily struggle. I think that's why God is pleased for us to grow in Christian community and I want to zoom out just for a moment from 16 to 18 to see its place in this section.

[36 : 14] The verse before it, it led with see to it that no one, that is other believers, see to it that we will not repay evil for evil but that we will always do good.

Well, there's no break in the thought between verse 15 and verse 16. It is a different unit that Paul is focused on but all of it's working together. We might understand this rejoicing and this prayer and this thanksgiving as flowing out of our responsibility in verse 15 to ensure that one another are doing it.

You know what that means? That means we need to see to it that each other are always rejoicing, always praying, that are always giving thanks.

And when we understand our own hearts, we understand that we actually need one another to help encourage us in this, don't we? we need each other. This section that flows out of that instruction and we must see to it that everyone lives in light of their standing in Christ, rejoicing, praying, giving thanks.

In Christ, it's possible and we should continue in these things as we eagerly await his return. Let's pray.