

# 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

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Date: 19 May 2013

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Thessalonians, in chapter 4, verse 3, Paul says, this is the will of God, your sanctification. That is, your growth in Christlikeness. Of course, that's not what we typically think about when we ask, what is God's will for my life? But over and over again in the New Testament, God's will for us isn't so much about particular decisions that we face, what job I should take, who I should marry, but more about the kind of people that we become, more about the kind of people that we become.

Now, of course, God cares about the particular decisions that we face. He delights when we take even the simplest decisions to Him in prayer. Peter says at the end of his first letter, cast all your anxieties on Him because He cares for you. And that's a great comfort when we face big decisions and large transitions. And you know, God also gives us one another to help discern which path might be best. But you know, for all that, God's will for our lives, if you will, isn't primarily about guidance, but it's about godliness. It's about who we are in the midst of the decisions that we face. It's kind of like Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians chapter 10. He says, so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Or here in 1 Thessalonians 5, 16 through 18, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Now today, many of us face a world of seemingly limitless possibilities. You go to the grocery store and you are confronted by 50 different kinds of jam. But perhaps much more poignantly, you're also confronted with much more seemingly overwhelming possibilities and choices than that.

[ 2 : 1 0 ] And if we're honest, you're frightened to death that you will choose wrongly and screw up your life.

And you know, Christians can often compound that fear by thinking that we need to also sort of decipher God's will in the midst of all that as to whether I should choose one job or another, for example. And that's doubly frightening, you see, because then if I choose wrongly, I haven't just picked a job that I hate, but I've stepped outside of God's will for my life.

Yikes! But friends, don't you see how far that kind of thinking is from what Paul's talking about here? God's will, according to our passage, is not about anxiously deciphering our future, but about becoming a certain kind of people.

And when we look at what Paul describes here in this short little passage, it's hard not to use the word freedom. God's will is that in Christ Jesus, we be free to rejoice and free to pray and free to give thanks no matter what happens and no matter what the circumstances, always and without ceasing.

So there are three very simple points in our passage this morning. What kind of people does God want us to become? First, the kind of people who rejoice always.

[ 3 : 4 3 ] Now this doesn't mean that we put on a superficial happy face and pretend like nothing is hard or wrong or sad, right? I remember, I think it was my kindergarten graduation.

I don't know why they do a kindergarten graduation. They sort of parade these little kids across the stage and then they made us sing songs. And one of the songs that the school would typically have the kids sing was Don't Worry, Be Happy by Bobby McFerrin.

As if we had great cares as kindergartners. That's not quite what Paul's after here. What Paul's after is the fact that there is an indestructible joy that pervades the Christian life.

You see, Paul knew hardships. Listen to what he says in 2 Corinthians 11. He says, Five times I received at the hands of the Jewish authorities the forty lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea. On frequent journeys. In dangers from rivers.

[ 4 : 52 ] Dangers from robbers. Danger from my own people. Danger from Gentiles. Danger in the city. Danger in the wilderness. Danger at sea. Danger from false brothers. In toil and hardship. Through many a sleepless night. In hunger and thirst.

Often without food. In cold and exposure. And apart from other things. There is the daily pressure on me. Of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak?

And I am not weak. The queue is made to fall. And I am not indignant. And what is Paul's response to all this? What does he say to the Thessalonian Christians who are also undergoing hardships? Don't worry. Be happy. No. Rather he says something richer and truer and more profound. He says rejoice always.

You see friends. Sometimes I think that the opposite of joyfulness. Isn't necessarily sadness or struggle. But cynicism.

[ 5 : 53 ] Cynicism. That tendency to see life as empty and pointless. And just everyone after their own self-interest. But you see friends.

God's will is that we be freed from our cynicism. And actually learn to rejoice. And of course it's not just a general rejoicing. Or happiness that Paul has in mind here.

Right? But it's a rejoicing in God. It's got to be that way. Look at the other two verses. Certainly God is the object of our prayer. And of our thanksgiving. We pray to God.

And we give thanks to God. So our rejoicing must be in God himself. To have him as our highest delight. And our most worthy treasure.

And our heart's song. Paul says always. What does it look like? To rejoice.

[ 6 : 49 ] Always. Perhaps it's helpful to think of a platoon in battle. Or maybe even better. A city under siege. And a great war has been raging for years.

But at last the message comes. Finally word reaches you. That the enemy has fallen. And that the war will end. And peace will at last reign.

And of course there are still hardships to come. Those scattered forces of the opposing side. Will still empty their rounds. They'll still slash and burn the fields as they retreat.

There still may be casualties. And loss. But despite it all. The victory is secure. And the war is won. And the tide of rejoicing.

Begins to swell. And nothing can hold it back you see. No matter what hardships still come. Before it's all said and done. With the proclamation of victory.

[ 7 : 51 ] Comes an indestructible joy. How many of us Christians have forgotten. That the victory has been won.

When the job offer doesn't come. When the marriage gets hard. When the diagnosis isn't good. When the siege doesn't relent.

Around the city walls of your heart. Friend remember the one. Who went deep into battle for us. And who faced the only enemies. That could truly destroy us. Remember Christ. Our great victor. Who did battle with sin. And death on the cross.

And who in his death and resurrection. Conquered them both. For all who repent and believe. You see friends. The gospel message. Is that word.

[ 8 : 50 ] That comes to the city under siege. It proclaims that a victory. Has been won. And therefore produces a joy. That's indestructible. For those who hear it.

And for those who believe it. That's indestructible. Chalcuty and loss. May still come. But it can't break. The tide of rejoicing.

That flows from knowing. That our peace. Has been secured. So Christian this morning. Are you rejoicing?

Are you celebrating. What God has done for you in Christ? Are you delighting. Not just in the gifts of life. But in the giver of life. Even in the midst.

Of the hardships. And the trials. Are you rejoicing? God's will is that we become. A people who are freed.

[ 9 : 53 ] From our cynicism. And who can rejoice. Always. Friend if you're here this morning. And you're not sure about this. Christianity thing. Aren't you still longing.

For an indestructible joy. In the midst of sarcasm. And cynicism. And snark. That we all love so much. In our culture. Aren't you wishing.

That something could lift you up. And out of that. And put you on a place. Where there would be joy. Friends.

Remember what you have in Christ. And rejoice. But Paul goes on to say. In our passage. That God also wants us to become. The kind of people who pray. Without ceasing.

Now I wonder what comes to your mind. When you think of prayer. Without ceasing. Maybe you think of. Very. Sort of religious. And solemn. Monks.

[10:51] Monks. Who do little else. But spend time in formal prayers. Which actually isn't what monks did. They were quite busy. Doing lots of things. But in our sort of popular conception. We think that they just sat around. And prayed all the time.

Right? That of course. Is not what Paul means here. Paul himself did lots of other things. But sort of have prayer meetings. Right? He was building tents. And getting in shipwrecks.

And getting whipped by Jewish authorities. You know. He was quite busy. So he can't mean that. But on the flip side. One might think of prayer.

Without ceasing. As simply just sort of cultivating. A prayerful attitude. Without actually praying. All that much. You've probably heard me use.

The Anne of Green Gables illustration. You know. Anne says. I wish that I could just go out. To a field. And feel a prayer. Right? Is anyone here seeing. Anne of Green Gables?

[11:43] Come on. You know what I'm talking about. Don't deny it. But again. Is that what. Is that what Paul means. By pray without ceasing. Just sort of have a general.

Sort of mood. Of attentiveness. That's not what Paul himself modeled. Or even Jesus for that matter. Jesus was always breaking away.

From his disciples to pray. And as we read Paul's letters. We find that he's always breaking off. And sort of running into prayer. Prayer. So prayer without ceasing.

Must mean something. Of both for Paul. I think. A constant heart attitude of prayer. Yes. Where we're actually. Communicating with God. In the ebb and flow. Of daily life.

But at the same time. Lots of regular. Devoted prayer times with God. Prayer without ceasing. And is it.

[12:39] Isn't it the case. When you think about it. That any intimate relationship. Any intimate relationship. Needs both of these things. Imagine a husband and a wife.

Who only talked together. While they were running errands. And they never set aside good times. To really just speak to one another. Without distractions. Wouldn't we say.

That they had. A bit of an unbalanced. Unhealthy relationship. Or vice versa. What if they only set aside times. To talk.

But were speechless. With one another. Throughout the ebb and flow. Of their days together. Certainly. That would be very strange. And a bit unhealthy. So you see friends.

When Paul talks about. Unceasing prayer. What he's talking about. Is a real intimacy. With God. A close communion.

[13:37] With the one who made us. And who redeemed us. And who will eventually. Take us on to glory. Now we're often tempted to think.

That the thing that keeps us. From unceasing prayer. Like this. Is our low level. Of self-control. Right? We say. If I could only force myself. To wake up a little earlier.

In the morning. To pray. Then I'd be good. Or if I could only force myself. To direct my thoughts. To God more often. Throughout the day. Then I'd be a little better. If I just had. A little more self-control.

Then I'd be able to kind of. Get this thing down. But you know friends. I don't think it's ultimately. About a low level.

Of self-control. That keeps us from. Prayer. I think it's actually. A pretty high level. Of self-sufficiency. Wouldn't you say? When I believe.

[14:31] That I'm able to do. The things that really. Need to get done. That I'm sufficient. In my own strength. And resources. To accomplish. What's before me. When I believe that.

When my self-reliance. Is high. I don't pray. Very much. Or very frequently. Only. And isn't it so easy.

To do that. We live in a culture. That prizes performance. Above all else. Where self-made women and men. Are still. Our heroes. And where we're taught. From a young age.

Not to show our weaknesses. And that the only one. You can really count on. Is yourself. And that your worth. At the end of the day. Is measured by what you've done.

Or what you've achieved. And as a result of this. Chronic. Self-sufficiency. Has it led us on. To a place.

[15:24] Of glory. Friends. I don't know about you. But I look at us sometimes. And I think we're drowning. We're plagued by anxiety.

And fear. And shame. And yet. And yet if we live out.

Of who we are. In Christ. There's a total different reality at work. It's been said that Martin Luther. When he met a friend.

On the street. Sort of coming up to a friend. Would say. Brother. Do I find you praying? You see. Luther knew that a person.

In Christ. Is a person. Who has within them. The capacity. For intimacy. And dependency. On God. Why?

[16:19] Why is our sort of. Identity in Christ. That way. Friends. One reason is that in Christ. We know. That we are saved.

Not in our own strength. And not in our own performance. But by his grace. Right? You see. The very start. Of a Christian life. Is the acknowledgement.

That we must. Depend on another. And when we come to depend. On Christ. For our righteousness. And our life. And our salvation. When it all begins.

With that moment. Of abandon. To our self-sufficiency. And our dependence. On another. What do we find? We find that we're ushered. Into an intimacy.

With God. Like nothing. We had ever imagined. That his spirit. Comes to dwell. Within us. And we begin. To call God. Nothing less.

[17:16] Than our father. And an unceasing. Union. Is forged. Brother. Do I find you praying.

And you know. New desires. Begin to grow. In our hearts. Don't they? Before really. Coming to know Christ. And depend. Solely. On his grace. Didn't our prayers.

Mostly take flight. Only when circumstances. Were bad. When we needed things. When things. Weren't going our way. Because you know. Before Christ.

Our highest desires. Were mostly. For our own comfort. And control. But you see. Now that we're in Christ. There's a growing hunger. For God's kingdom.

And God's glory. And that hunger. Is not connected. To our material circumstances. Whether things are going well for us. Or things are going. Not so well for us.

[18:13] We still long. For the kingdom to come. And God's will to be done. On earth. As it is in heaven. And in fact.

We know that when times are good. We are most in danger. Of losing sight. Of God's kingdom. So in the good times. We start praying. All the more. Because we know.

That prosperity. Is much of a dangerous adversity. So Christian. Are you not just rejoicing. In Christ. But are you praying. In Christ. Earnestly.

Fervently. Consistently. Praying. Is your heart engaged. In the things of God. Are you taking advantage. Most of all. Of the intimacy. With the father. That Christ. Has purchased for you.

God's will is that we live. Not just a joyful life. But a prayerful life. A life liberated. From our self. Sufficiency. And into Christ's.

[19:12] Sufficiency. Faith. But third and finally. God wants us to be. The kind of people. God's will for us. In Christ Jesus. Is that we become. The kind of people.

Who give thanks. In all circumstances. This is maybe. The hardest one. Isn't it? Often. It seems like. The default mode. Of the human heart. Is to complain. To complain. About what I have. Or what I've experienced. And to covet. Something else. You see.

We humans. Aren't just cynical. And self-reliant. But underneath. Isn't there annoying.

Dissatisfaction. So we complain. And we covet. But in doing so.

And even if we happen to get. What we want. The dissatisfaction. Only grows. And grows. It's kind of like.

[20:06] A sickness. Where the more you drink. The thirstier you become. Amen. But don't you see. What Paul is not so subtly. Hinting at here. When he says. Give thanks.

In all circumstances. That there is a life. Made available for us. In Christ. That is not bound. And determined. By the tyranny.

Of our circumstances. And by the gnawing. Dissatisfaction. That we feel. That there is the possibility. Of a life. Of thankfulness.

Thankfulness. Whether you land. That amazing job. Or not. Thankfulness. Whether you impress. All your friends. Or not. And whether you change. The world. Upon your graduation. Or not.

Or whether you live up. To your own expectations. Or not. Because there is one. Who came. And said. If anyone drinks the water.

[ 21 : 02 ] That I give them. He or she. Will never. Thirst. Again. That there will be a deep. And lasting.

Satisfaction. That comes from Christ. That actually frees you. From being determined. By the tyranny. Of your circumstances. And the downward spiral.

Of complaining. And coveting. A satisfaction. That is so rich. That we can give thanks. In all. Circumstances. You know. There are only two.

Life philosophies. That I know of. That seek to free you. From this sort of. Enslavement. To our circumstances. And they do it. In utterly different ways. The one says.

Accept your fate. And don't get too. Attached to life. And if things go south. Well. Realize. That's just how the world works. Matter decays. Things die.

[ 21 : 56 ] Companies close. Relationships end. Don't try to control. What you can't. Control. And to be honest. I actually kind of respect. That approach. Because acknowledges.

That we aren't the center. Of the universe. And we can't just. Pull ourselves up. By our bootstraps. And save ourselves. For the universe. But you see. The end result.

Of that approach. To life. Isn't joy. Or thanksgiving. Is it? It's rather. A kind of detachment. A kind of. Shutting down. Of critical parts.

Of our humanity. A shutting down. Of our. Selves. That were built. For joy. And for thanksgiving. Sure.

It saves us. From the tyranny. Of our circumstances. That kind of approach. To life. But it does so. At too great. Of a cost. But here's. What Christianity says.

[ 22 : 55 ] It says. That God. Has begun. A new creation. In the midst. Of the old. And that this new creation. Will one day. Swallow up. This old order.

Of death. And decay. And despair. And that even now. In Christ Jesus. You can become a part. Of that new creation. That you can have your sins. Forgiven.

And your heart. Renewed. And your future. Secure. And you can know. That your outer circumstances. And your inward. Failures. Aren't the last.

Word. And they're not. The defining. Word. On your life. And what's more. Christianity says. That this God. Of new creation. Who is able.

To bring about. Through a cruel. Roman cross. Reconciliation. And resurrection. That the God. Who can do that. Is able to take.

[ 23 : 50 ] All things. And work them together. For the good. Of those who love him. You see friends. The circumstances.

Of your life. Aren't mere accidents. Or misfortunes. But the places. Where God's healing. Grace. Can work. A new creation.

And transform you. More and more. Into the image of Christ. And what is the cost. Of this rescue. From the tyranny. Of our circumstances. Is it a shutting down. Of our humanity. What cost is there.

To get this. Is it a shutting down. Is it a shutting down.

Well friends. The cost. Isn't ours. The cost was his. When Christ. Went down. Into the depths. Of our brokenness. And bore the sting.

[ 24 : 43 ] Of our sin. So that he might. Carry us through. To newness of life. Christian. This morning. Be thankful. Be thankful.

Realize. That the cross. Has not only brought. Meaning to your circumstances. But it's given you. Cause for thankfulness. In the midst of them. See that Christ. Has set you free. From the coveting.

And the complaining. And given his own self. To you. As water. For your thirsty soul. You know. I've been amazed this week. As I've been studying.

The theme of thanksgiving. How often. Thanksgiving comes up. In relationship. To our holiness. As we take off. Our old self. And as we're called. To put on the new self.

In Christ. One of the defining marks. Of this new self. Is gratitude. Is thanksgiving. Friends. Just as an aside.

[ 25 : 42 ] I wonder how many. Of our struggles. With sin. Like lust. And bitterness. And fear. And pride. How many of these struggles.

Would be increasingly. Overcome. If we were to cultivate. A heart. And life. Of thankfulness. To God. After all. Would we hold on.

