

August 1, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Rejoice Always, Pray Without Ceasing, Give Thanks in All Circumstances

1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

One of the benchmarks by which we can accurately measure spiritual growth is how we respond to the clear commands of the word of God. This morning we come to one of those benchmark moments. In these three verses, God, through Paul, gives us three clear, unambiguous commands: *16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18 Do you want to know the will of God for you? **Rejoice always, pray unceasingly, give thanks in all circumstances.** That is the will of God for you. I am tempted to just leave the command resting there on your hearts and minds and let you wrestle through all the implications of it. What does it mean to always rejoice? Doesn't God know there are depressing and tragic circumstances in my life where rejoicing seems to be not only out of place but out of reach? How am I supposed to pray continuously? Doesn't He know I have a job, a family, things to do? I can't be on my knees 24-7. How am I supposed to give thanks in every circumstance in my life? How do I thank Him when I lose my job, or my husband gets cancer, or the house burns down? In short, how do I obey seemingly impossible commands?

I won't let the command just rest there this morning for two reasons: one is that I wouldn't be faithful to the call on my life as a good steward of the grace of God to you if I did that. And secondly, I am wrestling through these commands myself, and I want you to join me because there is strength in numbers. The first thing we need to understand about **all the commands of God is that they carry with them the power to obey.** That is, with the command to do, or not to do, comes the grace to do, or not to do it. The place we need to start is '**O God help me!**' Like the father whose child was possessed and he came to Jesus for healing. And Jesus asked him if he believed. And the man said, 'I believe – help my unbelief!' It does no good to come at this with the thought and attitude that this is impossible. The only way to approach the clear commands of Scripture is with a humble and contrite spirit that says, '**With men this is impossible but with God all things are possible!**' Every command of Scripture is a command toward holiness that can only be fulfilled by God Himself. Listen, if we could do this thing – we wouldn't need God. We are not supposed to conjure up joy and prayer and thanksgiving out of the goodness of our souls. We are meant to rely on God to do in us what we could never do – that is grace.

So the command comes – '**Rejoice always!**' By the way, I looked up the word '**always!**' in the Greek lexicon to see if I could find a loophole – there isn't one. It means 'always, at all times, evermore'. That is fairly conclusive. Which implies that if there is a time that I am not rejoicing, I am disobedient to the command – which means that I am sinning. And equally that implies that there are no circumstances in which a believer's joy should be diminished. You can hear echos of this in Paul's letter to the Romans: *Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:33-39

Can you not hear rejoicing? Paul fairly seems to be dancing as he recounts all the ways in which God is sovereign over his circumstances. Joy seems to bubble out of him in this passage. It reminds me of Richard Wormbrand's testimony in prison. Although his captors smashed four of his vertebrae and either cut or burned 18 holes in his body, they could not take away his joy. He testified, **"Alone in my cell, cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night."** **We must conclude that there no circumstances in which a believer's joy should be diminished.** So how do we live so as to rejoice always? What does it look like to pray unceasingly? How can we give thanks in everything? Well, this morning let's start with joy – **rejoice always.**

You probably know this is not an isolated command. In fact we find this all through the Bible. *'... You shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all your undertakings.'* Deuteronomy 12:18 **'Shall' does not imply an option.** Paul says it like this in Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always ; again I will say, rejoice !* Philippians 4:4 He gives the command: **'Rejoice always'** and then it is almost as if he anticipates someone saying, 'But, but, but...' – so he follows that up with **'Again, I will say, rejoice!'** However I can hear some of you Bible scholars muttering under your breath; 'What about Romans 12: *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep?* Romans 12:15 Isn't there a time for rejoicing and for weeping?

And the answer is clearly yes – however that does not negate the command to rejoice always. You cannot have one command of God negating another. Now if the Bible also said, **'Weep always'** we would have a problem. But it doesn't. It says **'Rejoice always'** which means that even in our weeping we are to rejoice. Do we have a Scriptural foundation for that? Absolutely. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians: *'...as sorrowful yet always rejoicing...'* 2 Corinthians 6:10 **Our sorrows do not preclude the responsibility to rejoice.** No matter what is going on – rejoice. Jesus tells His followers in Matthew 5: *Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad...'* Matthew 5:11-12 In Luke we find similar language: *'Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy...'* Luke 6:22-23 The greater the persecution – the higher you jump. James tells his readers: *'Count it all joy my brethren when you encounter various trials...'* James 1 No doubt persecution and insults and evil and trials are sorrowful – but the command is to rejoice. Harsh conditions, unsettling circumstances, soul-wrenching tragedy, heart-numbing pain never negate the command to rejoice in all things.

I know what your're thinking at this point – this is impossible! This is unrealistic! This is not natural! And you are right. In part. It is not natural – it is supernatural. It is not impossible because with God all things are possible. However, it is only unrealistic if you are counting on yourself to conjure up the joy. The joy by the way which Scripture says is to be **abundant, exceeding, unspeakable and full of glory.** So how does this happen? How do we live in this space called **'Always rejoicing'**? I want to give you seven reasons to obey the command to rejoice always – and then point out seven joy killers. And obviously I want to encourage you with the first seven and warn you against the second seven.

How to rejoice always

In obedience to God's will. As we said earlier, all of God's commands contain the means to carry them out. If you just look at the command, and conclude it is impossible, you will never experience the power of God to rejoice always. **We must engage our will to do what His will has decreed.** When that happens, the power of the Holy Spirit flows through the command into our souls to do supernaturally what we could not do naturally.

In acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. Real joy, real rejoicing flows from the rock-solid confidence that God is in control. It is not an emotional high – although our emotions are certainly engaged. It is a persistent emotion of joy that perseveres even through adverse conditions. It is a feeling based on a fact. It is an emotional response to what I know to be true about my God. It is an unshakeable confidence that God is supreme and sovereign over all suffering, all affliction, all calamity, all evil – just as He is sovereign over all that is good and right and lovely. It is knowing beyond a shadow of doubt that He ordains days of prosperity as well as days of adversity. And that He has ordained every good thing and every bad thing that comes our way for our good and His glory. *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* Romans 8:28 It is the absolute sovereignty of a loving and gracious God that puts backbone in our faith when we are pressured or crushed or squeezed by adverse circumstances and is the fountainhead of the river of rejoicing.

In recognition of God's character. The character of God is the guarantee that He will do what is best for us – always, without exception. That He is for us and not against us – that He regards us as the apple of His eye. Paul told Timothy: *if we are faithless, He remains faithful--for He cannot deny Himself.* 2 Timothy 2:13 In other words, faithfulness is who He is. And if that is who He is, we can not only trust Him, but rejoice in Him. *The LORD is my strength and my shield; in Him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to Him.* Psalm 28:7 We trust in God and not in fickle fate or circumstances that may or may not turn out well. We can rejoice because His character is faithfulness – we can rejoice because He is gracious and compassionate. The ground of our joy is rooted in who God is. If your joy is rooted in how things go for you – there won't be much rejoicing. But if your joy is found in God, there is an eternity of rejoicing.

In appreciation of His grace. When the realization of what God in Christ has done for you – when you realize how richly you deserve not heaven, but hell, you cannot help but rejoice. Jesus told His disciples, who had returned from their mission trip all joyful and full of themselves because they had been casting out demons: *Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*" Luke 10:20 Apparently the power of God through the Holy Spirit to cast out demons is not sufficient grounds for rejoicing – but having your name written in heaven is. Paul wrote to the Romans: *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.* Romans 5:10-11

In affirmation of His blessings. Paul tells us in Ephesians: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.* Ephesians 1:3-4 Is that not cause to rejoice? Meditate on the fact that God has chosen you. Rejoice in the truth that you have become a partaker of the divine nature. Savor the fact that God will supply all you needs according to His riches in Christ. There is no end to the continual flow of God's gracious blessing to you and that is reason to rejoice.

In response to answered prayer. The more we pray the more cause we will have for rejoicing. Of course if you don't pray that much, you won't have much reason to rejoice. Those who seek the Lord will find Him and find joy. *I sought the LORD, and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to Him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.* Psalm 34:4-6 We have reason to rejoice because we have a God who hears our prayers. *For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon Him?* Deuteronomy 4:7

In hope of future glory. Our hope is anchored in heaven – not earth. If you anchor your hope on earth, when it passes away, so does your hope, and so does your reason to rejoice. Everything about earth is temporary and finite – everything about heaven is eternal. It is this hope that the saints of old looked to for joy when things were bad down here. *But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.* Hebrews 10:32-34 Hard to be joyful about someone taking your stuff away if your hope is wrapped up in it. Jesus told His disciples: *Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great...* Matthew 5:11-12 **The hope we have in heaven and future glory is reason to rejoice always.**

There are many more reasons to rejoice always – we've just covered seven. But these seven are enough to fill your joy –ometer so that you find yourself rejoicing always. But I want to point out seven joy killers so that when you find that you cannot rejoice, you can diagnose the problem and get to rejoicing.

Joy Killers

False hope. First of all there is the problem of false hope. It is possible to think that you are a Christian without really being one, and therefore any joy you have is based on your circumstances and not in God. In the parable of the sower and the seed in the gospels there was the seed sown in the rocky soil – it didn't have any depth. And it says these rocky soil people received the word with joy but it was short-lived. The first little bit of trial or hardship or tough times and the joy was gone. That means there was no eternal work of God in their lives and they were never really converted. Unconverted people can never experience rejoicing always because that is a supernatural work and they don't have the Holy Spirit in them to do it. Supernatural joy only comes from the Spirit of God who indwells the believer. False hope, false salvation can't produce real joy.

The enemy of our souls. Satan is a real joy stealer. He can't have joy and he doesn't want anyone else to have it either. He will tempt you in your troubles to look at the situation instead of looking at God. He will try and convince you that it is all your fault that things are difficult. He will seduce you with the temporary delights of sin to forfeit your joy.

Unbelief. All sin reflects our failure to love God and trust Him and believe Him. If you do not believe in the promises of God, you cannot rejoice always. Real joy springs from the well of trusting God. We trust Him to be enough. We trust that delighting ourselves in Him is more fulfilling and satisfying than the fleeting pleasure and momentary satisfaction of sin. We trust that He is enough, even if we should lose houses, or cars or friends or loved ones. We trust that nothing is too hard for Him – nothing is beyond His power to control – no one is beyond the reach of His grace – He is not surprised by anything, rather He ordains all things for His own glory and purposes – and His purpose will be accomplished. And that is cause for rejoicing.

Ingratitude. This is the attitude of the soul that never has enough. Ungrateful people are joyless people. They always demand more, expect more, want more; and whatever the Lord gives them – it's never good enough. This person has the tendency to think that all the good they have they deserve, and they never deserve any hardship or trial or suffering. They look at life from the standpoint of fairness and often think that God is not being fair when He withholds something from them. God gives them a house, and it's not the right one - it's not fancy enough, or big enough or in the right neighborhood. They have cars but they are never good enough and next year's model always looks better. God gives them a wife or a husband and eventually they come to believe that He gave them the wrong one. No matter what God gives them it is never enough or never good enough. It is a life lived in discontent and joylessness.

False expectations. This springs from the poisoned well of bad theology. It is an ignorance born of deceptive teaching and wrong thinking about who God is. That is why I hate the prosperity gospel. It is a gospel rooted in materialism and greed. In fact I hate to use the term 'gospel' to talk about this kind of demonic doctrine because it is not good news but rather more like a death sentence for those who embrace it. Consider that it calls you to love money and things rather than God. Consider that it promises not more of God, but better health and more wealth for those who really believe. Consider that it tells you that if there is anything bad in your life that it is either your fault or the work of the devil, because God would never allow his children to suffer. Consider that it makes stuff look valuable instead of making Jesus the supreme value. It promises things it will never deliver and eventually makes shipwreck of your faith. It does not produce joy but rather sorrow. The stuff of joy is found in passages like John 16: *These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage ; I have overcome the world.* John 16:33 The real gospel points to Jesus as the focal point of our joy.

Self-centeredness. Self-centeredness is a joy killer. I do not know of one self-absorbed, self-centered person who is joyful. That almost goes without saying because if you really give yourself an honest appraisal, what's to rejoice in? The message of this age has been one of focusing on yourself. 'Have it your way' is a way of life for most people. Abuse therapy and victimization counseling has turned people inward to 'get in touch with themselves' and find out what makes them happy. The problems they have always come from someone else and they are always blaming others. 'Listen to your inner self' they hear from their therapists, and what they hear is the wicked deception of the human heart. Healthy people don't listen to themselves – healthy people talk to themselves. 'Self, stop your whining and listen to the word of God – rejoice always, pray unceasingly, in everything give thanks'.

Prayerlessness. Finally, prayerless people are joyless people. These people trust in themselves and apparently don't need God. And if you trust in yourself, be prepared to be disappointed. If you trust in yourself, be sure yourself will fail, and when you fail, there is no reason to rejoice. Paul told the Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always ; again I will say, rejoice ! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Philippians 4:4-7 There is a peace of mind that comes only through laying it all on Jesus in prayer that produces joy.

Our source of joy is God Himself, and when we realize we are joyless, what we need is some time for prayer. The sweet Psalmist of Israel knew this. As you read David's prayers, they always seem to start out in the depths of despair, but they end up in rejoicing: *As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"* Psalm 42 1-3 It is tears and thirsting and longing for God to show Himself strong in the beginning, but by the end we read: *Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God.* Psalm 42 11

The command, '**Rejoice always**', does not depend upon our feelings, our circumstances, or our frame of mind. We cannot obey the word of God by checking to see if we feel like it, or the circumstances warrant it. Job was in a hopeless situation. He had lost nearly everything dear to him, his body was wracked with pain and sickness, his friends accused him of sin he didn't commit, and his wife said that the best thing for him to do was to curse God and die. But Job's response was shot through with joy: '*Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.*' Job 13:15 *For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints [yearns] within me!* Job 19:25-27

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give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18*

Our gracious God and loving Father,

We confess that we have not obeyed Your command to 'Rejoice always' because we have looked to our circumstances and feelings rather than to Your grace. Forgive us and cleanse us and empower us to do what You have said we must. Grant us to see beyond our weakness to Your glorious might. Fill us with the hope and joy and expectation that You have the power to put Your hand upon us and grant us the will to do what You have commanded. Let our joy flow from the acknowledgment of Your sovereignty over all things, in recognition of Your character, in appreciation of Your marvelous grace, in affirmation of the many blessings You have already bestowed, in response to answered prayer, and in the hope of future glory. May we be known as a people who delight themselves in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all nations, we pray, in the powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.