

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

Our text for today is □ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22. This text continues the theme of readiness for the Lord’s coming, but the focus shifts.

In the immediately preceding context, Paul spoke of readiness reflected in our responses to difficult people in the church.

Now, in our text for today, Paul speaks of readiness reflected in our relationship with the Lord himself. In a few short verses, Paul packs powerful wisdom that can revolutionize our relationship with God and our outlook on life.

This text would be on my short list of the most important scriptures to understand and apply as believers in Jesus. Personally, I am very grateful to have revisited this passage in preparation for this sermon because I sorely needed it. And I learned something I never realized before. More on that later.

In □ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Paul fires off three commands in a single salvo, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

I think these three directives come as a package. It’s kind of like the gift set of cologne, lotion, and soap. They’re different, but they share the same fragrance. The fragrance is an attitude—an attitude toward God

and the life he has given us. It is a Godward attitude characterized by rejoicing and praying and thanksgiving.

But these commands are daunting.

The first command is to □ “rejoice always.” To rejoice means to be glad or to be delighted. At first blush, this may seem unhelpful and even irritating, particularly if you are mired in hardship. It can seem unhelpful because it sounds like we’re being asked to conjure up some cheery emotions that are impossible to produce. And it can be irritating because this is the kind of platitude often heard from unsympathetic, immature people who haven’t suffered greatly.

But let’s think about this.

This is a command to rejoice from God through Paul. And so, rejoicing must not be an emotion over which we have no control. The reason is simple: God does not command us to do what we cannot do. So, somehow, we must be able to choose to rejoice, regardless of our circumstances. To rejoice is not a command to feel; it’s a command to think and do.

And the command to rejoice is coming through Paul—a man whose earthly circumstances seemed to afford little to rejoice about. He was definitely not one of those clueless, unsympathetic people who hadn’t suffered greatly himself. A biblical biography of Paul reveals it.

- Paul was a man who knows what it’s like to be poor, to be hungry, and to suffer need (Php 4:12).
- Paul had a chronic ailment, and when he repeatedly pleaded with God to heal him of it, God said, “no.” (2Cor 12:7-9)

- Paul confesses to personal weakness, fear, and trembling (1Cor 2:3).
- Paul was not always happy. At times he says he felt discouraged and depressed and even hopeless (2 Cor 1:8).
- Paul was not entirely popular. Some professing believers found Paul to be an unimpressive speaker who preached worthless sermons (2 Cor 10:10). And history also tells us that Paul was martyred.
- Paul was not particularly attractive. One ancient historian named Onesiphoros describes Paul as, “A man rather small in size, bald-headed, bow-legged, with meeting eyebrows, [and] a large, red and somewhat hooked nose.”
- Paul was indeed well-educated and smart, but he was shunned by the religious establishment that educated him. And Paul contends that his smarts didn’t make him any better off (1 Cor 1:20).
- Paul was single in a culture where singleness was not cool. And he was not just single; he was celibate, which he describes as good (1 Cor 7:8).
- Paul did not always enjoy freedom but spent considerable time in prison.
- And Paul admitted to worrying. He worried about things going on in all the churches of his day, including the church in Thessalonica (2 Cor 11:28).

- Paul’s life was not easy or comfortable. He describes his own life as being full of physical torture, imprisonment, threats, weariness, toil, sleeplessness, hunger, and stress (2 Cor 11:22-28). And he writes to the Thessalonians after being run out of town.

And so, we can’t really say that Paul is just telling the Thessalonians to rejoice because he’s naive and his life hadn’t been hard enough yet to smash his rose-colored glasses.

Nor can we say that the circumstances faced by the Thessalonians are so rosy that they should feel fortunate. Remember, their lives were hard. They were being persecuted. Friends and loved ones were dying.

And yet, Paul says rejoice.

And notice how often we are to rejoice. Always. I looked it up. Always means always. Even when life seems miserable.

How do you do that?

The second command is also daunting: □ “pray without ceasing.” The phrase “without ceasing” is a translation of a single original Greek word that means constantly, unceasingly, continuously, without stopping.<sup>1</sup>

But this is not to be taken in a painfully literal sense. To pray without ceasing is not to be on our knees every single moment of every single day. That is not doable.

In ancient extrabiblical literature, the word is used to describe a hacking cough.<sup>2</sup> On Thursday, I was with my mom, and she complained of

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<sup>1</sup> BDAG, Friberg.

<sup>2</sup> Ryrie Study Bible.

coughing constantly. When I commented, perhaps insensitively, that she had not coughed once in the hour I had been with her, she said it comes and goes, but happens often.

Paul has already used the same word twice before in this letter to describe the frequency with which he gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians. He does so regularly, often, repeatedly, over and over again.

Such prayer springs from a constant Godward attitude—a constant receptivity to the Holy Spirit—a continuously open line of communication.

This, too, is a very high bar. Who of us can say we pray without ceasing? And even if we did pray without ceasing, what would we pray about? What should be the focus of our prayers?

The third command is no easier: □ “give thanks in all circumstances.”

- In hardship.
- In loss.
- In grief.
- In depression.
- In illness.
- In anxiety.
- In conflict.
- In bankruptcy.
- In pain.
- In loneliness.
- In hunger.
- In **all** circumstances, keep giving thanks.

Really? How do you do that?

□ Three commands in three verses that seem like unattainable ideals. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

And yet, Paul removes any doubt about the importance of doing these things in readiness for the Lord's coming, saying, □ "for this is the will of God . . . for you." Clearly, this is what God wants us to do. As believers, our readiness for the Lord is characterized by an attitude of joy, prayer, and gratitude.

Isn't this what any parent wants for their child? To be joyful and not whiny. To be in close communication and not disconnected. To be grateful and not spoiled.

What kind of attitude do you have toward God right now?

One key phrase that is easy to overlook is □ "in Christ Jesus." We can read right past it and have only a vague sense of what it means and no clue about its relevance to the train of thought. But it is important.

In some cases, Paul uses expressions like this, including "in Christ" and "in him," to convey our enduring position in Christ as believers. It relates to who we are and whose we are—things which do not change. Being in Christ is our source of identity and security.

In other cases, Paul uses the "in Christ" idea to describe the closeness of our ongoing relationship with Jesus. And this can change. It is variable. It is a source of motivation.

For example, Paul says in □ Colossians 2:6,

ESV Colossians 2:6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,

To “walk in him” means to live in close communion with Jesus. And this closeness is not guaranteed. As believers, we can choose to walk in him or apart from him. The idea of walking in Christ is also expressed by such scriptural phrases as walking by the Spirit and abiding in Christ. The opposite is described as walking in darkness or walking in the flesh or not abiding in Christ.

Jesus himself also used the phrase “in me” to describe an abiding intimacy. For example, in □ John 15:4, Jesus urges his followers to stay close to him, saying,

ESV John 15:4 “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.”

According to Jesus, the key to fruitfulness is abiding in him. If we do not abide in him, we cannot bear fruit.

With that in mind, let’s look back again at 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. I think Paul is saying it is the will of God that, as we abide *in Christ Jesus*, we should rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances.

The key here is abiding in Jesus. Apart from abiding, we are not going to be able to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. These things are the fruit of abiding. Indeed, elsewhere Paul describes joy as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

But how are we to abide in Christ?

In the very next verse, □ verse 19, Paul says,

## ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:19 Do not quench the Spirit.

For years when I read this, I thought Paul was changing the subject. I did not fully realize until preparing for this sermon that he is not changing the subject at all. He is actually explaining how we abide in Christ—how we stay close to him as the basis for cultivating a Christlike attitude.

You see to quench the Spirit is the opposite of walking by the Spirit. To quench the Spirit is the opposite of abiding in Christ. If we want to cultivate an attitude of joy, prayer, and gratitude, we should not quench the Spirit.

The word □ “quench” is a translation of an original Greek word that means to extinguish, as in putting out a fire.<sup>3</sup>

This makes sense because, elsewhere in Scripture, the Holy Spirit is referred to as a □ fire. For example, in Acts 2:3, we are told that the Holy Spirit descended on believers like tongues of fire. Also, in Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist says of Jesus, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

So, how do you quench the Spirit?

We can quench the Spirit in much the same way we can quench any fire: by depriving it of fuel. For example, we can put out a campfire by depriving it of the wood it needs to burn. With a gas stove or grill, we can extinguish the flame by simply turning off the supply of gas.

No fuel, no fire.

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<sup>3</sup> Friberg.



This raises another question. What is Holy Spirit's fuel? How can we deprive the Spirit of the fuel he needs to work in us?

Paul begins to explain it in □ verse 20, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:20 Do not despise prophecies,

What is he talking about? To what □ prophecies is he referring?

It is important to remember the historical context in which this was written. The people in the ancient Thessalonian church didn't have the complete Bible as we have it today. They had the Old Testament which had been written and assembled many years before, but the New Testament was in the process of being written. In fact, the letter of 1 Thessalonians was probably only the second biblical letter the apostle Paul had written after his letter to the Galatians. Still to be written and circulated among churches were other letters that would become a part of the Bible. These biblical letters were prophecies in the sense that they were written by men sometimes referred to as prophets who were inspired by God to write what God wants us to know.

Now, when you think of prophecies, you might think of foretelling the future. Prophecy can certainly include such foretelling, but it is not limited to that. Prophecy can also mean forthtelling, which is simply telling forth what God wants us to know or do—giving us instructions from God.

All this is important because in the early church, God, spoke through prophets such as the apostles Paul and Peter to say things the church needed to hear, and to record what we now have as the New Testament.

Second □ Peter 1:20-21 provides some insight into how this worked. It says,

ESV 2 Peter 1:20 . . . no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

This is saying that no part or prophecy of the Bible is just some guy's idea, but God superintended men through his Holy Spirit to write exactly what God wants us to know. The orders are from God, not man.

This also shows that, in some cases, the term “prophecy” or “prophecies” is the functional equivalent of the word of God. And back in 1 Thessalonians 5:20, that is how I believe Paul is using the term when he says, “Do not despise prophecies.”

Paul is saying do not despise the word of God conveyed to you. And the reason he is saying this is that the word of God fuels the fire of the Spirit within us. The word of God is the fuel. Thus, the way we avoid quenching the Spirit is by not despising the word of God. When we despise the word of God, we quench the Spirit.

You may be thinking, “Well, I certainly don't despise the word of God. I hold it in high regard.”

Well, let's think about this.

The word, □ “despise” is a translation of the Greek word, ἐξουθενέω (*exuthenéo*). It describes treating something as of no account.<sup>4</sup> It is to deal with something as if it were of little use or importance. The

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<sup>4</sup> Friberg.

emphasis is not so much on what we think about something but on how we treat something. In our context, a close synonym for “despise” would be “neglect.”

Sometimes I neglect things that I think are important. Ask my wife. I can say, “I hold the Bible in high regard.” But if I never read it and apply it, isn’t that treating it as if it were of little use or importance to me?

Paul is urging the Thessalonians and us not to neglect the word of God because it fuels the fire of the Spirit within us. The combination of the word of God and the Spirit provides the power for us to have a Christlike attitude of joy, prayer, and gratitude.

The late Dr. Earl Radmacher, one of my mentors in seminary writes this:

“The Spirit of God does not work apart from the Word of God . . . as I reflect deeply on the Word of God and take it in, that becomes the raw material the Spirit of God uses to form Jesus Christ in me.”<sup>5</sup>

When Radmacher says “the Word of God . . . becomes the raw material the Spirit of God uses,” it’s just another way of saying what Paul is saying in our text; namely, that the word of God becomes the fuel that fires up the Spirit.

If I do not reflect deeply and take in the word of God with regularity, I deprive the Spirit of the fuel he needs work in me. I thereby quench the Spirit.

The big idea I draw is this: ☐ Fuel the fire.

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<sup>5</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, *What to Expect from the Holy Spirit*, 57-58.

The Scriptures are the fuel, the Spirit is the fire. For the fire to do his refining work in us, we need to be continually stoked with the word of God. We need to fuel the fire.

But we need to be discerning about the fuel. The Holy Spirit runs on the word of God, not anything else. Not worldly wisdom. Not pop psychology. Not politics. Not religious tradition. Not “my truth” or “your truth.”

And not everything that is being preached as a Christian word from the Lord is actually biblical. That’s why Paul warns in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 and 22,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:21 but test everything; hold fast what is good.  
22 Abstain from every form of evil.

My car runs on gasoline. If I put anything else in the tank, it won’t go. So, I need to be careful about what I put in the tank. I need to test everything. I need to examine the nozzles. The ones that dispense gasoline are good. The one that dispenses diesel is a form of evil from which I need to abstain. And so is the water nozzle.

“Evil” in this context is not limited to things heinously immoral. It also includes things that are simply useless, unprofitable, or unserviceable.<sup>6</sup> Diesel is not inherently bad. Neither is water. In fact, both have their positive purposes. But for my car, they are unserviceable. Putting diesel or water in my gas tank is a form of uselessness. It will quench the motor.

As Christians, we have a propensity to fill up on all kinds of things that we think will make us happy, joyful, and grateful. We fill up on material

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<sup>6</sup> Friberg.

possessions. We fill up on power. We fill up on popularity. We fill up on pleasure. We fill up on performance. We fill up on perfunctory pieties.

All the while, we despise prophecies. We neglect the word of God. And we wonder: Why am I not rejoicing?

It is God's will for us to rejoice always. But we are to do so "in Christ Jesus." Such closeness requires the work of the Spirit within us fueled by the word of God. It is the word of God applied by the Holy Spirit that gives us what we need to continually rejoice, pray, and give thanks.

Which brings us back to the big idea: ☐ Fuel the fire.

How does work?

Let me share briefly how it worked for me just last week.

On Monday morning, as part of my daily devotional time, I read ☐ 2 Corinthians 4:1. It says,

ESV 2 Corinthians 4:1 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

As I reflected on the idea that it is by God's initiative and mercy, not mine, that I have this ministry of representing him, I wrote down this principle: ☐ It is God who chose and equipped me for ministry, I need not be discouraged by my limitations.

This is a needful word to me from my loving Father. I am constantly bumping up against my limitations. Too often I am discouraged by them because I see them as my deficiencies instead of God's design.

I rejoiced in this truth about God choosing me and designing me.

I prayed that my mind would be renewed by it.  
I gave thanks to God for choosing me and designing me the way I am.  
And that is the good to which I held fast that day.

On Tuesday morning, I read  Psalm 79:13. It says,

ESV Psalm 79:13 But we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.

As I reflected on this, I wrote down this principle:  Give thanks, recount his praise.

Further in my reading that morning, I noted  2 Corinthians 4:16 as presenting a specific reason to recount his praise. It says,

ESV 2 Corinthians 4:16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

I rejoiced in this truth about my inner renewal.  
I prayed for God's help in yielding to the Spirit's work of renewal in me.  
I gave thanks to God for his loving restoration.  
And that is the good to which I held fast that day.

On Wednesday morning, I read  2 Corinthians 5:17. There Paul says,

ESV 2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

As I reflected on this verse, I wrote down this principle:  I am a new creation.

I rejoiced in this truth about being a new creation in Christ.

I prayed for help in putting off the old me and putting on the new.  
I gave thanks to God for the new life I have in Jesus.  
And that is the good to which I held fast that day.

On Thursday, I read □ John 4:49-50, where an official seeks Jesus to heal his child who is deathly ill.

ESV John 4:49 The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” 50 Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.

As I reflected on the example of the official in this passage, I wrote down this principle: □ Seek the Lord, receive his word, go on your way believing.

I recognized this model of the official as an affirmation of the message from our text for today. It was as if the Lord was saying to me in that moment, “This is good. You’re on the right track.”

I rejoiced in this truth about the healing power of God’s word and God’s encouragement to me about my sermon.

I prayed for help in seeking the Lord and receiving his word in faith.  
I gave thanks to God for the power of his word available to me.  
And that is the good to which I held fast that day.

On Friday, I read □ 1 Kings 8:56 which describes Solomon’s dedication of the temple. Solomon says,

ESV 1 Kings 8:56 “Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke by Moses his servant.”

As I reflected on this verse, I wrote down this principle: ☐ God is faithful to keep his promises. Inasmuch as I was then within sight of finishing my sermon, which did not seem possible earlier in the week . . .

I rejoiced in this truth of God's faithfulness to me.  
I prayed, praising God for his loyal love for me.  
I gave thanks to God that not one of his words to me has ever failed.  
And that is the good to which I held fast that day.

In all this, I did not float through the week on a blissful, carefree cloud. Life is hard. Stress is high. On Wednesday night, I shared my burdens with the elders, who compassionately bore them. I am no different than the Thessalonians or Paul who faced their own hardships and weaknesses. I struggle.

All the more reason for me and you to heed the big idea from our text:  
☐ Fuel the fire.

Let's pray. Lord, we want to fuel the fire of the Spirit in us by reflecting deeply on your word to us in Scripture. Transform us that we may rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. Amen.