**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

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**Three Commands For The Heart**

***16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.***

* In my last message we began to examine this passage of instruction from Paul to the Thessalonian church by exploring Paul’s first command, in v. 16 . . . ***rejoice always***.
* Last week I explained how the three commands in this passage . . . ***rejoice, pray and give thanks*** are given in **absolute** terms . . . ***rejoice always***, ***pray without ceasing***, and ***in everything give thanks***.
	+ Paul’s point is that these are not commands for momentary action or for brief periods of time. By his use of these absolute terms of time and inclusiveness, Paul’s point is that these commands **should be the habitual and continual practice of the Christian life**.

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**The Second Command**

***1 Thessalonians 5:17— pray without ceasing***

* This week I want to pick up where I left off last week, with the second of the three commands . . . ***pray without ceasing***.
* Now, I know exactly what all of you are all thinking . . . **how is it possible to pray continually . . . without stopping**.
	+ Well, I’m happy to report to you that this is not what Paul is teaching here. **When Paul commands that we *pray without ceasing***, **he is not speaking of duration**. In other words, Paul is not saying that we should pray **non-stop**.
	+ Paul is not instructing us regarding the **length** of our prayers, but **the attitude of our prayers**. He is instructing us that **when we pray, that we approach God with a reverential attitude.**
	+ And, furthermore, with his use of this command to ***pray without ceasing***, Paul is instructing us to **pray in all circumstances.**
	+ As D. Edmond Hiebert puts it, **“the act of prayer is intermittent, but the spirit of prayer should be incessant.”**
	+ J.B. Lightfoot points out that **“it is not the moving of the lips, but in the elevation of the heart to God, that the essence of prayer consists.”**
* Hiebert and Lightfoot make very good points in the quotes I just read. **God desires to see a reverential spirit that elevates the Christian heart to Him in prayer.**
* Many people mistakenly believe that being able to pray long and eloquent prayers should be one’s goal. But that is not what God wants. Many people are able to compose eloquent messages, but **long and eloquent prayers are meaningless if there is not a heart of reverence and worship in one’s words**. The Lord makes this point in His sermon on the mount, in Matthew 6:5-7 . . .

***Matthew 6:5-7— 5 "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. 7 And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.”***

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* + As you see, in the Lord’s instruction, both the Jews and the Gentiles were guilty of praying with improper motives, either wishing to be admired by men or wishing to impress others with their long prayers of meaningless, repetitive words.
	+ **God cares nothing for the duration of your prayer, but He does care for the content and worshipful approach of your prayers.**
* With Paul’s command to ***pray without ceasing***, he is teaching us that **no matter where we are or what we are doing throughout the day . . . whether at home or at work . . . whether at rest or busy . . . whether we’re having a good day or bad . . . we should never be far from God in our hearts.**
	+ **In other words, prayer is not limited by time or place**. There is no right or wrong time of day or location in which we should pray.
	+ Prayer, throughout the day, should be spontaneous and done in a spirit of reverence and worship.
* In some of his other letters Paul gives similar instruction. In Romans 12:12 Paul commands that Christians should be . . .

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***Romans 12:12— rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,***

* + In Ephesians 6:18 Paul writes . . .

***Ephesians 6:18— With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints,***

* + And in Colossians 4:2 Paul gives similar instruction to that found in our text today when he instructs . . .

***Colossians 4:2— Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;***

* Notice in Romans 12:12 and Colossians 4:2 that we are instructed to be ***devoted to prayer***.
	+ The verb ***devoted*** (*proskartereō*—#4342) means “constantly attentive toward.”
	+ Devotion does not imply “obligated,” but “desirous of.” We are ***devoted*** to someone or something because our hearts are inclined toward that person or thing.
* Also, notice in Ephesians 6:18 that we are instructed to ***be on the alert with all perseverance and petition*** to offer up prayers on behalf of the saints.
	+ In other words, we should constantly be on the look-out for the prayer needs of our Christian brethren.
* With this instruction by Paul to ***pray without ceasing***, hopefully this will cause each of us to evaluate our own prayer-lives to see where we can be more attentive to prayer.

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**The Third Command**

***1 Thessalonians 5:18— in everything give thanks***

* Paul’s **third command** in this section, found in v. 18, is ***in everything give thanks***. Or, as the New International Version puts it, ***give thanks in all circumstances***.
	+ Just as the commands to ***rejoice always*** and ***pray without ceasing*** appear difficult to accomplish, so this third command . . . to ***give thanks in everything*** . . . seems like an equally difficult command to obey.
	+ And while the previous two commands . . . to ***rejoice always*** and ***pray without ceasing*** . . . are continuous, as to **time**, this command is **universal in scope.**
		- In commanding that we ***give thanks in all circumstances***, Paul leaves no “wiggle room” in which we might be able to equivocate.
		- Paul does not command that we ***give thanks in all circumstances* except . . .** His command is without exception.
* And, once again, we come to the question of . . . **“how?”** How can we possibly ***give thanks*** in those situations in which we are experiencing the most intense negative emotions, such as grief and pain?
	+ And, once again, I answer that it is important to understand that the word **thankful** is not synonymous with **enjoy** or **happy**.
		- In other words, in commanding us to ***give thanks in all circumstances***, Paul is not commanding us to **enjoy** our trials or to **“be happy”** that we are in a severe trial. He is merely instructing us to understand and acknowledge that “in every cloud there is a silver lining.”
		- And while we don’t know or don’t see the silver lining, we should live with the certainty that God has a good purpose for all of the events of our life.
	+ And it is when we understand and believe that God has a good use and purpose for our trials that we can then ***give thanks*** to God that He is using the events of our lives to serve Him and His purposes.
		- We can ***give thanks*** that our trials are **not in vain**.
* Which would be more difficult to accept, the knowledge that your severe trial had **no** good or useful purpose **or** the knowledge that your severe trail was being used by God for a good purpose?
	+ Of course, it would be much more difficult to endure a trial without purpose.
	+ That is the problem for the world. The world sees tragedy and heartache as being worthless and without purpose. The world sees tragedy and heartache as simply another reason to accuse God of being a mean, uncaring and unloving God.
* But, the fact is, we learn in Scripture that our trials do have a good purpose. First, we know from Romans 8:28 . . .

***Romans 8:28— 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.***

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* + In causing ***all things to work together for good***, we know that God is working His will through our trials.
	+ We also learn from 1 Peter 2:20 . . .

***1 Peter 2:20— For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.***

* + Our endurance of our trials . . . our ***giving thanks*** to God for His strength that we are able to endure . . . causes us to ***find favor with God*** as we live in obedience to His will**.**

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**The Purpose of this Instruction**

***1 Thessalonians 5:18— . . . for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.***

* So, having first given us three commands for our Christian hearts, **in v. 18 Paul then gives us the reason we are to obey these commands . . . *for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.***
* In this passage . . . v. 16-18 . . . Paul gives us our instruction first, followed by the purpose of the instruction. The reason Paul gives the commands first is to emphasize the instruction, followed by the purpose.
	+ But this passage could just as easily be constructed with the purpose first, followed by the instruction. If done this way, it would read . . . ***this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks.***
	+ If constructed this way, the emphasis of the passage would fall on the beginning phrase . . . ***this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*** But by putting the commands first, Paul is emphasizing the commands, with the purpose being secondary.

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**Who are these commands aimed at?**

* But in reading this passage, it is important that we understand the significance of this purpose statement.
	+ Having given us the commands to ***rejoice always, pray without ceasing and in everything give thanks***, it is crucial that we understand **who these commands are intended for**.
	+ As Paul states in v. 18, this instruction ***is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus***. In other words, **the three commands in v. 16-18 are intended for Christians.**
* Look at what Paul says here in v. 18 . . . ***this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus***. It is important that we understand how important that final phrase . . . ***in Christ Jesus*** . . . is.
	+ If this phrase were omitted and the phrase merely read . . . ***this is God’s will*** . . . or even, ***this is God’s will for you*** . . . it could be correctly argued that this instruction is **for all people**. But the addition of the qualifying phrase, ***in Christ Jesus***, clearly defines who this instruction is for.
	+ **This instruction is specifically for those who are *in Christ Jesus*** . . . those who believe in Christ Jesus as their Savior.
	+ In other words, **if you claim to be a Christian . . . if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior . . . then Paul’s instruction in v. 16-18 is aimed directly at you.**

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**Three Aspects of God’s Will**

* It is important, in discussing the subject of **the will of God**that we understand what aspect of God’s will that Paul is talking about here. In order to properly understand Paul’s instruction, it is necessary to understand the subject of **God’s will**.
	+ There are **three aspects of God’s will . . . His preceptive will, His revealed will and His secret will.**
* **First**, there is God’s **preceptive will.**
	+ God’s **preceptive will is defined as** **the rules of life which God has set down for His creatures, indicating the duties which He requires of us.**
	+ God’s preceptive will is found in the precepts, or instruction and laws, He has given to us in Scripture. It is what we are duty-bound to do. But, unfortunately, while God’s preceptive will is God’s instruction on how we ought to live, we disobey His preceptive will every day.

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* **Second**, there is God’s **revealed will**.
	+ **God’s revealed will is defined as God’s decree of what shall actually come to pass. What actually happens is accomplished by God’s decretive will.**
	+ In other words, **whatever happens, either by God’s direct action or by permission through the unrestrained agency of His rational creatures, is God’s revealed will.**
	+ **Everything that actually happens happens because of the revealed will of God.**
	+ For example, while God does not cause His creatures to sin, He permits sin for the purpose of accomplishing His revealed will.
	+ So, while God’s preceptive is often disobeyed by men, God’s revealed will can never be thwarted.
* So, in comparing God’s preceptive will with His revealed will, we can see that the former . . . God’s preceptive will . . . is what we are duty-bound to do, while the latter . . . God’s revealed will . . . is what God has ordained to actually come to pass.

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* **Third**, there is God’s **secret will**.
	+ **God’s secret will is** **what God actually purposes, in the secret counsel of His will, to do. God’s secret will is called “secret” because it is known only to God and can only be known if and when God chooses to reveal it.**
	+ **God’s secret will is the answer to the question of “why did God do or permit that?”** God does not reveal His secret will until it manifests itself in becoming His revealed will. For example, in 1 Peter 3:17 we read of God’s secret will . . .

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***1 Peter 3:17— For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.***

* + Likewise, in 1 Peter 4:19 we read . . .

***1 Peter 4:19— Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.***

* + According to God’ secret will, He permits His children to suffer to accomplish the secret purposes He has ordained.
* So, with that understanding of the three aspects of God’s will, we come back to Paul’s instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 . . . ***16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.***
	+ When Paul reveals that ***this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus***, what aspect of God’s will is Paul referring to?
	+ Here in v. 18 Paul is referring to God’s **preceptive will . . . what God desires for His children to do.**
	+ Here in v. 16-18, in issuing these three commands, Paul is revealing what God desires of His children . . . that we ***rejoice always***, that we ***pray without ceasing***, and that ***in everything*** we ***give thanks***.
		- If we obey these three commands, we are being **obedient to God’s preceptive will**.
		- But when we fail to obey these commands, we are demonstrating that it is **God’s revealed will in permitting us to disobey.**
		- And **what ultimately happens** after we have failed to fully obey God’s preceptive will . . . and known only to God . . . **is God’s secret will**.
* So, I have endeavored to explain to you this morning that **it is God’s will for those who are in Christ Jesus to *rejoice always* . . . whether in joy or in suffering, to *pray without ceasing* . . . being ready and anxious to pray at all times and in all circumstances, and *in everything give thanks* . . . thankful to God that He strengthens and keeps us near to Him, even when we are in the midst of severe trials.**
* But **what about unbelievers?** The thing we have to understand is that **while** ***God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*, God does not cause all things to work together for good to those who do not love God and who are not called according to His purpose.**
	+ In other words, while God uses trials and adversity in our lives for our good . . . to sanctify us and conform us more and more into the image of Christ, God often permits the wicked to prosper and live at ease in judgment against them.
	+ After all, a person who does not believe in God and is living a life of ease has no need of Christ. So while we, who believe in Jesus Christ, may be in situations in which we are struggling in life while those who hate God are not struggling or suffering, we have to keep in mind that God is using our trials and struggles **for our good**.
	+ It is uncommon for a person who is living a life of sin, ease and comfort without Christ to be called by the Holy Spirit. It is much more common for God to use a crisis and severe trial in the process of calling an unbeliever to salvation.
* So, it is with the knowledge and assurance that **God is causing all things to work together for good** for us that we should have the desire to ***rejoice always, pray without ceasing and in everything give thanks***.