BE JOYFUL ALWAYS

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28
Key Verses 5:16-18

“BE JOYFUL ALWAYS; PRAY CONTINUALLY; GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, FOR THIS IS GOD’S WILL FOR YOU IN CHRIST JESUS.”

In chapter 4 and 5 of 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul taught the Thessalonian believers to live waiting for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Whether we live or die before he comes, we will all rise to meet him and be judged. Those who have lived a holy and pure life in anticipation of his coming will rise to be with him forever. Those who have ignored a love relationship with God in order to enjoy this world will rise only to be condemned. Therefore, Paul urged us to encourage one another in our faith, and to be ready to meet our Lord Jesus as one of his precious and holy children. In this passage, Paul gives final encouragement and direction to the Thessalonian believers. He urges them to live in peace with one another. Most importantly, he urges them to be joyful always by living in obedience to God’s command. In every age, mankind has sought the way to be joyful always. But it was impossible, because of our cursed existence to struggle hard to earn three meals a day and then die. No human being can be joyful always. But God’s will is for us to be joyful. Let’s learn from St. Paul the secret of always being joyful in God.

First, “Live in peace with each other.” As we have studied, the Thessalonian church was established in the midst of fiery persecutions against Paul and his fellow workers because of the Jews’ jealousy toward his ministry to the Gentiles. They could remain in Thessalonica no more than three weeks. As a result, Paul had little or no time to establish an orderly community among the believers there. They were all young believers. But Paul knew that among them, God himself had already chosen several to be leaders. Who were they? They were those who worked hard, not for themselves, but for the sake of God’s flock in Thessalonica and God’s work among all the Greeks. Look at verses 12 and 13. “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.” The Christian leaders in Thessalonica were the Christian workers. Here we learn several things about the Christian community.

Firstly, Christian leaders are servants. Sinful man wants to be recognized as great by other sinful people. At the same time, sinful man wants to obtain the most benefit from the least amount of effort. As a result, leaders in the world are 100% corrupt. They take advantage of others in order to enjoy their position of power. Paul reminds the Thessalonians in verses 12 and 13 that Christian leaders are not like that. Christian leaders are those who work hard among the believers in order to encourage, protect and admonish them. Christian leaders are those who are bearing the burden of fulfilling God’s world salvation purpose through preaching the gospel and raising disciples from among God’s sheep. In short, Christian leaders are the front line Bible teachers and shepherds who are laying down their lives each day in order to fulfill their holy mission in God. Jesus taught his disciples in Mark 10:43-45. “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Those who want to be great Christian leaders must be ready to work as servants all their life time.
Secondly, Christians must submit to earthly as well as heavenly authority. In Paul’s day, slavery was the most common state for ordinary man. Only a privileged few were recognized as citizens, or had the authority to decide where to live and how. So the gospel message that taught them that all men are created equal in God was revolutionary and sparked a holy desire in all who heard to live as free men and women in Christ. But freedom in Christ does not mean freedom from human authority. Freedom in Christ means that whomever we obey on earth, we are ultimately obeying Christ in heaven. On the other hand, if we do not obey our human leaders who are over us, we are not obeying Christ, who gave them their authority. We are all inspired and creative individuals with a unique personality and gift. But we who are in Christ must submit to our leaders who admonish us and encourage us to grow in our faith.

Look again at verse 12. “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.” Leaders who work hard, and Christians who humble themselves to follow their leading create a Christian koinonia that is at peace with God and men.

Look at verse 14. “And we urge you, brothers, to warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” Christian leadership is not static. It is fluid, as one and then another rises up as a servant and leader for the fellowship in each circumstance. Each Christian can and should be a leader for one another, by helping one another to overcome their weaknesses and fulfill their holy mission in God. Just as Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, and then encouraged them to do the same, so all Christians must be ready to help one another grow in faith and practice the love of God. How can we do so? Firstly, we must warn the idle. The idle are those who have lost their holy mission from God. They are doing something, but they have no clear purpose or direction in God. Lazy people who have no holy mission in God are headed for destruction, like Lot, who abandoned his uncle Abraham’s tent life to enjoy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We must warn them in love to take up their cross of mission. Secondly, we must encourage the timid. Timothy was called by God through St. Paul’s anointing. But Timothy was young and easily intimidated. Paul urged him, saying, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Ti 1:7). Our circumstances often seem to be in control of us. But we must encourage one another to overcome our situation with a spirit of power and love, and give glory to God. Thirdly, we must help the weak. When we look at Jesus’ earthly ministry, Jesus mostly helped weak people to become normal men and women who could be a blessing to their society. Helping weak people takes all of our strength. Helping weak people is like loaning 10,000 dollars to a street person. But it is our sacred duty to help weak people patiently and in love, as if we were helping Christ himself. It is because Christ stooped down and humbled himself even unto death to help us in our weakest moment. Paul summarizes the goal of Christian fellowship in verse 15. “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.” May God bless you to experience the peace of God when you wholeheartedly serve this Christian fellowship.

Second, be joyful always. God created mankind to live in paradise. In paradise, man could enjoy all kinds of fruits and foods free of charge. In paradise, mankind could enjoy the heavenly chorus and animal orchestra in wonder and amazement each and every day. In paradise, the man and woman could love each other in innocence and purity with all their hearts. But the man and woman sinned by disobeying God and eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Mankind lost paradise, and had to live in the real world, where he could eat food only by the sweat of his brow. The woman had to endure childbirth, and dishwashing three times a day. And at the end, they died to return as dust
of the ground. In short, when man sinned, he lost the joy of life. The gift of life he had received from God became a burden to him. When God looked at man who had lost paradise, he was sorry that man had sinned and disobeyed God. He was sorry that mankind had to sweat and struggle just to survive. But God was most sorry that mankind, whom he had made, had lost the joy of being alive in God’s world. Mankind who lost the joy of paradise became ungodly, and unintentionally very wicked. We read the story about the young men who killed their high school classmates in Columbine. Why did they do it? It’s because they lost the joy of life. When they had no joy in their hearts, they became spiritually weak. They could not bear up under the least bit of hardship, but harbored a grudge against everyone who had hurt them. Finally, they could commit such a terrible crime, all because they had no joy of life.

But God sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ into this world to restore man’s joy. When the virgin Mary went to her cousin Elizabeth, she could sing a song of deep joy from her heart. “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (Lk 1:46b-47). Mary had just given up her beautiful marriage dream with Joseph in order to obey God’s purpose for her to be the mother of God’s Son. Why was Mary so joyful? Luke 1:48 says, “for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on, all generations will call me blessed.” Mary could rejoice from her soul when she knew that God was with her, through the promise of the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. When the apostle John first joined Jesus, together with his brother James, John was an angry man. Jesus called them both, the sons of thunder. Do you know why? When a Samaritan village did not want to welcome Jesus as he was traveling to Jerusalem to die as the Lamb of God for the sin of the world, John pleaded with Jesus to call down lightning and destroy them all. But John later testified that he saw the glory of God in Jesus. When John saw that Jesus was God incarnate who came to die as the atoning sacrifice for his sins, all of John’s anger and frustration was taken away. John became the apostle of love and joy. He wrote 1st John as an old man in Ephesus, when the church there was under attack from the Gnostic heretics. He was really angry at them for their teaching that Jesus was not really God and man. But he did not blow up at them. He wrote a love letter to the church, saying, “We write this to make our joy complete.” (1 Jn 1:4). Paul healed a demon-possessed girl in Philippi. Then her owners became angry and had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into jail. That night, Paul and Silas were still bleeding, locked up and in chains. But they started singing hymns to one another and to the other prisoners. At midnight they were still singing, when an earthquake struck and caused the chains to fall off and the prison doors to open. The jailer was converted to faith in God, and the town leaders humbly came to escort them safely. They sang hymns out of their deep joy, knowing that God was with them even in the prison cell. Jesus Christ came to this world to save sinners. He reconciled men to himself through his blood, while we were still enemies of God. Jesus Christ is Immanuel God who restores joy to all mankind by being with us and by leading us all the way home to the kingdom of God.

Look at verses 16-18. “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” These verses strongly imply that to be joyful, prayerful and thankful is not an option. It is the divine will of God. But how can we obey such a command? I am not joyful for many complicated and complex reasons. I cannot become joyful just because God commanded me to, can I? How can God’s command solve my sorrow in my heart at the loss of my father, or my despair at having failed in my studies to become only a mediocre physicist? But we must hear the absolute command of God, and be joyful always. Then, when we humble ourselves to accept God’s authority to command us “be joyful,” by the grace of God, God makes himself and his purpose
for our life known to us. God himself comes to us and gives us his peace and joy in our hearts.

One precious woman of God followed her husband to a remote mission field in the first months of her pregnancy. She was due to give birth at the end of March, the very time when the Easter Bible conference should be. It seemed impossible for her to come or serve this conference. But she accepted this verse, and decided to be joyful and give thanks to God by participating in the preparations for the Easter Conference with all of her heart. God helped her to find the best conference place. And God helped her to come and serve all the messengers and testimony sharers joyfully. All the other women coworkers were shocked to see her so near the delivery date. But they were more shocked that she was not burdened or burdensome at all, but a blessing in every way. When she decided to obey God with her whole heart in this way, then God made her strong, and she could deliver the baby girl a week after the conference on Easter Sunday morning, with a very short labor period. May God bless you to hear this heavenly command and be joyful, thankful and prayerful in all that you do for God. May God make you strong enough to be a blessing in every way, through humble obedience to God’s command, “Be joyful always.”

Third, Do not put out the Spirit’s fire. Look at verse 19. “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.” The musician Keith Green defined a Christian as “one who is bananas for Jesus.” In short, a Christian is one who has the Spirit’s fire. It means that we are no longer one of the walking dead, who are condemned because of sin and have no living hope. We are one of God’s holy children, with a blessed inheritance in the kingdom of God. We have the assurance that God is with us, and God will bring us home to be with him forever. We have a holy obligation to fan that assurance and gift into flame (2 Ti 1:6). How? We must pray continually, depending on God. We must thank God from our hearts, remembering God’s grace that saved us from sin and death. We must rejoice in our holy mission in all circumstances. Then the Spirit’s fire will not go out, but will burn brightly, and compel us to love others in Jesus through Bible study and 1 to 1 shepherding. Some people are afraid of the Spirit’s fire, because they don’t want to be martyrs. Some people only look for an emotional feeling from God. We must test the Spirit’s leading with the Bible. We must obey everything that is good. We must reject the evil. (20,21).

Paul prayed for the Thessalonian believers to be sanctified by God through and through. Look at verses 23,24. “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” The Thessalonians were just beginning their lives of faith. They would suffer much to remember God’s grace to them and bear fruit with their lives. But Paul prayed that they would not give in to their easy-going desires. Instead, he prayed that they would struggle and grow until they were blameless in spirit, soul and body; ready for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

In this passage, we learned that God has called us to live a holy life in peace with all our brothers. Such a life requires hard, constant work. But those who obey God have the source of joy in their souls. They can be joyful always, and give thanks in all circumstances, because they have in them the Spirit’s fire burning. We do not pray much. But may God help us to pray and seek God earnestly, until we can be joyful always as God’s hardworking servants in this wicked generation.