

Series: The Power of Prayer

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

1 THESSALONIANS 5

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:17

1 Thessalonians 5:17

¹⁷ Pray without ceasing.

Introduction:

Someone has stated that this is a chapter of impossible commands.

Note the commands:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶ Rejoice evermore. ¹⁷ Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸ In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

- Rejoice Evermore
- Pray With Out Ceasing
- In Everything Give Thanks

It's interesting that Paul doesn't offer any explanation or help here on what these commands mean or how we can obey them.

God commands us to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in everything.

With each command, I want to explain what it means and give some help on how to grow in obeying it.

As we learn to abide in Him and trust in Him to work through us, we will progressively become conformed to His image.

Sermon Content:

Note:

1. GOD COMMANDS US TO REJOICE ALWAYS

Does “rejoicing always” mean that you always go around with a smile on your face and an upbeat bounce in your steps?

Illustration:

I have known people who were going through and having major problems and when asked how they were doing they would reply, “I’m just praising the Lord!”

They seemed to think that it would be unspiritual to reply, “I’m really struggling with some things.”

If “rejoicing always” means always being upbeat and never feeling sadness, then we have a problem, because neither the Lord nor Paul were always happy. It’s interesting that the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament is (1 Thess. 5:16), “Rejoice always,” but the shortest verse in the English New Testament is (John 11:35), “Jesus wept.”

As the Lord faced the cross, He prayed:

Hebrews 5:7-9

⁷ Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; ⁸ Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;

Paul described himself in 2 Corinthians 6:

2 Corinthians 6:10

¹⁰ As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

In Romans 12:

Romans 12:15

¹⁵ Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

So “rejoice always” does not mean, “Deny your feelings, put on a happy face, and never feel sad.” Regarding the trials that God brings into our lives to train us as His children, the Bible acknowledges:

Hebrews 12:11

¹¹ Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

So, what does Paul mean when he commands, “Rejoice always”? First, it’s important to remember that he wrote this to new believers who were suffering persecution because of their faith.

1 Thessalonians 3:3-4

*³ That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.
⁴ For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.*

So, given their difficult circumstances, this command to rejoice always has to be viewed not primarily as a

matter of feelings, but rather of obedience. When we are in difficult trials or if people have mistreated us because of our faith, we have a choice: either we can focus on our trials and lapse into self-pity. Or we can set our minds on the things above, where Christ is at the right hand of God, where our life is hidden in Him.

Colossians 3:1-4

¹ If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. ² Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. ³ For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

In Philippians 4 we read:

Philippians 4:4

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.

The phrase “In the Lord” is the key.

Our joy cannot be totally oblivious to circumstances, but neither should it be governed by them.

So “rejoicing always” is a conscious attitude of contentment, hope, and happiness that comes from deliberately focusing on Christ and the eternal treasures that we have received freely from Him.

How can we develop a habit of rejoicing always?

- First, focus on the riches that God has freely given us in Christ.

For example, Ephesians 1:3-14 speaks of the blessings we have in Him.

Ephesians 1:3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: ⁴ According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: ⁵ Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. ⁷ In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; ⁸ Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; ⁹ Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: ¹⁰ That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: ¹¹ In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

¹² That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. ¹³ In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

In Him you have redemption and forgiveness of all your sins, lavished upon you by His grace. He has made known the mystery of His will. He has given us an inheritance and has sealed us with the Holy Spirit.

- Second, walk in the Spirit, not the flesh.

Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

Galatians 5:22

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

To walk in the Spirit means daily to yield to Him and to rely on Him to control your life in every situation.

It takes time to produce fruit. It doesn't pop out on a tree the day after you plant it!

But if you walk consistently by the Spirit, eventually the fruit of joy will be yours.

- Third, sing!

If you're feeling down, get out a hymnbook or put on some solid Christian music and sing of God's goodness, grace, and love.

The longest book in the Bible is a songbook. Use it often to set your mind on the things above.

2. GOD COMMANDS US TO PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

What does this command mean?

Does this mean that you must pray every waking moment?

Obviously, not, because neither Paul nor the Lord Jesus did that. It is helpful to know that the word translated "without ceasing" was used of a hacking cough.

A person with a bad cough doesn't cough continuously, but often and repeatedly. It was also used of repeated military attacks. An army would attack a city but not succeed. They would regroup and attack over and over until they won the victory.

Our prayers should be frequent and persistent. Like the friend who came at midnight to ask for a loaf of bread.

Luke 11:5-13

⁵ And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; ⁶ For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? ⁷ And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. ⁸ I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth. ⁹ And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. ¹⁰ For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. ¹¹ If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? ¹² Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? ¹³ If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

We keep knocking until we get what we're after. Like the widow who kept bothering the unjust judge, we keep coming back until we obtain what we were asking for.

Rejoicing always and praying without ceasing are related, because it is through prayer that we lay hold of

the riches that we have in Christ, which are the source of true joy. Prayer claims the promises of God in our trials. Laying hold of God's promises brings joy, because we know that He is for us.

Remember what we read in Romans 8:

Romans 8:31-32

³¹ What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? ³² He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

How can we develop a habit of praying without ceasing?

- Recognize Our Need To Depend on the Lord in Every Situation
- Pray Whenever You Can

When you think of a loved one or friend, send up a short prayer for him or her. When someone asks you to pray for some need, don't promise to pray later and then forget. Pray right there with the person.

- Spend Time in God's Word and Prayer Each Day

We have considered the first two commands, note command three:

3. GOD COMMANDS US TO GIVE THANKS IN EVERYTHING

What does this command mean?

This command means that in every situation we are to give thanks to God.

Note Ephesians 5:20:

Ephesians 5:20

²⁰ Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;

Giving thanks in every situation does not mean that we must be happy with every situation or resigned to accept matters without praying and working for change.

When God takes us through hard trials, we don't feel thankful. But by faith we can say, "Lord, I trust that You are good and that You know what You're doing in this difficult situation.

Rejoicing always, giving thanks in everything is often a choice to believe God in difficult circumstances.

How can we develop a habit of thankfulness to God in every situation?

- First, and most importantly, deepen your understanding of God's goodness.

The story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) illustrates this truth.

Joseph's brothers hated him and planned to kill him until they saw a caravan of traders heading toward Egypt. So they cruelly sold their brother into slavery.

He ended up getting thrown in prison, even though he obeyed God by resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife.

He begged the cupbearer to mention his case to Pharaoh so that he could be released, but the cupbearer forgot.

Two years later, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream and was instantly elevated to the second most powerful position in the country.

Later, he was able to be reconciled to his brothers and to see his aged father again.

But after Jacob died, the brothers feared that Joseph would get even with them for what they had done.

At that point, Joseph wept and stated:

Genesis 50:20

²⁰ But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

Joseph saw God both as sovereign and good.

Submitting to the goodness of God in every situation the key to a thankful heart.

- Second, thankfulness will be our habit when trust in God is our habit.

Thankfulness and trust are bound together. If you are trusting God, you're thankful. If you are not thankful, then you're not trusting God.

This is illustrated with the children of Israel. God delivered them from slavery in Egypt by the ten miraculous plagues on the Egyptians, while sparing Israel.

He miraculously brought them through the Red Sea and then closed the water on top of the pursuing Egyptian army.

You would think that by this point, they could thankfully trust in God. But we read Exodus 15:22-24:

Exodus 15:22-24

²² So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water.

²³ And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. ²⁴ And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?

They didn't trust that the God who had powerfully saved them from slavery could provide water in the desert.

If you're grumbling, you're not trusting. If you're not trusting, you're not thankful. Develop a habit of trusting God, especially in trials, and you will thank Him both for His great salvation and for the opportunity to see Him work in your time of need.

Close:

Thirteen years before his conversion, John Wesley had a conversation one night with a porter of his college that impressed Wesley that there was more to Christianity than he had found.

The porter had only one coat. He had eaten no food that day and yet his heart was full of gratitude to God.

Wesley said to him, “You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat, and no bed to lie upon?”

What else do you thank him for?”

“I thank him,” answered the porter, “that He has given me my life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him.”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶ Rejoice evermore. ¹⁷ Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸ In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

We are to rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks.

This is the will of God “in Christ Jesus.”

In Him makes these commands a reality.