

## **Rejoice, Pray, Give Thanks, Repeat (1 Thessalonians 5:15-18)**

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If you know what acronyms like ISFJ, ENTP, or ESFJ mean, it's probably because you're already familiar with the whole world of personality types and the Myers-Briggs test in particular. The popularity of such tests is not surprising. According to the Myers-Briggs Foundation, knowing your type indicator can help you make better decisions, communicate more effectively, manage and prevent stress, set and achieve goals, build strong relationships, and focus your career plans. There are obvious benefits to understanding your personality.

There are also two less than obvious dangers lurking in the whole enterprise. **First, we can think the search for meaning is ultimately self-referential.** The classical liberal tradition in which American culture has steeped for centuries says that meaning isn't found by looking outside of us. It's found by looking within us. "Know thyself" has become the holy grail of human flourishing. Christianity says the exact opposite. If you want to know what is true and good and right, if you want to discover meaning in the midst of a crazy world, don't look first within yourself. Look to the God who created you.

John Calvin was right. "Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself." Who we really are and whether it's good or bad is only discernible in the light of our Creator's absolute purity and glory. Meaning isn't self-centered. It's God-centered.

**Second, we can start to believe that who we are is intrinsically worthy of acceptance when in fact God says that who we are is in desperate need of transformation.** Is there anything wrong with knowing you tend to be introverted, intuitive, thinking, and judging? Of course not. But if we're not careful, we can go even further and start to think and act like our greatest need is to be accepted for who we are. Then, lo and behold, we turn God into the ideal lover. He accepts me for who I am and never makes any demands contrary to my personality (unlike all the haters out there). Stop criticizing me and start loving me for who I am like God does.

2 Corinthians 3:18 commends a radically different vision. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the

Spirit.” **God’s goal for your life, friend, isn’t to make you more like you. It’s to make you more like Him.** And therein lies your greatest good and his greatest glory. Don’t come to God’s Word asking him to fill your love cup with a therapeutic affirmation that whatever you are is beautiful. Come to God’s Word asking Him to love you by transforming you more and more in the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. For it is when we become more like Jesus, the one who created us in his image, that we become fully and truly human.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, the Lord reveals His transformative will for our lives in the form of three simple commands – rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. It’s not an option – check and see if it fits with your personality type. It’s not an invitation – consider a lifestyle of joy, prayer, and gratitude if your present approach isn’t working. It’s an explicit command from our Creator.

If you claim to be a Christian, the letters J, P, and G should always show up in your personality test – enduring JOY, persistent PRAYER, and abiding GRATITUDE. And lest you despair over their present lack in your life, friend, take heart in this. The good news of the gospel is that what God requires of us in Christ Jesus he supplies to us through Christ Jesus. The final phrase in verse 18 is key to understanding the whole, “...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Because of Jesus and what he’s done for us, a Christian should be characterized by 3 things:

## **1) ENDURING JOY**

Look at verse 16. Paul instructs the fledgling church in Thessalonica to “rejoice always.” To “rejoice” is a decision of the will whereby we choose to actively delight in something or someone. We tend to think of “joy” as an emotion over which we have no control. You’re either feeling joyful or you’re not. It arrives spontaneously. It leaves spontaneously. To tell someone to “rejoice” can seem about as genuine as hiring mourners for a funeral or pasting a “happy smile” on your face when you’re miserable on the inside. It seems emotionally dishonest at best.

And yet there it sits. Two words. An unmistakable command from the Lord to us as His people. Rejoice – always. No exceptions. At first glance, it seems so simple. But then you slow down and think, “Paul, do you realize what you’re saying?” I mean, let’s be honest. Who among us feels perpetually joyful? Rejoice always?



The collective testimony of Scripture reveals that joy is not optional for the people of God. It is required and commanded by God over and over again. Deuteronomy 12:12, "And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God." 1 Chronicles 16:10, "Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice." Psalm 32:11, "Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!" Zephaniah 3:14, "Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem." Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Three things are clear from these passages and a multitude like them.

First, God requires all of us to be joyful. Joy is not an emotional option for certain personality types. Second, the joy he requires is consistently God-centered. The Lord is not an emotional junkie, pleased by mere emotion. The object of our joy matters. We are repeatedly commanded to rejoice in the LORD because it is our joy in the Lord, more than anything else, that displays the true weight of his glory. Every good gift we enjoy in this world is ultimately designed to deepen our gladness in the One from whom all blessings flow.

Third, the joy God requires is an act of the will. It may feel spontaneous, but it is not passive. The fact that we are commanded to rejoice implies it is something we can choose to do or not do. So does that mean we must choose to rejoice even in the darkest and most oppressive situations in our lives? Yes.

Here's where the little phrase at the end of verse 18 makes all the difference. Notice Paul does not simply say, "For this is the will of God." We know God's revealed will for our lives from the entire rest of the Bible. He requires joy. But Paul doesn't stop there. What does he say? "For this is the will of God *in Christ Jesus for you.*"

Joy is God's will for you *in Christ Jesus* because it is through God the Son that God the Father affects his gladsome will for our lives. Through Jesus, God gives us joy – not a bite-sized joy or a fleeting joy, but the enduring joy God Himself enjoys. As Jesus said to His disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

Notice how Jesus connects two things – the words He speaks to us and the joy He effects within us as a result. So what exactly are these words, the "things" Jesus has spoken, that enable us to rejoice? John 15:9-10, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

The “things” Jesus has spoken to us that effect God’s gladdening will for our lives consist, first and foremost, of an invitation to enjoy an intimate relationship with God, to “abide” in his love for us. And what makes that kind of relationship possible? The love Jesus demonstrated by laying down His life for us, by giving us the gift of Himself.

Jesus lived, died, and rose from the grave to make right all that our sin made so terribly wrong, starting with our broken relationship with God. A restored relationship with God through Jesus gives us joy because it is only in God’s presence – in knowing, loving, and serving Him – that we discover a fullness of joy that nothing in this world can take away. Psalm 16:11, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

God accomplishes His will for our lives through Jesus – He brings us to Himself and fills us with his joy. That’s why Paul says “rejoice always...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.” So what do we do with the fact that even as Christians, even as those who have the gift of relationship with God, there are many days we don’t FEEL joyful? The whole “rejoice ALWAYS” thing can feel entirely out of reach and make listening to sermons like this an exercise in discouragement.

If that’s you, friend, you need to know two things. **First, the presence of joy does not entail the absence of sorrow.** What does Paul say to the church in Corinth? 2 Corinthians 6:10, we are “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” Or in 2 Corinthians 7:4, “in all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.” So which one is it Paul? Were you sorrowful or rejoicing? Were you afflicted or were you overflowing with joy? Yes.

All the above, no less than Jesus. Hebrews 1:9, “God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.” Jesus himself overflowed with joy. And yet Isaiah 53:3 tells us he was also “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” If Jesus was a man of sorrows, why should we think anyone following Him will feel any different?

And yet people still try and subtly or not-so-subtly pressure others to follow their example. “How are you doing?” “I am GREAT. Couldn’t be better. I am DONE with grieving, mourning, and all those other emotions that get people down. I’m

choosing JOY. I'm speaking LIFE. I'm not sick. I'm on the road to healing. I'm not suffering. I'm about to achieve a victory." Don't do that, friend. Rejoicing in the Lord doesn't mean ignoring or denying our sorrows. It means choosing to actively delight in the Lord in the midst of our sorrow.

**Second, while we cannot make ourselves feel joyful, we can choose where we will look to find joy.** We are always looking for delight in something or someone, even when we are filled with sorrow because we lack the chosen object of our delight. Money can be the object of your delight even when you don't have any. Sex can be the object of your delight even when you're not getting any. The approval of man can be the object of your delight even when no one seems to like you.

To rejoice in the Lord means we choose to seek our joy in Him instead of in someone or something else. We continue to fix our thoughts on Him and nurture our affection for Him by reading and meditating on His Word where He reveals his goodness for all to see, even as we wait to feel the joy we know we ought to feel and long to feel. We say with King David in Psalm 63:1-2, "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek YOU; my soul thirsts for YOU; my flesh faints for YOU, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon YOU in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory."

At this point in Psalm 63, David has yet to experience anything that feels like joy, but he's fighting for it, he's seeking after it, by choosing to keep the glory of God's self-revelation before his eyes. Think of it this way. You can't make yourself feel awe. But you can decide whether you look at your belly button or gaze across the Grand Canyon. In the same way, you can't make yourself feel joy. But you can decide whether you will look elsewhere or remain in the purifying stream of God's Word as you wait for God to do what only He can do.

And to the degree we fail to "rejoice always," we cry out for God's forgiveness, asking the Holy Spirit to help us see Jesus for who He really is so we might rejoice in Him for who He is, even in our suffering. 1 Peter 1:8, "Though you have not yet seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

The joy God requires of us in Christ Jesus he supplies to us through Christ Jesus. A Christian is characterized by enduring joy.

## 2) PERSISTENT PRAYER

Verse 17, "Pray without ceasing." Like the first exhortation, this one can be easily misunderstood. We do well to start with a definition. To pray is simply to talk with God. It doesn't require a hushed voice. It doesn't require a special vocabulary. It can be as simple as a child, "Help, Father." It can be complex and specific as our greatest sorrows. "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast" (Psalm 22:14).

When Paul says, "Pray without ceasing," he doesn't mean all we do is talk to God, as if "real" Christians do nothing but pray. It's an example of hyperbole, where an author uses deliberate exaggeration to help us grasp his point. In this case, to "pray without ceasing" means two things.

**First, being a Christian requires a lifestyle of prayer.** In the same way that a close relationship with a friend or spouse requires a pattern of regular communication so too our relationship with God requires a pattern of consistent prayer. As breathing sustains life in our physical bodies, so too prayer sustains life in our souls. It's an ongoing thing. A continual thing. A pouring out all of my heart to God throughout the day kind of thing. Psalm 62:8, "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us."

- When you're walking down the hall to comfort a crying baby, **TALK TO GOD.** "Lord, I need your help right now to be patient with this child the way you are patient with me."
- When you're walking into the cafeteria to eat before your next class, **TALK TO GOD.** "Father, show me how to be a good friend to my classmates today, especially those that don't know you."
- When you're walking into a boardroom where the bossman's bossman is waiting for your presentation, **TALK TO GOD.** "King Jesus, help me trust you right now, to believe in the depth of my heart that you're in control, and that what you think of me matters more than what anyone in this room thinks of me."
- When you get home late from work for the hundredth time and you can tell your spouse is a little frosty, **TALK TO GOD.** "Father, help me to be humble. Guard me from making excuses. Teach me to walk in love and not be defensive even if I get attacked halfway through dinner."

Praying without ceasing entails a lifestyle of prayer, bringing all of you to God all throughout the day. It's not just the right thing to do. It's an incredible privilege.

**Second, to "pray without ceasing" means we persist in prayer.** At the end of the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18, Jesus says, "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:7-8)

Prayers that remain unanswered present an especially difficult test of our trust in the Lord. Will we hold God hostage to doing what we want Him to do when we want Him to do it? Or will we continue to quietly or not-so-quietly pour out our heart to the Lord, knowing he does all things well, even the things we don't understand? Praying without ceasing means we choose the latter.

We refuse to stop praying simply because it seems like God has yet to answer. Instead, we persevere in bringing our requests to Him even when we have nothing new to say, knowing the great work of prayer is not informing God of what he does not understand, but rather continuing to let the Lord carry a burden that is too big for us. **Praying "without ceasing" means practicing a lifestyle of persistent prayer.**

Now remember what I said earlier – what God requires, God supplies. That means God doesn't just require persistent prayer. He effects persistent prayer, He empowers us to pray, through the person and work of Christ. Persistent prayer, no less than enduring joy, is "the will of God in Christ Jesus." Jesus enables this kind of prayer in at least two ways:

**First, the Father hears our prayers because of Jesus.** We don't have access to God's ear because of how good we are. Only Jesus is perfect. And it's because Jesus lived for us and died for us that the Father now welcomes us to approach Him with the same confidence His only Son has enjoyed for all eternity.

**Second, the Father answers our prayers through Jesus.** Hebrews 4:15–16 captures the combined spiritual dynamic: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Who pours out “mercy” and “grace to help” in the hour of need when we pray? Jesus does! He’s our sympathetic high priest. He takes our hand and gives us confidence to approach the Father in prayer. Then after we pray, He turns around and pours out all we need for life and godliness, including the spiritual alertness and strength we need to pray and keep on praying. In both senses, access and provision, a lifestyle of persistent prayer is the “will of God in Christ Jesus for you,” Christian.

The persistent prayer God requires of us in Christ Jesus God supplies to us through Christ Jesus. A Christian is characterized by persistent prayer.

### **3) ABIDING GRATITUDE**

Verse 18, “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Notice Paul doesn’t say give thanks for all circumstances, as if we are obligated to thank God for tragic experiences of suffering and evil. No, He says give thanks in all circumstances. Why? Because there you will never encounter a situation or circumstance in your life, Christian, where you do not have abundant reason to praise the Lord.

Consider just a short list of the blessings God has given you in Christ Jesus that the greatest sorrows you will ever encounter in this life cannot take away:

- God created you, granting you the incredible dignity of being His image-bearer.
- God chose you. Before you were born and had done anything good or bad, He elected you for salvation through Christ.
- God called you. When you had no power to change your own heart, the same voice that spoke the universe into existence spoke life into your soul, enabling you to see Jesus as your Savior and trust Jesus as your Savior.
- God justified you. He forgave all your sin and gave you the gift of His spotless righteousness. In the courtroom that ultimately counts, you are perfect as Jesus is perfect.
- God sanctified you. He set you apart for himself, holy as He is holy, and is even now working in your life to make you more like Jesus, a purifying work He will not fail to accomplish even through your suffering.
- God adopted you. He took you as a sinner and made you a royal son or daughter of the King. You are His child. He is your Father. And the inheritance of His firstborn son, Jesus, is yours.



- God glorified you. You have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places, welcomed into the kingdom of God. Heaven is your true home. And one day your Savior will return to bring you home. Your future in Christ is completely secure.

So what do we do? We say with the psalmist in Psalm 103:1-2, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Even when we're suffering? Yes. Why? Because your entire existence in this world, Christian, the futility of suffering included, occurs under the mighty deluge of the mercies of God to us in Christ Jesus.

So we bless the name of the Lord with gratitude in all circumstances. We bless Him for making us more like Jesus through our circumstances. We bless Him for the assurance of his nearness and love in the midst of our circumstances. And we bless Him for the change He will one day work in our circumstances.

Take this to heart, brothers and sisters. In every situation – no exceptions – you have abundant reason to give thanks. The abiding gratitude God requires of us in Christ Jesus God supplies to us through Christ Jesus. A Christian is characterized by abiding gratitude.

## **CONCLUSION**

No matter your personality type, if you're a Christian, your life should be characterized by enduring joy, persistent prayer, and abiding gratitude. How they are expressed will vary from person to person, but their presence should be discernible in the life of every believer. If you have to convince the people who know you best that despite all appearances to the contrary, you're rejoicing on the inside, something's missing.

The good news of the gospel is that what God requires of us in Christ Jesus He supplies to us through Christ Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate answer to St. Augustine's prayer, "Command what you will, and give what you command," because God effects joy, prayer, and gratitude in our lives through the person and work of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 presents everyone in this room an invitation and an opportunity. If you're not a believer in Jesus, the Lord invites you right now to repent of your sins and come to Christ. Trust Him. Submit to Him. Follow Him. The



kind of joy, prayer, and gratitude I've spoken of today are not something you can will into existence. They are God's will for you in (and only in) a relationship with Christ Jesus.

If you are a believer, the Lord's Word to you today gives you an opportunity to practice humility. Before this sermon becomes a distant memory, ask a fellow brother or sister you trust to give you an honest assessment. Do you see enduring joy, persistent prayer, and abiding gratitude in my life? By the grace of God, where am I strong? By the grace of God, where do I need to grow?" Then ask the same person, "How has God helped you to grow in those areas?"

The Lord gives grace to the humble, friends. Seek help to grow from one another confident that what God requires, God supplies.