

## "Three Commands" – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Most of you know that I'm quite fond of quoting Romans 10:9. I like it because it perfectly summarizes what a person must do to be saved from an eternity in hell.

*... that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)*

That's pretty explicit, isn't it? You cannot earn salvation, you can only accept it as a gift, by faith, faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone. You have to believe that Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead so you can have a living relationship with Him. And you have to confess Him as the Lord of your life.

But confessing Jesus as Lord is more than just saying the words: "Jesus, you are Lord."

*"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)*

If Jesus really is your Lord, you need to let Him call the shots. You need to find out what He wants you to do and how He wants you to live your life, then strive to be obedient. I know you're going to stumble from time to time. I certainly do. As John says:

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)*

So, when you mess up, just admit it. Confess your transgressions, accept His forgiveness, but then keep pressing on toward the upward call of Christ. Find out what He wants you to do, then just do it.

Finding out what Jesus wants is not hard. Determining God's will for your life is not a difficult task. He wrote it down for you in the pages of this Bible and the passage we're going to look at this week couldn't be more explicit. It gives three commands in one sentence. These are not suggestions; these are commands and if you are not willing to be obedient to these commands, then you are rebelling against the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It is that simple. So, let's take a look now at these three commands:

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)*

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks: three commands you can use to guide your Christian walk; three things that should characterize the life of every Christian.

Let's take them one at a time.

The Christian life should be a life characterized by joy. "Rejoice always."

Christian, you have an awful lot to be happy about and this is certainly not the only place in Scripture where we are exhorted to be joyful.

*The LORD reigns; Let the earth rejoice; Let the multitude of isles be glad! (Psalms 97:1)*

*Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands! Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing. (Psalms 100:1-2)*

*This is the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalms 118:24)*

*Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven,  
(Matthew 5:12)*

*Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! (Philippians 4:4)*

*"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and  
that your joy may be full. (John 15:11)*

*And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. (1 John 1:4)*

I could go on and on.

God wants us to rejoice in Him. God wants us to rejoice in Jesus, but this world ... this life militates against it. There is so much heartache in this fallen world. We live in a culture that is becoming more and more rebellious toward the Creator of this universe. We see the consequences of sin all around us. We are faced with trials on every side. We endure illness, poverty, persecution. As we get older, we just seem to collect disappointments. And yet the Lord commands that we rejoice always? How do you do that?

You do that by remembering the infinite grace of God. Consider the world in which we live. It's incredible! It's magnificent! It is beautiful! God not only created it, He sustains it. And He sustains us. We certainly don't deserve it, but our God ...

*He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the  
just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:45)*

But more than that, you can rejoice because He made you a Christian. Aren't you happy about that? He did all the work, all you have to do is believe.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of  
yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.  
(Ephesians 2:8-9)*

You were dead in your sins and transgressions. You were destined for an eternity of unimaginable agony but God sent Jesus to pluck you out of the jaws of hell. And He has promised you an inheritance in a New Heaven and a New Earth where righteousness dwells. You think this earth is incredibly beautiful ... and it is. Imagine how incredible the new earth is going to be. It is going to be your playground!

*Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.  
(Habakkuk 3:18)*

Rejoice!

You can also rejoice that you are part of God's own family. Do you rejoice in Christian fellowship? I do! So did King David.

*I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."  
(Psalms 122:1)*

You know, there are some people who go to Sunday morning worship as if it were some sort of obligatory penance. There are some people who actually think it is sacrilegious to enjoy worshipping with the people of God. I had a friend of my father tell me once that I really need to keep my sermons to no more than ten or twelve minutes. "That's all people can endure," he said. Well, I don't want our worship to be something you have to endure. We are not to forsake ...

*... the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25)*

I desperately want you to look forward to Sunday morning worship, not because we are particularly entertaining, but because this is a place where together, we get to encounter God. Jesus said:

*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20)*

My prayer for every one of you is that this gathering together with the saints would not be something you only do if there is nothing else to do. I pray that it would be a priority because this fellowship, this koinonia, is really special.

John writes:

*... that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)*

Wow!

*And these things we write to you that your **joy** may be full. (1 John 1:4)*

Rejoice!

Finally, if you can find joy in God's grace, joy in your salvation, joy in the family of God, you can even find joy in tribulation. You can rejoice even when you are facing troubled times.

You see, God is working all things together for your good and His glory. If you have trusted Jesus with your life, even the most painful, horrible, gut-wrenching experiences will eventually work out for your good. It might not seem like it in the short term, but that is the promise of scripture. Scripture is God-breathed. God never lies!

*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)*

Embrace that. Claim the promise and you can rejoice, even during the trials of life.

Think about the Apostles. At one point, they were hauled before the Sanhedrin. Let me just read that passage ... it is in Acts, Chapter 5.

*... when they had called for the apostles **and beaten them**, [probably 39 strokes with the lash] they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, **rejoicing** that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (Acts 5:40-42)*

Even while enduring the most severe tribulation ...

Rejoice!

Well, I'm quite sure I could preach for another hour on the command to rejoice, but I need to move on. The second command in this sentence of scripture is "pray without ceasing". I think it was John MacArthur who once said that for the Christian, "... praying is like breathing, it's just normal, it's just natural, it's just living for us." I certainly believe that's what praying should be but I suspect most, if not all of us fall short of that ideal. If prayer is like breathing

for us, then too often we are found holding our breath. You can't hold your breath too long before it starts to impact your performance.

When Paul says that we should pray without ceasing, he is saying we should engage in a lifestyle of prayer. Prayer is our means of communicating with God. Jesus made it possible for us to have a restored relationship with our God but relationships cannot thrive without communication. Haven't you found that to be the case in your marriage? And how long would a friendship last if you never communicated with your friend? We need to be persistent with our prayer life because that's how you communicate with the greatest Friend you will ever have.

Now, to have an effective prayer life, you need to understand what prayer is and how prayer works. Prayer is not, or at least it shouldn't be, just an exercise in telling God how to run His universe. Here's the thing; if you want to communicate effectively with anybody, you also need to listen. You need to listen to God and God speaks to us primarily through the Bible. Remember, all scripture is *theopneustos* (θεόπνευστος) That is, God-breathed ... spoken by God. (2 Tim. 3:16) So, don't just make demands of God ... take time to listen to what He is telling you. Get into His word. Get into the Bible. And then ...

*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; (Philippians 4:6)*

Prayer is not about getting God to do what you want Him to do. Prayer is about opening your heart to Him. Prayer is about letting God conform your heart to His will. And then, God uses your prayers to accomplish His will. Isn't that amazing?

In Revelation, John uses burning incense as a metaphor for our prayers.

*Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (Revelation 5:8)*

As we offer our prayers to God, they are as a sweet-smelling aroma to Him. He really likes hearing our prayers. No wonder Paul tells us to pray without ceasing. We should be praying about everything. Not just big things, but small things too. In fact, as we make our way through the day, we should be having a running conversation with our Lord.

And *in everything give thanks*. Well if we are always rejoicing for the amazing grace God continually pours out on us, if we are praying to Him without ceasing, doesn't it make sense that we should have an attitude of gratitude?

God is so good! God is good all the time. He is good when things are going well, and He is good when things are going sideways. So, we should be thanking Him

*In everything give thanks.*

Notice that it doesn't say **for** everything give thanks. "Oh, I hit my hand with a sledge hammer ... thanks for that, Lord." That wouldn't make a whole lot of sense. But you can thank God that He is still in control and that when you stop hitting your hand, it tends to feel a lot better. No matter what bad things you experience, if you are in Christ, you know everything is going to be okay.

*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:16-17)*

Now that's something to be thankful for!

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)*

God is working all things together according to the council of His will (Ephesians 1:11)  
As God's children, as God's heirs, we reap the benefit. We will glorify God and enjoy Him forever!

*For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)*

That, my friends, is a lot to celebrate!

So, *this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks.