

July 1, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Perpetual Practices

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Three Perpetual Practices: Joy, Prayer, Giving Thanks

Extent of These Practices

Examples of These Practices

Results of These Practices

Difficulties in Application

Once again, we have the opportunity to open God's Word together. I would ask you to open your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5.

In recent weeks, we have looked at the final section of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians (which began at verse 12).

In verses 12,13a, Paul deals with how the people of the church ought to relate to the leaders of the church.

In verses 13b,14,15, Paul deals with how the people of the church ought to relate to each other.

In verses 16-22, Paul deals with how the people of the church ought to relate to God.

Tonight, we will focus our attention on verses 16, 17 and 18.

Like last time we looked at 1 Thessalonians, the text before us creates no great obstacle to inhibit our understanding. It is so simple and straightforward that I didn't block diagram this passage, which is usually my first step in preparing for any sermon. (I believe that this is the first time in this epistle that I have not done so).

Furthermore, my time spent in commentaries what much less than normal this week -- there simply isn't much to say by way of interpretation with this passage. It is an easy passage to interpret.

However, as easy as this passage is to interpret, it is equally as difficult to apply. The bar is raised. The standard is set. And we find difficulty in meeting the demands of the text. Let's first look at the text tonight:

5:16 - Rejoice always;

5:17 - Pray without ceasing;

5:18 - In everything give thanks;

for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

First, notice that there are 3 simple commands. We are told to "rejoice" and "pray" and "give thanks." Notice that there are 3 simple modifiers to these commands: "Always" and "without ceasing" and "in everything." Finally, there is 1 reason given, "this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (This probably refers to each of these commands).

To put these verses in a succinct form, we could say that God's will for us in Christ Jesus is that we be ...

1. a joyful people!
 2. a prayerful people!
- and
3. a thankful people!

To put these verses in a polished, homiletical form, we could say that Paul gives us 3 PERPETUAL PRACTICES for being in God's will:

1. The practice of Joy.
2. The practice of Prayer.
3. The practice of Giving Thanks.

Three Perpetual Practices: Joy, Prayer, Giving Thanks

Let's look at each of these practices.

1. Joy

This is the Greek word, *chairw*(*chairō*). It means, to rejoice, be glad, be of good cheer. It is a very common word. The noun form of this word is

cariv(charis), which means, grace, loveliness, graciousness, gracefulness. (We named our first daughter after this word). This word is commonly used in greetings: cariv (charis) to you and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This word describes a genuine happiness and contentment, which affects one's countenance and attitude. It describes an encouraging and positive outlook which manifests itself through one's words and actions. It is so repeatedly manifest in Scripture as an attitude of true believers that I couldn't even hope to be exhaustive in our time this evening in describing this. Let's just get a feel of how this is used (particularly in non-Theological contexts).

It is used to describe the joy of first hearing the gospel: "When the Gentiles heard [that Salvation was being extended to them], they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord" (Acts 13:48).

It describes the initial joy after conversion. After Philip baptized the Ethiopian Eunuch and was snatched away, Luke records that the "eunuch ... went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39)

It represents the joy in heaven at the conversion of sinners. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

Paul used this word to connote the joy of encouragement at seeing the spiritual growth of others, "For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ" (Col. 2:5).

It describes happiness and fortunate circumstances. The chief priests had joy and delight when they found out that Judas agreed to betray Jesus. "They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money" (Mark 14:10-11).

In the Psalms this concept of joy is used over and over and over again to describe our praise to God!

"In Thy presence is fullness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever" (Ps. 16:11).

"Sing for joy in the LORD, O you righteous ones; Praise is becoming to the upright" (Ps. 33:1).

"Sing for joy to God our strength; Shout joyfully to the God of Jacob" (Ps. 81:1).

2. Prayer

The word used here to describe prayer is a very common word. In fact, this is the most common word in the New Testament to describe prayer and thus, it is the most general word. It is always used to describe prayer to God (or to gods). Any praise or request that is destined to be heard by God comes under the umbrella of this word.

For instance, ...

Jesus uses this word repeatedly when teaching His disciples how to pray. "And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matt. 6:5-6). It is a very general word which is used in many and varied contexts.

We see models of prayer in the Bible that demonstrate how general this word is, because of all of the different types of places in which people prayed. Prayer goes far beyond what happens in a formal place of worship.

Jesus prayed in a lonely place in the desert (Mark 1:35).

Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:35).

The early disciples were praying in the upper room (Acts 1:14).

Peter was praying on a housetop (Acts 10:9).

Early church prayer meeting in a home (Acts 12:12).

In Philippi, they routinely prayed by the river (Acts 16:13).

Paul and Silas prayed in a prison cell (Acts 16:25).

This is no less true in the Old Testament...

David prayed in the caves.

Elisha prayed over a boy who had died.

The Psalmist prayed when reading God's Word (Ps. 119:18).

Daniel prayed in his residence in Babylon.

Prayer can be made alone.

Prayer can be made together.

Prayer can be silent.

Prayer can be audible.

Prayer can be a praise to God.

Prayer can be a petition to God.

Prayer can be made in a sanctified place.

Prayer can be made in any location.

Prayer can be made at all hours of the night or day.

3. Thanksgiving

This word, in the Greek text, is eucaristew (eucharisteo), which means, "to be thankful, give thanks, to have gratitude, to receive with thanks." This word is related, etymologically, to our word for "joy."

eu (eu) = good
cariV (charis) = grace

Literally, it means, "good grace." Thus, it came to mean, "thanks." This word is a very common word. Most often, it is used to express a thankfulness to God for what has been done. For instance,

In giving thanks for the bread during the last supper, Christ "gave thanks" (or eucharisted the bread) (Matt. 26:27).
Before feeding the 5,000, Jesus "took the loaves; and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated" (John 6:11).
The healed leper "turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving thanks to Him" (Luke 17:15-16).
In more than half of Paul's epistles, he begins with a word of thanks to God (for instance, 1 Thess. 1:2; Philemon 4; Eph. 1:16).
Paul gave thanks for Pricilla and Aquila's risking their own necks for his sake (Rom. 16:4).

The key here, is that this word is used in thankfulness to God for what has been done. Which is true of each of these practices we have just examined. They all are responding actions.

We respond to God in joy.
We respond to God in prayer.
We respond to God in thanksgiving.

We have looked at the Three Perpetual Practices: Joy, Prayer, Giving Thanks. Notice also what is said about the ...

Extent of These Practices

We are to rejoice always.
We are to pray unceasingly.
We are to give thanks in everything.

In each of these verses, the Greek text clearly reveals that the emphasis is upon the duration and breadth of these actions (in each case, the modifier comes first in the sentence). You get the emphasis in the Greek text if you read these words this way

5:16 - Always rejoice.
5:17 - Unceasingly pray.
5:18 - In everything give thanks.

"Always" refers to the time of rejoicing -- there ought never to be a time in which rejoicing isn't occurring. "Unceasingly" refers to the duration of prayer -- there ought never to be an end to praying. "In everything" refers to the object of gratitude -- there ought to be nothing for which thanks cannot be given.

I mentioned before how each of these practices are very common ones in Scripture. But, it is interesting to see that the continual emphasis of these practices are also called for in other portions of Scripture.

1. Rejoicing

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil. 4:4).

Even in difficulties: "Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12).

2. Praying

"Men ought to pray at all times and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

"With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18).

"Devote yourselves to prayer" (Col. 4:2).

3. Giving thanks

"I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth" (Ps. 34:1).

"Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, the Father" (Eph. 5:20).

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

Now, what does this mean? Is Paul calling us to 24 hours a day, continual, conscious and audible rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks? Does this mean that if we aren't consciously rejoicing at every moment of the day, we are sinning? Does this mean that if we aren't always engaging our minds in conscious prayer that we are sinning? Does this mean that if we are not consciously thankful for everything that we see or encounter, we are sinning?

Let me simply say, that it is impossible to be consciously rejoicing, praying and giving thanks at all times throughout every day. First of all, constant audible prayer and constant telling each other of how we are thankful for other things would make life impossible. Imagine it with me for a moment. If you were constantly saying, ...

Praise the Lord; I'm filled with joy, ...
In you, O LORD, I rejoice, ...
I give you praise, O LORD, ...
You are holy and true, ...
Praise God from whom all blessings flow, ...
Praise the Lord Jesus Christ, ...
Bless the Holy Spirit, You are so good to me, ..."

Or, ...
"Thank you for this day, ...
thank you for this breath, ...
thank you for these people, ...
thank you for children, ...
thank you for the Bible, ...
thank you for this breath, ...
thank you for our car, ...
thank you for my pencil sharpener, ...
thank you for Susie's kind words, ..."

If you were constantly saying these things, it would be impossible to hold a conversation with anybody. Life would be chaos. What about when you sleep?

Perhaps you might say, "well, rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks can be done without saying anything. You can think these things in the mind." I ask you, do you have difficulty thinking of more than one thing at a time? I know that I do. Even thinking these things consciously all of the time wouldn't be possible.

Thus, I believe that when Paul commands these things, I believe him to be speaking hyperbole, not reality. Hyperbole is an intentional overstatement of the case, in order to allow you to feel the weight and importance of the statement. Paul's emphasis here was simply that these attitude ought to so pervade our lives, that others see them.

I remember when we used to go visit grandma. She had a clock with distinctly sounding chimes. Whenever we were at grandma's house, we heard the sound of the clock. To hear the clock was equivalent to being at grandma's house. Recently I was at a home which had the same chimes on their clock. When they sounded, I was transported back to my grandmother's house, because it so reminded me of the atmosphere of grandma's house. So our heart toward God ought to have this constant atmosphere of rejoicing praying and giving thanks -- an ever-present reality in the home.

Like the constant sound of my grandmother's clock, so ought our attitudes be ever expressed constantly before others. Though it is practically impossible to consciously express all of the attitudes at every moment of the day, on the other hand, to consciously refuse to exhibit any of these attitudes is nothing less than sin. In other words, ...

- if you are ever conscious of having an attitude which is not characterized by joy and rejoicing, you are sinning.
- if you are ever conscious of not praying and communing with the living God, you are sinning.
- if you are ever conscious of not being thankful for a particular circumstance, you are sinning.

Examples of these practices

A friend of mine, who is now with the Lord, constantly modeled for me what it meant to be joyful in all circumstances. Whenever he was asked, "How are you doing?" He would almost always say (even in his terminal bout with cancer), "I'm rejoicing." It was a constant reminder to him as well as to others of this constant attitude.

Nehemiah has modeled what it means to be prayerful in all circumstances. When standing before King Artaxerxes, the king said, "What would you request?" Before he responded, Nehemiah "prayed to the God of heaven" and immediately made known his request before the king. Nehemiah didn't pray formally. He prayed a quick prayer to God (as if never leaving his presence) and continued to speak with the king in an attitude of utter dependence.

We have already seen Paul's example of being thankful in all circumstances. Earlier in this epistle, Paul wrote, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers" (1:2).

This ought to be our attitude. People ought to see us and say that something is different about us. Have you ever met people and been around them and thought to yourself, "Wow, this person is a really happy person!" "They are joyful and helpful!" And then, later, found out that they were Christians? I can think of 2 women in particular at work who are like this. There is a joy about them. And I have discovered later that they are Christians.

May I point out further, that we ought to be different than the world, who knows nothing about the genuine joy and thankfulness that surrounds the life of the believer in Jesus Christ. The unbelieving world knows nothing about these attitudes. Their joy is worldly and temporary at best. They may have a formality to their prayers, yet they remain external and unreceived in the throne of heaven (i.e. "The prayer of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD."). Though God showers us in his blessing as Psalm 145:9-10 say, "The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works. All Thy works shall give thanks to Thee, O LORD, and Thy godly ones shall bless Thee." Yet, the unbelieving world knows not God and they do not honor Him as God or give thanks (Rom. 1:21).

But, unlike the unbelieving world, this needs to be our attitude. We need to have a constant attitude of joy. This doesn't mean, "Patsy Clairmont, laughter and smiles all of the time. But it does mean that we ought to have a joyful and rejoicing disposition, rather than having a grumpy and gloomy disposition.

We need to have a constant attitude of prayer. We ought to continually bring up anything and everything to the LORD in prayer. We ought to have a constant communion with God, ever sending up quick requests and praises to the throne of God.

We need to have a constant attitude of thanksgiving. Our hearts need to be filled with an unworthiness to receive or experience what we have. We ought never to presume and think that we "deserve" anything, but rather, we ought to express to God and others of our sincere appreciation for what God and others have done for us.

Results of these practices

1. This will affect our worship.

We don't come here to church to rejoice, pray, and give thanks as if we never do these at other times. Our church services isn't built around trying to "get you up" in an attitude of joy and thanksgiving. We come to worship together because we have been doing these things by ourselves. Our joy and thanks are merely amplified when we are together.

2. This will affect our friendships.

People don't want to be around gloomy people. Have you noticed that? Show me a gloomy person, and I will show you somebody who has a difficult time having any friends. But if we, as the people of God, cultivate these practices, our friendships will be different.

3. This will affect our evangelism.

Recently at work, I was asked by a fellow worker, "What is this that I always hear you humming?" I was able to tell him that I hadn't really noticed that I was humming. However, I did notice myself humming some of the new hymns that we have been singing here at church. I had an opportunity to give testimony to God for putting joy in my heart. Furthermore, your joy will create credibility in your message. If you are gloomy in your countenance, who wants to be saved from their gloominess to your gloominess?

Let me ask you, "How well do you live up to this?" "To what extent does this match the experience of your heart?"

I would admit, that it is difficult to always cultivate an attitude of continually joyful and thankful prayer. So tonight, with the remainder of our time, I would like to address some of the difficulties that inhibit us from experiencing this in our hearts. I sincerely believe that if we can overcome these difficulties, our hearts will be better cultivated to produce these attitudes which God requires of us.

It is important that we cultivate these attitudes in our lives. Why? Because it is the will of God us in Christ Jesus (5:18).

Let's examine some ...
Difficulties in Application

In doing so, I really want to lump all of these commands together and treat them as one. Though there are subtle differences, I believe that they all are addressing the same attitude.

Think about it...

The one who is continually prayerful will express this with a joyful countenance and thankful heart.
The one who is filled with joy will have this overflow in prayer and thankfulness.
The best way to express one's thankfulness is through prayer and genuine joy.

All of these attitudes simply express a dependant and thankful heart, which will express itself both to God and to others.

Furthermore, I believe that the difficulties we experience in being joyful are the exact same difficulties we face in being thankful and prayerful. The hindrances to prayer are the same hindrances we have to joy and thanksgiving. I believe that this will become apparent as we examine some of these difficulties....

Let's look at the first difficulty. I am calling it ...

1. Circumstances

I have known people and I have observed people who have allowed the circumstances of their lives to dictate their attitudes toward God or toward others.

Take as an example, the family circumstances one had while growing up (you can think of others) I have seen those who have been raised in difficult and abusive family situations become resentful and rebellious toward the LORD. These people are neither thankful nor joyful to the LORD for the families that God has given them and they never overcome it. They remain bitter toward God for allowing them to be placed in such a situation.

I feel for these types of people. This past week, I had opportunity to spend a considerable amount of time with about 40 children at a Christian soccer camp in DeKalb. I had an opportunity to open the Bible and teach them of what God requires of us and of the provision God has given to us in Christ Jesus.

I noticed before, more than ever, the effects of the divorced home on Children. You could simply tell of those children, who are living with only one parent as opposed to those who are living with two in a loving, Christian home. For the most part, they have picked up gloom and sorrow from their parents.

I feel for them. I don't pretend to imagine the experiences that many of these children (and then adults) have faced.

And yet, here is what I do know, the Bible nowhere gives excuse for those who have been saved and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ to be a gloomy, depressed, and unthankful people. Paul says, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks." (1 Thess. 5:16-18)!

I see no "Except" word here! "Except those who have grown up in bad families. You have a right to be a gloomy, unthankful, non-praying people." The fact is that circumstances often lead people down this road and apart from Jesus Christ, it is to be expected.

But those who have seen the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, have seen their circumstances to be far worse than they ever appear to be on earth.

- They have seen themselves to be separate from Christ,
- They have seen themselves to be excluded from the blessings of God's people,
- They have seen themselves to be strangers to God's covenants,
- They have seen themselves to be without hope,
- They have seen themselves to be without God.

Those who have seen the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ have seen that whatever earthly circumstances they may have been placed in, they were in far worse shape spiritually, ... But God, who is rich in mercy, made them alive and has granted forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the cross of Christ, there is much reason to be thankful and joyful. The thankfulness and joy in the gospel ought to overshadow life's circumstances which may lead to gloom and despair.

2. Feelings

This is a big one that tends to diminish our joy and thankfulness before the LORD. Again, the Bible no where says, "be thankful and joyful and prayerful," unless you aren't feeling like it. The scriptural injunction is ...

Psalm 100:1-2,4

"Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth."

"Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before Him with joyful singing."

"Enter His gates with thanksgiving, And His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him; bless His name."

So, you ask, "what if I am not feeling joyful or thankful?"

1. Confess your sin of joylessness.
2. Confess your sin of thanklessness.
3. Pray that God would give you a spirit of joyful and thankful prayer.
4. Do everything you can do to be joyful and thankful externally and pray that God would make this attitude true in the inner man.

I was blessed to hear of one in this week, when difficult things had come upon her, turned on the radio and forced herself to have a joyful, rejoicing attitude.

Let's hear afresh the admonition of D. L. Moody, "My friends, God is above feeling. Do you think you can control your feelings? I am sure if I

could control my feelings I never would have any bad feelings, I would always have good feelings. But bear in mind Satan may change our feelings fifty times a day, but he cannot change the Word of God; and what we want is to build our hopes of heaven upon the Word of God" (as quoted by Bibiotheca Sacra, #370, April-June, 1936, p. 187).

3. Trials

By this, I mean those difficulties that come in life that you were neither expecting, nor desiring.

This may be health related (as some of you are experiencing).

This may be church related.

This may be work related.

This may be financially related.

Whatever the case may be, I am simply describing the case in which people run into difficulties in life, which the Bible calls, "trials." I have seen people go through trials with tremendous joy and thankfulness. I have seen other people go through trials and turn into grumblers, rather than rejoicers.

I remember the late Rich Kerns saying, "Trials will either make you bitter or better." I have seen people in the church become bitter and resentful, rather than joyful and thankful because circumstances turned out differently than they had expected them to. But the Bible tells us to "consider it all joy (i.e. 'nothing but joy') when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2,3).

However, often times, trials dampen our joy and thankfulness before the LORD. Rather than being continual prayers, we become complainers and worriers.

The Thessalonians are great models for this. Paul testified of them in 1:6, "You received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." You may think that the Thessalonians had reason to complain because of the trials that were coming upon them. However, they rested in the sovereignty of God. "You yourselves know that we have been destined for these afflictions" (3:3).

Ultimately, with all circumstances of life, we need to rest in God's sovereignty as the Thessalonians did. I love John Piper has said so eloquently, ... "Behind a frowning providence, God hides a smiling face." We know that trials will come.

4. Earthly-mindedness

By this, I mean a pre-occupation with the here and now, rather than a focus upon the eternal. Failing to set our minds on the things above, but on the things on earth creates within us a difficulty in continually being joyful and thankful and prayerful.

When we don't have our focus upon God, we will lose our joy and thankfulness.

I have seen those who have been tremendously blessed financially in this world come to neglect and reject God, because there is no need for them to trust in God when they have the world's goods. I have seen these types of people become proud and arrogant before others, thinking that they deserve to have the world's riches.

On the flip side, I have seen those who have been given very little from the world's perspective and have come to be bitter and resentful to God, because they don't have from a worldly perspective what they wish they had. I have seen these types of people respond harshly and hateful to those who have been given more.

There is truth in the proverb, "Give me neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is my portion, lest I be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD? Or lest I be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God" (Prov. 30:8-9).

Materialism can distract us from either side. Some have too much and have no need for God. Some have too little and cannot be thankful for God's provision. Materialism distracts from a continual joy and thankfulness and continual dependence upon the Lord in prayer.

One of the lessons that I taught the children at soccer camp this week was the parable that Jesus told of the greedy man in Luke 12. You remember when he had so much grain that he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones? In the story, God called him a fool! "Because this very night, your soul is required of you." He was so focussed upon the here and now that he was actually ignorant and unbelieving of the life to come.

Listen, the one who is focussed on this earth will have difficulty lifting his mind to heaven in constant communication with God.

I love what John Piper has said, "We have settled for a home, a family, a few friends, a job, a television, a microwave oven, an occasional night out, a yearly vacation, and perhaps a new personal computer. We have accustomed ourselves to such meager, short-lived pleasures that our capacity for joy has shriveled. And so our worship has shriveled. ... The scenery and poetry and music of the majesty of God have dried up like a forgotten peach at the back of the refrigerator" (John Piper, Desiring God, p. 78).

Conclusion

In all circumstance, we are called to have these attitudes in ourselves. May we depend upon God to cultivate them in our lives. Amen.

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