REJOICE, PRAYER, THANKS

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Key Verse: 5:16-18

“Be joyful always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Thank God that his clear teaching that the day of the Lord is coming and it is the day of sudden destruction. He died for us. In this grace, we are sons of the light and sons of the day. As children of the day we are to be alert and self-controlled, putting on faith and love as breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. We should be always aware that we are in a spiritual battle field and so we cannot stand in the battle field without the armament of faith, love, and hope but we absolutely can with that equipment. We studied the main part of this epistle, 4:1-5:11. 5:12-28 is Paul’s final exhortation. We want to study this part in two lessons. In today’s passage, 5:12-18, Paul gives pastoral instructions as Christian living for the holistic relationships in the whole church community of God. It includes the famous command of God, “Be joyful always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” May we really digest and try to master these words of God so that these words may truly influence our lives.

**First, building up the community of God (12-15).** Verse 12 says, “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.” “Respect” is an important element in all our relationships, especially in the church. Due respect builds up the relationship between the two, the shepherd and the sheep, keeping the spiritual order before God. Paul continues in verse 13, “Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” The respect is to be shown in love, not in fatalistic thinking or customarily. Paul says in Galatians 6:6, “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.” The author of Hebrews says in 13:17, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Each part has a solemn duty. The shepherds are to bear the holy duty of watching over God’s flock of sheep as men who must give an account, putting themselves under the Chief Great Shepherd Jesus, and the sheep are to show submission in obedience before God. Then God richly blesses the relationship.

Then Paul says, “Live in peace with each other.” Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Hebrews 12:14 says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy.” Peace and holiness are to together in the community of God.

Consequently, Paul says in verses 14 and 15, “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and to everyone else.” Here Paul seems to list four different kinds of people: the idle, the timid, the weak, and the resentful. The Thessalonian church was an exemplary one, yet it was undeniable that there were still different kinds of sinners who were redeemed by the grace of Jesus yet were to be much changed in their characters and behaviours. One servant of God, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) once said, “The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians but a school for the education of imperfect ones.”  That’s quite true. The church is not a place for perfect people, but a place for imperfect unholy people to continually be changed in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s think of the people Paul listed here, four categories, one by one. The first one is “the idle.” “Idle” is in Greek *ataktos*, meaning “out of order”, “out of place.” It was often used in a military sense. When used in the military sense, it had the idea of a soldier who was out of line, a soldier who was out of rank, a soldier who was guilty of disorderly conduct, who was insubordinate, not submissive, disobeying orders, not following through on his duty.  The soldier was out of step. So it is translated “disruptive”, “disorderly”, “unruly” or “wayward.” They are disobedient and rebellious. This word or its equivalent form is used in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 7, 11, “6…to keep away from every brother who is idle…7…We were not idle when we were with you…11We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.” Paul urges, “warn/admonish them.” They can be obedient, submissive, orderly, and responsible with diligence.

The second category is the timid. “The timid” is in other translations, “the fainthearted.” They do want to challenge. They want to stay in their comfort zone. They worry about many things out of fear for their changed lives and future. Paul exhorts, “Encourage them.” The timid can be courageous and powerful, challenging everything that has to be done. We remember what Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7, “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”

The third group is the weak. We are reminded of Hebrews 11:34, “…whose weakness was turned to strength…” Paul urges, “help the weak”, for the weak can be the strong in God. Hebrews 12:12 says, “Strengthen your feeble alms and weak knees.” Paul says in Ephesians 6:10 “…be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”

Paul says, “Be patient with everyone.” But we all need patience as we live with different people. God is patient and love is patient.

The fourth one can be the revengeful. In our sinful nature, it is easy to revenge, claiming eye for eye, tooth for tooth. But Paul says, “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else” Also Paul says in Romans 12, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil…Do not take revenge, but leave room for God’s wrath…Do not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (12:17, 19, 21). Peter says in 1 Peter 3:9, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

When Paul urges/exhorts the congregations to do these, he surely had a vision of the church’s growth through the changes of the people. Warning or admonishing, encouraging, helping, being patient, not allowing revenge spirit are all beautiful involvement. Paul did not say, “just wait until the Lord comes, and we all receive the glorification.” No, he wants all the congregations to be positive in this involvement and relationship.

**Second, rejoice, pray, give thanks (16-18).** Now Paul says in verses 16-18, “Be joyful always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Let’s try to digest these wonderful words of God so that we may keep these words in our hearts and lives.

Firstly, “be joyful always.” We know the cross is the symbol of Christianity. We can also say that Christianity is the religion of joy, although Jesus was known as a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering (Isa 53:3), and Christian life is problem-free but has many hardships. Nehemiah 8:10 says, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” It implies that joy belongs to the Lord and we can have joy because of the Lord. The Lord is the source of joy. David says in Psalm 32:11 says, “Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” Also, prophet Habakkuk says in Habakkuk 3:17-18, “…though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.” This indicates that Christian joy is different from that of the people of the world, which are external such as more income, better carriers, more recognition, more human love, seemingly better children, or other better human conditions. It is not easy for anyone to overcome these external things, but God wants us to have internal joy in the Lord. Mary said in her song after receiving the blessedness of conceiving the baby Jesus, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” (Lk 1:46, 47). It shows that Christian joy is more than emotional joy. It is rejoicing of one’s spirit in God.

In the upper room dialogue with his disciples, even though it was the very previous night before the cross Jesus said of his joy in John 15:11, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that you joy may be complete.” Jesus wanted his disciples to remain in his love by keeping his commandments so that they might have the joy of Jesus in them. He also said in his high priestly prayer in John 17:13, “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.” Jesus prayed for God’s protection for his disciples from the evil one and in that they might have the full measure of his joy within them though living in this world. Jesus had always joy in love relationship with the Father and fellowship with him, although he had also had pain and agony of his soul because of man’s sin and suffering. Jesus wanted to share with his people the joy he had in the glory God had bestowed on him because of love for him before the creation of the world (Jn 17:24). Hebrews 12:2 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

As we studied, John says in 1 John 1:3-4, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write his to make (y)our joy complete.” God is light. In fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ we can have joy. We can also have joy through having fellowship with one another in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 14:17 says, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

A Psalmist expressed the joy of the blessed, “Blesse is he…whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Psalm 19:8 says, “The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.” Psalm 119:111 says, “Your statues are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.” And Psalm 119:162 says, “I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil.” As we mediate on the words of God, we have joy in our hearts. And when we have fellowship in the word of God through Bible study and through Daily Bread and testimony writing and sharing, we have joy in the fellowship.

In the course of serving God’s flock of sheep Paul had much pains and suffering. But he also had joy. Regarding the Thessalonians, when he heard about their faith and love, he was so joyful that he said, “For we now really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?” (3:8-9). And he said, “What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.” (2:19-20) And Paul said of their joy in 1:6, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” And Jesus, after calling the twelve disciples, said to them, Luke 6:22-23, “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. ‘Rejoice in that day and leap for you, because great is your reward in heaven.” Paul wrote Philippians in Roman prison. But it came known as an epistle of joy. He says in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice.” When Apostle Peter thought of the early Christians, he was so thankful to God because of their refined faith amid all kinds of trials. He said to them in 1 Peter 1:8-9, “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” And he said in 1 Peter 4:13, “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

It is good to know that in the spelling “J-O-Y”, J standing for Jesus comes first, and then O for others, and Y for yourself comes last. Also, we are aware that there is a joy-robber, Satan. Anyway it is the command, “Be joyful always.”

Secondly, pray continually. Prayer is our spiritual breathing. It means without prayer we can not survive spiritually. We remember our Lord Jesus’ prayer life. He prayed early in the mourning (Mk 1:35). He prayed in the evening (Luke 21:37). On special occasions he prayed. Before calling 12 apostles he prayed one whole night (Lk 6:12). Before the cross he prayed at Gethsemane, saying, “…not as I will, but as you will” (Mt 26:39). Jesus taught his disciples, the Lord’s prayer, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come…” (Luke 11:2). After that he taught them a bold prayer through the story of a man who came to his friend’s house at midnight and asked the friend to lend him three loaves of bread so that he might serve his quest friend who came to his house while he had nothing to serve. Jesus said in the story, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friendship, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” (Lk 11:8). Then Jesus continues, “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Lk 11:9-10). After this Jesus goes further, “Which of your fathers, if you son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Of if he asks for an egg will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk 11:11-13). And Jesus taught his disciples a persistent prayer through a widow’s persistent request to an ungodly merciless judge. He said, “You should always pray and not give up…Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly…” (Lk 18:1, 7-8). In the upper room dialogue, Jesus taught his disciples prayer, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (14:14) “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7), and in 16:24, “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.” And Jesus said in Mark 11:24, “…I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

In Acts 1:14, after Jesus’ ascension the group of 120 people all joined together constantly in prayer (1:14), and when Peter was kept in prison, the church was earnestly praying to God for him (12:5). Paul says in Colossians 4:2, “Devote yourselves to payer, being watchful and thankful.” He also says in Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Ephesians 6:18 says, “And pray in he Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 4:7, “The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.” James said in James 5:16, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” As we studied in 1 John, he says in 1 John 5:14-15, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.” In Revelation, the prayers of the saints went up to God. 5:8 says, “…they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” and 8:3-4 says, “…He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand.” All these words of God show how much God wants his people to pray, pray continually.

Thirdly, give thanks in all circumstance. Being thankful is a part of Adam’s Bible, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden…” (Ge 2:16). In the Garden of Eden God wanted man to be thankful for all that God provided. When Adam and Eve lost thankful heart, they lost paradise. Thanklessness is the root of sin. Romans 1:21 says, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” In the gospel story, Jesus expressed the sin of thanklessness of fallen men so poignantly this way: Jesus healed ten lepers. At the moment they were healed, they all forgot who healed him and went on their way, except one Samaritan who only came back to praise God and said to him, “Thank you.” Jesus responded, saying, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise God except this foreigner?” (Lk 17:17-18). We can say that paradise restored means thankfulness restored. We believe that heaven is characterised with thanksgiving while hell is no thanksgiving. It is said that people in hell say, “Because of you…” and “It might have been.” In Revelation, the living creatures never stop saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” giving glory, honour and thanks to him (Rev 4:8-9). And in Revelation 7, when a great multitude who came out of the great tribulation cried out in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb,” all the angels fell down their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” (Rev 7:12).

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were put in prison after being flogged severely, simple because they did the work of God healing a demon-possessed girl. Their feet were fastened in the stocks. But about midnight they were praying and singing hymns to God, surely full of thanks to him. Then a miracle happened. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake and at once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose (Ac 16:25-34). It was for the further work of God to save the jailer and all his household. Paul says in Colossians 2:6-7, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” As we thought of, he also says in Colossians 4:2, “Devote yourselves to payer, being watchful and thankful.” And in Philippians 4:6 he says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Thanksgiving is to be learned. One spiritual secret of learning thanks to God is to count his blessings one by one. Paulina shared what she experienced after the birth of Danielle Emma. After the catheter was removed, she had enormous troubles in urinating. Her bladder was full, but she could not pee. Then she was filled with negative thoughts, feeling desperate. At the moment she prayed and remembered these words, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” She started to thank God for Dani’s birth and also good health otherwise. As she was reciting the words on the toilet, a trickle of pee came! And then more and more and her condition became normal. She confessed that it was a miracle. One Christian lady, when she was in the 4th year of university, was hit by a car driven by a drunken driver, while she was waiting for the traffic light to change. 55% of the body was injured with third-degree burns. Doctors said that she would not survive. But miraculously she survived and could have a second chance to live. She thanked God for the new life given to her. However, the pain in her body without skin was too much to bear. Three pills of pain-killer was allowed a day, and a pill would last for three hours altogether covering nine hours. For the rest of the day she had to feel the pain fully, which was unbearable to her. It had to go on for two months because of doctors’ strike. In such pain, she could not believe that God was with her. She felt that God abandoned her. In that situation, her mom suggested to find one thankful topic a day. She thought what’s there to be thankful for with such a pained body? However, she began to find and thank God for one thing a day. She thanked God that she could eat again with her own hand. The next day she thanked God that she could fasten her clothing buttons. She found that her feet were the only part not hurt by that accident. So she thanked God that she could walk with those feet. In fact, because of thanks to God she could sustain a day as the Israelites could survive a day by the daily bread of manna from heaven. And when she had such a thanksgiving heart, God gave her a vision in her dream that she would be a blessing to others as he received much help from others. Her skin transplant surgery was done properly. After, God led her to the USA to study social welfare and she became a professor in her own country. Now she plants hope in many despairing young people. Here, Paul says, “give thanks in all circumstances.” We can do so, because we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Ro 8:28).

It is notable that in light of the coming of the Lord God’s will for us in Christ Jesus is to be joyful always and pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances.