

FOLLOWING A BETTER PATH

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

October 10, 2021

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday and we join hands together as churches across the entire nation of Canada in thanks for what God has done for us in this past year. Here in Canada – we are highly blessed, as we live in a land of plenty, and we often forget to be thankful. Plus, we tend to forget what is happening in the rest of the world where millions of people in third world countries live on less than \$2 a day, and unsure where their next meal will come from, and then there are those who have endured hurricanes, earthquakes and countless other natural disasters who are trying to put their lives back together. The first thing we need to realize is that God loves these struggling people as much as He loves us here in Canada, so it's hard to understand or explain why these people suffer such great hardships, while most of us live such highly blessed lives. Maybe, God is giving us an opportunity to live our lives with open hands and release our wealth and resources into the lives of others who are less fortunate, as we are reminded in **2 Corinthians 9:7, “God loves a cheerful giver.”** Or maybe it's a lesson to us here in Canada in how we can be thankful and praise God right in the middle of stress, heartache, and difficulties!

Linda Harris has been handing out a great book on the power of praise and thanksgiving titled the *“Power of Praise,”* by Merlin R. Carothers. Linda gave me a copy a few months ago and I have read through it at least twice. This book is full of stories of how being thankful in circumstances that we would call dark and difficult can bring about victory and great joy in a believer's life. In those difficult times, as we abide in Christ with thanksgiving, everything else becomes secondary. The key verse for the teachings in this book is from **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”** So, on this Thanksgiving Sunday I would like us to understand those words from the Apostle Paul.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement wrote this comment on this passage, *“Rejoice evermore – in uninterrupted happiness to God. Pray without ceasing – which is the fruit of always rejoicing in the Lord. In everything give thanks – which is the fruit of both of the former (rejoicing and praying). This is Christian perfection! Farther than this we cannot go; we need not stop short of it. Our Lord has purchased joy as well as righteousness for us. It is the very design of the Gospel, that being saved from guilt, we should be happy in the love of*

Christ. Thanksgiving is inseparable from true prayer; it is almost essentially connected with it. He that always prays is every giving praise, whether in ease or pain, both for prosperity and for the greatest adversity. He blesses God for all things, looks on them as coming from Him, and receives them only for His sake; not choosing nor refusing, liking nor disliking anything, but only as it is agreeable or disagreeable to His perfect will.” John Wesley calls it reaching Christian perfection when a believer comes to the place in his walk when they can, **“Rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances!”** That is the essence of the Gospel message!

A number of years ago there was a Mercedes-Benz TV commercial that showed one of its cars colliding with a concrete wall during a safety test. Someone back then asks a Mercedes engineer why the company does not enforce its patent on their car's energy-absorbing car body, since the Mercedes' design has been copied by almost every other car maker in the world in spite of the fact that they have an exclusive patent on this technology.

The engineer replies in an abrupt German accent, "Because in life, some things are just too important not to share."

In the same way as this car manufacturer shared their technology to produce safer cars for everyone – Christ followers have a Gospel message that is too important not to share with others. We as the church must believe with our whole heart that Jesus Christ **must** be shared with our friends, our neighbours, and the whole world. Because as we read in **Isaiah 61** – the Gospel is GOOD NEWS for the poor, the broken-hearted, the prisoners, for those who mourn, turning their sorrows into gladness, and that’s why Jesus came. The GOOD NEWS of the Gospel message is the hope of this world, and as followers, we are commanded by Jesus to be witnesses according to **Acts 1:8**, **“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** And, because of this command – the Christian faith has been passed down from generation to generation over the last 2000 years – by people who were willing to take upon themselves the responsibility of being His witnesses in both good times and bad times as they followed Paul’s instructions: **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances!”**

This morning we are going to look at Paul’s final instructions to the church in Thessalonica – and I have entitled this message, following a better path. The first 4 chapters of this letter were written to encourage the struggling church on how to

live in their pagan society filled with idol worship. What made it especially difficult for them to live out their faith back at that time was that these believers were facing intense persecution from the surrounding culture, as they were experiencing social isolation as well as physical attacks from society around them. We as the modern church also struggle with how to live in an increasing secular society, a society that for the most part doesn't acknowledge or worship God, or share our beliefs.

As we turn to Paul's final instructions to the church in Thessalonica – Paul begins these final instructions to the church by instructing them on their responsibilities to their Christian leaders in **verses 12-13**, encouraging them not to take them for granted, because they work on their behalf to promote the Gospel message. Then, **verses 14-15** speak about the congregations' responsibilities towards each other, those believers who worship with them, urging them to not be idle, encouraging the timid and disheartened, and helping the weak believers, being patient with everyone. There are always people in the church that have deep needs or hurts that we need to come along side of in love. We have a duty to our Christian leaders and to those we worship with, to help them become mature in the faith!

And then we are to be kind to those who have wronged us. Paul wrote, ***“Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.”*** Revenge is a powerful natural human instinct. If someone throws an object at your face, your instinct is to raise your hands to protect yourself. If you lose your balance, your hands instinctively move out to catch yourself. In the same way, if someone hurts you, your instinct is to hurt them back, and when someone insults you, your emotional instinct is to say, *“Same to you, buddy, and more of it.”* But as followers of Jesus Christ, we follow a different set of relationship rules. We don't repay evil with evil; instead, we repay evil with good. That's also what Apostle Peter wrote, ***“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”*** (1 Peter 3:9). Believers follow the Golden Rule – *“We do to others as we would have them do to us!”*

Then Paul turns his focus on how we are to relate to God, our heavenly Father. **Verses 16-18** speak about the congregational responsibilities toward God, ***“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”*** These three actions are God's will for our lives, and you will notice that they all involve choice! So, regardless of what we

are going through, God's desire for every believer is to be filled with joy, to pray continually, and always be thankful. Paul's words here can be very difficult for us because some of the things that happen to us really stink. It's difficult to be filled with joy, to give thanks and praise God when a marriage breaks up, or when a loved one dies, or when we get sick, or when someone we love is going through an addiction. Life is hard at times, but Paul is telling us here that we don't have to wallow in our hard luck, like the rest of the world. We can still give thanks to God as we go through hard times. We can rejoice in God and trust Him through it all. That's our witness to the unbelieving world. As believers, our best witness to unbelievers is in how we cope with disappointments and how we see them in their true perspective, and that true perspective is rooted in the conviction that in all circumstances God is at work on behalf of His people, those who love Him and serve Him. Bottom line is that we trust God at all times! And to rejoice always is to see the hand of God in whatever is happening and remain certain that God is working all things out for our good. So, we leave the outcome to God and accept the outcome whatever it may be!

Rejoicing and giving thanks are both based on our convictions that our Lord is indeed King – and He will come to take us to be with Him in eternity one day. So whether we live or die, we win! When we think that way – rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks are less things that we have to do, and more of things that we want to do and chose to do, all because of what we truly believe and the hope that we have in Christ Jesus. The real challenge for us is that when times and things are good, it's easy to rejoice and give thanks, but when things are not so good, we don't feel like rejoicing and giving thanks, but we do it anyway, because when those difficult times come, we are convinced that ***“in all things God works for the good of those who love him”*** (Romans 8:28).

The problem is that many of us are constantly defeated by the circumstances around us because we aren't ready to accept the fact that the battle is the Lord's, not ours. And even when we realize that we are powerless to cope with the enemy, we are often afraid to let go and trust God; however, God's Word makes it clear that the only way out of any dilemma we face is a step of faith on our part. Believing that God's promises are true, accepting them, and then daring to trust them will lead us to understanding. That's the way that faith works: ***“Acceptance always comes before understanding!”*** The reason for this is simple – our human understanding is so limited that we can't possibly even grasp the magnitude of God's plan and purpose for us without the help of the Holy Spirit. So, if our

understanding had to come before our acceptance, we'd never be able to accept very much. We trust God, praise God, and then watch Him work. That is essentially how Jesus operated during His time of ministry on this earth. Jesus openly admitted that He could do nothing in Himself; His part was to submit to His heavenly Father's will in perfect obedience, trust, and faith so that God's power could flow through Him to meet the needs of those around Him!

Joy is a choice, and it has to be expressed and we do that by rejoicing always, so those around us will know that we are filled with joy even in our sufferings. That's what Paul tells us in **Romans 5:2-5** (Passion translation), ***"What incredible joy bursts forth within us as we keep on celebrating our hope of experiencing God's glory! But that's not all! Even in times of trouble we have a joyful confidence knowing that our pressures will develop in us patient endurance. And patient endurance will refine our character, and proven character leads us back to hope. And this hope is not a disappointing fantasy, because we now experience the endless love of God cascading into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who lives in us!"*** So, joyful praise is an active response to what we know God has done, is doing and is going to do for us – in our lives and in this world through His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, regardless of what we happen to be going through. And if we ever come to doubt that God is working out His kingdom plan, we can't possibly wholeheartedly praise Him. If we want to joyful praise God for everything, we need to be sure our foundation in Christ is rock solid, without any cracks of doubt and uncertainty causing that foundation to crumble when the storms of life come against us!

In his book, *"Power in Praise,"* author Merlin Carothers writes, *"Praising God is not a magic formula for success. It is a way of life that is solidly backed up in God's Word. We praise God, not for the expected results, but for the situation just as it is. As long as we praise God with an eye secretly looking for the expected results, we're only kidding ourselves, and we can be certain that nothing will happen to change us or our situation... We praise God, not for what we expect will happen in or around us, but we praise Him for who He is and where and how we are right now."* YES, God can miraculously change our situation, but possibly the only change that will take place is in us, as we come to experience real joy, lasting peace, and happiness right in the midst of what once appeared to be a miserable and hopeless situation. So, we don't give thanks to bargain with God, *"I'll praise you so that you can bless me, Lord."* We thank God because we delight ourselves in Him, according to **Psalm 37:4**, ***"Find your delight and true pleasure in***

Yahweh, and he will give you what you desire the most.” If only we could be delighted with the Lord in everything first our faith would grow by leaps and bounds!

Paul’s next instruction to his church to pray continually doesn’t mean that we are on our knees 24/7 – but that we are connected with God 24/7. Think of it as WIFI on which we are all so dependent these days. Laurie and I live in the country and our internet connection is not always reliable. When we are connected and have a strong signal things are great, but when our WIFI goes down and we lose our connection to the internet, no one is happy. It is the same way with God, we need to have a strong signal and a constant connection to keep things great. In **John 15**, Jesus tells His disciples that He is the true VINE, and they are the branches and in order to bear much fruit, they need to remain connected to the vine. Jesus tells His disciples three times here that they need to *“remain in me,”* so that God could work in their lives and through their lives. And not only that, but Jesus also tells His disciples in **John 15:14** that by staying connected to the Him, *“that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* Our joy is directly connected to and dependent on our prayer life. If we want more joy in your life, then spend more time in prayer! If you want to be more thankful spend more time in prayer!

Then, **verses 19-22** speak about the congregational responsibilities toward the gift of the Holy Spirit and to the preaching of God’s word (prophecy). *“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.”* While all sin is against God, the New Testament teaches there are three specific sins we can commit against the Holy Spirit. In **Matthew 12:31-32** Jesus speaks about the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is the sin of unbelief, the total rejection of Jesus Christ, so never worry about this sin as a believer, because only unbelievers can commit this sin, not believers. But then, the other two sins against the Holy Spirit can be committed by believers. The second sin is grieving the Spirit. Paul wrote, *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption”* (Ephesians 4:30). We commit this sin of grieving the Holy Spirit whenever we take for granted His holy influence in our life and when we act or speak in a way that is displeasing to God. Just as parents grieve over the misbehaviour of their children, the Holy Spirit grieves when we live in an unholy way, treating the Spirit with disrespect. The third sin of quenching or putting out the fire of the Holy Spirit is mentioned here in **1Thessalonians 5:19**.

All congregations and all individuals need to take the Holy Spirit seriously, and we have 2 responsibilities here – we don't want to quench anything that is of the Spirit, and we don't want to accept anything that is false, not of the Spirit. And then the Spirit needs freedom to move in our church and in our personal lives. We are not to control the work of the Spirit but give Him all the room that He needs to move freely within us, through us, and among us. During our worship services, the Spirit needs to have freedom to move, and that is very difficult for those, like me who like to be in control! If we try to control the work of the Spirit – the Spirit will not move – the Spirit is quenched – the fire is extinguished and goes out. So, the problem for churches is balance, we need to be somewhere between too much control and too little control. YES, we can't control the Spirit, but we are not to let things get out of hand and disruptive either. This all takes listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, being tuned into His voice as He guides us and directs our path!

The next thing Paul instructs is in this: ***“Do not treat prophecies with contempt.”*** In other words, respect the preaching of God's Word. In another letter, **1 Corinthians 14:3**, Paul describes the importance of the preaching of God's Word, ***“When someone prophesies, he speaks to encourage people, to build them up, and to bring them comfort.”*** So, what does it mean to hold preaching in contempt? To answer that question, we need to look at our legal proceedings. When a judge holds someone in contempt of court, here is the legal definition, “Individuals may be cited for contempt when they disobey an order, fail to comply with a request, tamper with documents, withhold evidence, interrupt proceedings through their actions or words, or otherwise defy a public authority or hold it up to ridicule and disrespect.” Therefore, you are holding the preaching of God's Word in contempt when you disregard it, ignore it, or mock and ridicule it!

Then, Paul calls us to be discerning in what we hear from our pulpits, ***“but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.”*** The Apostle John wrote the same warning, ***“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”*** (1 John 4:1). Don't be naïve and gullible, don't believe everything you hear from a preacher is the truth, just like you are not to believe everything you read on the internet. Know your Bible, so that you can check out what the pastor is saying for yourself, accepting what is the truth and rejecting the rest. Luke, when he wrote the book of Acts, observed the believers in Berea, and said this about them, ***“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and***

examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). Every pastor’s greatest fear is that of misleading their congregation, so I encourage you to check out what I am saying for yourself and call me out on anything that you may be questioning!

Lastly, verses **23-24** are Paul’s closing prayer, *“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”* This closing prayer – identifies God as the source of peace and that God is to be central in the life of the church. For the church today then, remembering what God has done is not only all that we read of God’s faithfulness, love, power and mercy throughout the Bible and the work of His Son Jesus on the cross. But it also involves what God has done since the book of Acts in the history of the church throughout all the generations over the last 2000 years. Paul reminds us here that God is faithful, how He has worked in the lives of believers in the past, He will continue to work in our lives and the lives of believers in the future. The promise is that the true church, will not die out in this generation!

The heart of God is found in verse 23. God’s heart in all of the commands He gives us through His servant Paul is that you and I might be sanctified completely (made holy) by the power of God. The point of salvation is not just justification (the forgiveness of our sins), but also sanctification, as we work out our salvation, letting God work in our lives. So, God’s plan for us is that God wants us to grow into maturity, into holiness and be filled with shalom (peace), because He is the God of peace. Therefore, as we read God’s Word and hear God’s Word preached and taught, any understanding of God’s Word that does not lead us to holiness and shalom (peace), is a misunderstanding of God’s Word!

Remember, while justification is completely an act of God, sanctification, to be sanctified, is something we need to work out with fear and trembling as we are conformed to the image of Jesus. **Romans 8:29**, *“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”* So why did God save you? Why are you chosen? Why did He call you to Himself? Because, His plan is, over the period of our lives, to conform us into the image of His Son. So that’s our joy, that’s why we rejoice always and that’s why we give thanks to God in all things. As Paul encouraged his church in Thessalonica in this first letter, they must have paid attention and followed his teaching, because in his second

letter, Paul writes this to encourage them. **2 Thessalonians 2:13**, *“As for us, we can’t help but thank God for you, dear brothers and sisters loved by the Lord. We are always thankful that God chose you to be among the first to experience salvation—a salvation that came through the Spirit who makes you holy and through your belief in the truth.”* This is why God called you. Because He’s going to perfect you. But we’re not there yet. We are still in process, and the process will not be finished until we leave this earth. So as we wait, we rejoice always, we pray continually, and we give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus!

As we continue on here at SCCC for however many years God gives us – our deep and abiding prayer should be that we would become a community of believers fiercely committed to Christ and to each other – so that the community around us would say, *“Look at how they love one another. Look at how they spend their money, they are so generous. Look at how they use their gifts to serve one another and others. Look at how they fight for their marriages. Look at how they raise their kids and grandkids. Look at how they are filled with joy and are thankful in all of their circumstances, both good and bad. I want to be like them?”*

The key in how to achieve all of this is found in **verse 19**, *“Do not quench the Spirit.”* Do not put out the Spirit’s fire! Because if you are on fire for Jesus, then you’ll be joyful, prayerful, and thankful! You’ll honour God’s Word and test everything, holding on to the good and rejecting what is wrong! Doing it all for the glory of God!