

Last Sunday during the Wesley Covenant Service, we started the new year by renewing our commitment to follow the Lord. It is a very meaningful service, but it brings up an interesting question. Okay, now that we have vowed to follow the Lord, to grow closer to Him in our personal relationship, and to be a better Christian, how do we do this? Are there any guidelines for us to follow? Now the best instructional manual that I have found for life is the Bible. In his letters in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul provides guidance to new Christians and to new churches on how to live the Christian life and how to live in a Christian community. This morning, let's discuss his final instructions to the Thessalonians in fifth chapter of 1 Thessalonians, verses 16 through 24.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Before closing his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul levels a series of rapid-fire exhortations to them. It kind of reminds you of what you might have said to your child as they were leaving for school each morning before going out the door. It probably went something like this: "Don't forget your lunch. Have you got all your homework? Have you brushed your teeth? Did you wash your face? Pay attention in class." Here at the end of Paul's letter, the situation is not much different from a mother saying good-bye to her child at the door as he leaves for school. The final words that Paul offers this beloved congregation come from his heart and his close relationship with them. With love for this congregation, Paul tells them: "Rejoice always." "Pray without ceasing." "Give thanks in all things." "Do not quench the Spirit." "Do not despise prophecy." "Test everything; hold fast to that which is good." "Keep away from every kind of evil."

At first glance, these short, but direct commands seem impossible to accomplish. However, Paul tells us in verse 18: "For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Remember what the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13 – "I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength." Also remember that Luke 1:37 states: "For nothing is impossible with God." So, with this assurance as we begin a new year, let's take these seven instructions one-by-one and see how we can apply them to our daily lives.

V. 16 Rejoice always

Because of God's steadfast love and what Jesus did for us on the cross at Calvary, one of the constant themes of the Bible is to rejoice. Psalm 118:24 states: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Think how much better each day would be if you started each day reciting this verse or singing our opening hymn. In Philippians 4:4, Paul tells us to "rejoice in the Lord always." To make sure we got the message, Paul repeats himself by saying: "I say again: Rejoice!"

Praise and thanksgiving are important in our personal relationship with God. It is God's will that we be joyful and thankful. When we give thanks to God "in everything" – good and bad – we

are telling God that we trust Him with our life and our circumstances, no matter how hopeless things may appear at that moment. The Apostle Paul learned how to be thankful and joyful regardless of his circumstances. In Philippians 4:11, he states: "I have learned to be content in any and every situation."

Now this does not mean that we are to deny our feelings, put on a happy face and never be sad. Rejoicing always is a conscious attitude of contentment, hope and happiness that comes from focusing deliberately on Jesus. Joy is not a luxury or a mere accessory in the Christian life. It is a sure sign of the presence of God in our daily life and our complete trust in Him. Therefore, with this command in mind, think about the negative impression we are giving to the world when we as Christians walk around looking like we have been baptized with vinegar. In other words, if joy is in your heart, then let your face know!

V. 17 Pray without ceasing

One way to always be joyful is to pray continually, to pray more. Prayer should be the constant attitude of a Christian – not that you abandon your regular duties and give yourself wholly to prayer. But that you not only routinely pray at a certain time, like your daily quiet time, but that you also pray as the need arises throughout the day. God calls us to be in a continual conversation with Him in prayer.

One of the greatest powers in life is the power of prayer. Prayer is so powerful that kingdoms have been won, souls have been saved, churches have been built, lives have been changed, and people have been blessed. All of this has happened because of the power of prayer. Many people go through life without any purpose, enthusiasm, direction, and joy simply because they do not pray. Oh, they occasionally say grace at meals and pray that God will bless them, but they have not learned the secret and power of "praying without ceasing."

Jesus lived in constant communion with God. There was never a time when He was away from God. He never felt at a distance from God except when He was dying on the cross for our sins. As you read the gospels, you find that Jesus made it a habit to rise early before dawn and go to a deserted place to pray. Jesus carved out time every day in His busy schedule to chat with His Father. Now if the Son of God needed to do this, don't you think this proves that we need to follow His example and spend more time in prayer with the Lord.

In our text, Paul encourages the congregation at Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing." He was not suggesting that they remain on their knees in a physical posture of prayer constantly; rather, he was insisting that they make prayer a daily habit. He was challenging them to be constantly aware of and open to God. This definitely applies to us today. Think about how often you stay in contact with your friends and family today by using your cellphone, texting, and emails. Why not stay in the same contact with God. Pray all the time; be in a constant conversation with God. Put Him on speed dial!

V. 18 Give thanks in all circumstances

When we pray continually, we should be able to give thanks in all circumstances. Giving thanks to God should be as natural to Christians as breathing. If we believe in the promise of Romans 8:28 that all things work for the good of those who love the Lord, then we should be able to praise the Lord at all times, in all circumstances, and for everything, no matter what is going on.

The *Message* paraphrases this verse as follows: “Thank God no matter what happens.” Remember what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6 – “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” In other words, Paul is telling us to not worry. Now that’s great advice for us as we start a new year, don’t worry, walk in faith and trust in the Lord. Remember you cannot be thankful and worry at the same time. Of course, I know that I am preaching to the choir since no one here worries, right?

Giving thanks to God is a constant theme in Paul’s letters. In Ephesians 5:20, he writes: “Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul is telling us to give thanks to God at all times for everything. Did you hear that, in everything, the good and the bad! Is Paul telling us to grit our teeth and pretend to be happy all the time? No, remember Paul says that we are to be grateful to God in all circumstances, not for them. It is not natural to be thankful for bad news about our health, the loss of a loved one or an accident. But we are to be thankful that God is with us in these difficult times and that He will carry us through them.

The Bible does not suggest that everything is good or that everything will go well in our life, but it does suggest that we should always give thanks for something good. Jesus never suggested that we rejoice in evil and difficult situations. Rather, He implied that in the face of insults, criticism, hardships, and persecutions, we rely on God’s power and look for the good in life and in all those we meet.

V. 19 Do not put the fire of the Spirit out

In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist states that while he baptized with water, the one following Him, Jesus, would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now as believers, we must be careful not to quench this holy fire that we receive when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. As a fire can be put out by withdrawing fuel, so we can quench the Spirit if we don’t kindle the fire by praying continually, reading God’s Word, and regularly participating in worship and service projects. Sin also quenches the Spirit as does traditions, manmade rules, and worship rituals.

If you are a believer, the Holy Spirit is present in your heart, but you must listen to and obey him in order to reap the benefits of his presence. Let us discover his presence by responding positively to his gracious work within us. Let us rejoice in what God wants to do through us by His Spirit. The Holy Spirit will utilize you in giving praise to God and bringing the blessings of God into the lives of others if you will only recognize his presence and cooperate with his leadership. Not to do so is to pour water on the fire. Not to do so is to choke the life of

something that God is seeking to bring to fruition in your life. As our closing hymn states: "Revive us again; fill each heart with Thy love; may each soul be rekindled with fire from above." In other words, don't pour water on the fire of the Spirit!

V. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt

The best interpretation of the word "prophecies" in this passage is not about predictions of the future, but preaching the word of God. In other words, we are not to despise preaching! Did you hear that? We are to give serious thought to the Word of God. Now some people neglect God's Word because they think that they know it all or know enough, and that there is little or no benefit from hearing it again. Now I don't know about you, but I have been reading the Bible as long as I can remember, and I still learn something new every day. That's why I can't understand why everyone of us are not involved in a weekly Bible study.

Now another way that we show contempt for prophecies or preaching is to not regularly attend worship services, and falling asleep, focusing on our smartphone, or letting our mind wander during the sermon. One Sunday morning a man fell asleep during the sermon and started snoring. The preacher told his wife to wake him up. To which she replied: "You put him asleep, you wake him up."

In James 1:22-25, we are told to not merely listen to the Word and let it go in one ear and out the other; we need to put it into action. The person who looks intently into the Word and does not forget what he has heard, but does what it says will be blessed. You never know when God will send you a message. Thus, if you are not paying attention, you might just miss it.

V. 21 Test everything; hold fast to what is good

The Apostle John provides similar advice in 1 John 4:1 where he writes: "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." The *Message* has an interesting paraphrase of this: "My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world." When Judy and I taught Junior High Sunday School at St. John's UMC in Santa Fe, I told the students to not believe everything I said, but to challenge me if they disagreed. Because that's how we grow in our faith; examining, challenging, and asking questions about our beliefs. That's the only way that you are going to make it your own personal belief, not somebody's else.

Now the standard by which we test all preaching and teaching is the Word of God. We must search the scriptures and let the Spirit guide us. Testing everything must be done in order to hold on to that which is good. Especially today, because there are a lot of people who will misquote the Word in order to support their own personal opinions and political agenda.

V. 22 Avoid every kind of evil

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The *Message* paraphrases it as: "Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil." Let's be honest, most of us can get into enough trouble by ourselves. Also, we all know that there are certain places and things that we need to avoid. We must be willing to stay away from those people, places and situations where we are susceptible to giving in to temptation. Like Paul, the Apostle Peter also warns us in 1 Peter 5:8 where he writes: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." The best advice I have found is that when temptation knocks at your door, let Jesus answer.

Thirteen years before his conversion, John Wesley had a conversation with a porter at his college that showed him that there was more to Christianity than he had found. The porter had only one coat. He had not eaten any food that day, and yet his heart was full of gratitude to God. Wesley said to him: "You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat, and no bed to lie upon? What else do you have to be thankful for?" "I thank Him," answered the porter, "that He has given me my life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him."

Now think about how much better this year will be if you follow these instructions from the Apostle Paul: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything be thankful, do not put the fire of the Spirit out, do not treat prophecies with contempt, test everything and avoid evil. Even though we'll never obey these instructions perfectly, we should be working at making progress this year, because as Paul says: "This is God's will for us in Christ Jesus." Amen