

Doing God's Will

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

In my family's living room, there's a large wood-framed sign with this quote on it: **"Life is amazing. And then it's awful. And then it's amazing again. And in between the amazing and awful it's ordinary and mundane and routine. Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That's just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life. And it's breathtakingly beautiful. L.R. Knost"**

That's life. It's a mixture of happiness and sadness, mourning and joy, pain and pleasure. Jesus himself said that in this world you will have tribulation while he also taught that he came to give us life and life to the fullest – and that for those who trust Jesus, we would begin to experience that full life in the here and now. But how can we experience Jesus' life when there's these ups and downs? And what does living the full life look like when life seems so chaotic and I can't trust whether today is going to be full of "pleasures" or "pains?"

These are good and legitimate questions, and essentially what you're asking is, "What is God's will for how we live in this heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life? Thankfully, God tells us. Now, let me explain that this sermon today is not a sermon that will give you specifics on what you ought to do in response to specific things in your life. Instead, this sermon focuses on God's will for your attitude and heart. What I hope we do today is dive into a very brief passage that tells us *how* we ought to live in the midst of this breathtakingly beautiful life God has given those of us who trust Christ.

So, if you're struggling knowing God's will, the apostle Paul tells us! The big idea of the sermon this morning is that **God's will for his children is that they would be rejoicing, prayerful, thankful people.** Now, let's read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.¹ Linguistically, all three of these commands are connected because the word "for" in verse 18 connects to each of the commands. It's God's will to rejoice always. It's God's will to pray without ceasing. It's God's will to give thanks in all circumstances. And, it's God's will that these things are happening continually in the Christian's life.

As you hear this, you might think, "Are you kidding me? Pastor Timothy, you have no idea what's going on in my life!" The craziness is absurd. Or, maybe you feel your life has no meaning and you're depressed by it's mundaneness. Or, maybe you just hear "pray without ceasing," and you think, "I've already failed." In some ways you might hear these words of Paul and think, "I'd rather God's will was just, 'Wake up. Don't kill anyone. Provide for your needs. Help someone out. Go home. Go to bed.'" That seems easier, right? But God doesn't just want us to have an easy life. He wants us to have fullness of life – and that's only found in communion and relationship with him that expresses itself in rejoicing and gratitude.

So, as we approach Thanksgiving this week, I hope and pray that this sermon serves as a wonderful complement to the previous week's sermons. May our hearts be filled with God's kindnesses so that we truly are a rejoicing, prayerful, grateful people.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Th 5:16–18.

With this understanding, let's try to figure out what Paul's words actually mean in practice so that we can know how to do God's will in this life. So, first we see that:

1. Christians are to be a rejoicing people (v. 16).

What I'm going to do with each command is to answer the questions to what, when, and why. I think this is what Paul wants us to understand. So, we take verse 16 and read, "Rejoice always." Start with the "what" question.

What? What is Paul saying? **Rejoice.** Now, what does rejoice mean? Does it mean to just put on a happy face when you feel discouraged? Does it mean to be happy when the sun is shining, but angry when it's dreary and rainy? Rejoice in times of prosperity, but grumble in seasons of drought?

This word for rejoice actually isn't speaking so much to being happy about temporal circumstances, but it means **"to enjoy a state of happiness and well-being."**² Focus on the *state of*. The word is speaking to a reality. To rejoice is to enjoy the reality of happiness. But if you're like me, you could say, "But I'm not in a state of happiness right now." Then you look around at things that are broken around you. But, the Scriptures come at us and help us to understand what a state of happiness and well-being means. In Colossians 1:24, Paul writes, **"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. . ."**³ Is Paul in circumstances that would make him happy? No. Suffering is not usually equated with joy. How can you suffer and be happy? Before answering that, let's take a look at 2 Corinthians 6:10, where Paul says, **"as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."**⁴ Paul reveals here that you can be sad and rejoicing at the same time? We have rejoicing in sorrow and rejoicing in suffering.

So, let's think about the definition again. It involves a "state of happiness and well-being." Do you realize that if you've been reconciled to God, you are at peace with God. There's no warfare between you and him. He loves you eternally, and Romans 8 tells you that he commands all things in your life – the harsh and the happy – to submit to your eternal well-being! Therefore, you and I live in a state of happiness and well-being. This is how Paul could rejoice in suffering. He could rejoice in sorrow. Why? Because of Jesus.

Therefore, rejoicing is an act of faith. If you are living by trust in Jesus, you rejoice in the hardships because you are confessing that even the pain and sorrow do not take you away from eternal well-being in Christ. That then makes sense of Paul's words. Even think of when Paul said in Philippians 4:4 to **"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."**⁵ Note the words. Rejoice *in the Lord*. That means to rejoice on the basis of Jesus. You're not rejoicing because life always feels good. But you're rejoicing because the Lord promises to redeem all things! So, your rejoicing isn't in the circumstances in and of themselves. Your rejoicing is in the Savior over all the circumstances who promises to not waste anything in his children's life. Is he worthy of our trust, Ventura? Then rejoice! Actively rejoice! Let your rejoicing defy despair. Let your rejoicing counter the lies of the enemy and your flesh! Let your rejoicing reveal who you worship and praise! Now, let's move to the next question.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, [Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains](#) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 302.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 1:24.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 6:10.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:4.

When? Paul says, “Rejoice *always*.” The always means in all things. Now, real quick, this doesn’t mean all things are good. Satan intends evil. People can sin against us. We don’t rejoice in the fact that people do evil. But we can rejoice in the midst of those things because we know we are in a state of ultimate and eternal well-being, and God is sovereign over all. Now, let’s go to the final question:

Why? Of course, Paul says that this is God’s will in Christ Jesus. But I also want to ask *why* is it God’s will in Christ? So, look at Philippians 4:4-5. **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.** ⁵ **Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;** ⁶

Rejoicing is the reasonable response for those who have been saved by Jesus. If you know you’re a sinner and left to yourself, you deserve God’s just punishment. If you know that Jesus came to this earth to pursue you and unite you to God. If you know that none of your actions can make yourself right with God, and only Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross covers your sin. If you know God loves you eternally, then the only reasonable response is that you would rejoice *always*. This doesn’t mean everything makes sense. But rejoicing tells the world that your mind, your reason, is sound and set in the Lord. He’s at hand – meaning that he’s near to you always. Do you believe that?

As most of you know, I just came back from being in Africa. It was a trip with various trials. Actually, almost as soon as I landed in Sierra Leone, I experienced spiritual attack. I felt darkness. I felt oppressed. And it didn’t go away until about the day before coming back home. Initially, I tried to fight in my own strength, trying to take comfort in being able to say that “I got this and it’s under control.” But that didn’t help because God reminded me that I wasn’t in control. I don’t have it covered. I needed to trust him in the midst of these mental and emotional trials. By the Lord’s mercy, I let go of my feeling the need to be in control, and you know one way I expressed my trust? Rejoicing in the Lord? I played music that praised the Lord. I rejoiced. Did I still experience the oppression? Yes. But I am a child of God. I’m in an eternally blessed state! I need to not give into the lies of the enemy. I need to confess the realities of my hope in Christ. So, rejoice in the Lord!

2. Christians are to be a praying people (v. 17).

What? Praying. The Greek word for prayer here is the generic word. It simply means to speak to God. It can include all forms of speech to God. For example, James 4:9 calls us to lament and weep and mourn. The Psalms are full of lament-type songs and prayers to the Lord. Prayer also includes asking. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given you.” First Peter 5:7 also says that we are to humble ourselves by casting our burdens on the Lord. These are various forms of prayer. But the point of Paul is that God’s will is that you be a praying person. I love how prayer is sandwiched between rejoicing and thanksgiving in this list. Why? I can only imagine it’s because this life is the life of opposites that we experience. We’re always needy for the Lord. We’re needy for his wisdom. We’re needy for his grace. We’re needy for forgiveness. We’re needy for his help. And, he’s always ready to answer us and provide for what we need. Prayer is sandwiched here in this list because prayer is communion with the Lord. Never forget that. Prayer isn’t simply saying words to the sky. Prayer is communing with the God who reconciled us to him and loves us dearly. We will never be able to glorify God and glory in God in this life, if we do not seek him and know him in prayer. So, pray, and know he hears and will answer his children.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:4–5.

When? We are to pray **without ceasing**. What does without ceasing mean? Does this mean that as you're talking to other people or even sleeping that you should be talking to God, too? I don't believe so. Essentially to always have the heart be drawn to communion with the Lord. When you say "Amen," you're not saying, "Talk to you later, God." Your conversation is ongoing. There's no real end to it.

Now, you might say, "That sounds impossible!" But let me ask you something else, "Does it sound oppressive to you if I say you need to always be breathing? No. Why? Because you need to breathe, right? And, breathing is natural to our bodies. We don't usually think about our breathing because it's so much a part of who we are. When you study prayer in the Scripture, you find that prayer is the breath of Christians. And while our sinful flesh doesn't want to pray, our spirit longs to grow more in our relationship with the Lord. Therefore, God's non-burdensome will is that you would always be praying to God. Whether you are lamenting, laying your burdens before him, praying about others' needs, expressing joy in worship, or asking him for personal requests, you're exhaling and inhaling to God throughout your days.

Why? Again, this is God's will, but why? I'm going to choose *one* reason why. In John 15:16, Jesus says, **"¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you."**⁷ Jesus chose them so that whatever they would ask the Father, he would give. Let me boil this down a little more. **Jesus died on the cross and rose again so that we could pray!** And, in living in prayerful dependence on God, God would bear fruit in our lives. Meaning, God would bring about his will in and through us.

So, praise the Lord that his will is to breath dependence in prayer! And, praise God that he welcomes us to depend on him! Finally, we get to the third command:

3. Christians are to be a thankful people (v. 18).

Verse 18: give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.⁸

What? Give thanks. Now, I love this word for thanksgiving. It means to have gratitude for benefits and blessings. This would be gratitude for temporal and eternal blessings. This would be to be thankful for my wife, my children, my health. Don't miss this. In being in Africa, I've had a renewed spirit of gratitude for what I do have. All of God's kindnesses (whether temporal or eternal) are to be received with *thanksgiving*. And God's kindnesses are meant to lead us to repentance (meaning, they are to draw us closer to him and lead us to grow in obedience). How many kindnesses do you have? Don't reject them! Be grateful to God for them and let that gratitude compel you to greater zeal for God and his glory!

This for thanksgiving also recognizes our need to express gratitude for the eternal. Whether painful or pleasurable circumstances, I can be thankful for the God who is there. Because I rejoice in him, I can be thankful for him and his plans. I can give thanks that his grace *is* always sufficient in every moment that I face. So, like Job, we can say that the Lord gives and takes away, but blessed be the name of the Lord. We can say with Joseph that people mean things for evil, but God means for good. Now, we can answer the when question.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 15:16.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Th 5:18.

When? In all circumstances. Don't pick and choose what to give thanks for. Give thanks in the midst of all things. Know that God is over all circumstances and even the trials are preparing for you an eternal weight of glory. Ephesians 5:20 says, ²⁰ **giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**⁹ Again, the thanksgiving, like the rejoicing, is done in faith. It's with our eyes looking to God in Christ Jesus. First Thessalonians 1:2 states, ² **We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.**¹⁰ Paul is giving thanks for fellow Christians and their testimony! They are blessings. It's right and good to thank God for the many strengthening blessings we have in our lives – and by the way, I thank God for you, Ventura! Now we get to what I see as a very powerfully encouraging verse. Colossians 3:17: **And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.** ¹¹ In your words and actions, do all for Jesus' glory! And while you're seeking to shine forth Jesus in your words and actions, give thanks to God! Now, let's move to the "why" question.

Why? I mean, we know that all of this is God's will in Christ Jesus. And I find gratitude to be a particularly cross-centered act. Some might say they can't be grateful because of the hardships, but did you know that Jesus expressed gratitude in the darkest time period of his life? The Greek word for giving thanks here is "eucharisteo." It's the word from which we get "Eucharist." That's talking about when Jesus *gave thanks* to God in expressing to his disciples that his body would be torn and his blood would be shed so they could be forgiven. **Jesus gave thanks!**

Oh, I still don't know why Jesus would give thanks to God for saving sinners, but I'm so thankful that he loves us so much that he did this! I, a rebel, he thanked God to save. What wondrous love is this? This also shows us Jesus' trust in the Father. He gave thanks for what was going to happen. And while people sinned and were wicked against Jesus, Jesus still thanked God because God was going to highly exalt him. Then, the Scriptures teach us that just as Jesus was exalted, so we will be lifted up as well someday. Will we trust? For the joy set before us, will we express gratitude to God and show the world that we believe there's more to this life. This life here is like one piece of sand amongst all the sand of the world. Eternity's coming, and we rejoice and give thanks to our God.

Now, again, if you're like me, you might be thinking, "Easier said than done," but God never says this is easy. But he does say he promises us growth in these areas. And, I pray for all of us that 2022 is a time of growth in rejoicing, prayer and gratitude. After Paul says these final words, he then writes this: ²³ **Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** ²⁴ **He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.** ¹²

Christians are to be a rejoicing, praying, thankful people. And, our God who is faithful will surely empower us to grow in living this way. Since this is true, pray the Lord would empower you daily to do his will by rejoicing, praying, and thanking him in all things. Your God is faithful. He will do it.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 5:20.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Th 1:2.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 3:17.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Th 5:23–24.