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## 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

<sup>16</sup>Rejoice always. <sup>17</sup>Pray without ceasing. <sup>18</sup>In everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. <sup>19</sup>Do not extinguish the Spirit. <sup>20</sup>Do not treat prophecies with contempt. <sup>21</sup>But test everything. Hold on to the good. <sup>22</sup>Keep away from every kind of evil.

<sup>23</sup>May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

## Do...Don't...Done!

### I.

Uncertainty. It's enough to cause anxiety. What is not set or determined or certain makes us nervous. Aaron Rogers is coming off injured reserve status for today's game. Will he play well? Does this give my team a chance at the playoffs? It certainly isn't determined or certain, and it can breed anxiety in any number of fans.

Of course, the anxiety of a fan rooting for a team isn't really all that important in the overall scheme of things. Other things are more serious. Waiting for the results of your ACT's means you can't fully enjoy your senior year just yet. Waiting for results from a medical test — that's even harder. Until the doctor calls or the lab calls, the potential for life-altering or life-threatening consequences can create quite a bit of anxiety.

In times that make us anxious for all kinds of reasons, it may not be easy to hear Paul's exhortation to us this morning. Paul gives us a number of dos and don'ts for our lives of sanctification. How are we ever to be anything like the holy, sanctified people we are supposed to be when so many things in our future seem so uncertain?

First there are some things we can *do*.

Paul says: "Rejoice always" (1 Thessalonians 5:16, EHV). Paul is not filled with some sort of ivory-tower-idealism when he says "rejoice always." He knew that sometimes things are difficult. Paul was frequently in jail because of his faith in Jesus, yet he knew that even imprisonment was a time for being joyful in the Lord. On one such occasion the Bible tells us: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25, EHV). Not only did the prisoners in that jail have an opportunity to hear the message of salvation in Christ because of Paul and Silas, but even the jailer became a Christian that day. Joy in the gospel is observable and contagious.

Joy isn't always easy. Life is filled with anxiety and uncertainty. An injury can make your status at your job questionable. Serious illness like cancer can make your entire future or the future of your family uncertain. Paul said to the Romans: "We rejoice confidently on the basis of our hope for the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only this, but we also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patient endurance, <sup>4</sup> and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope will not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us" (Romans 5:2-5, EHV). The reason — the basis — for our rejoicing is the salvation we realize we have in Christ Jesus. *That* never changes.

"Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17, EHV). Prayer is sometimes referred to as a conversation with God. Relationships grow with communication. That's true of human relationships, and it's true as we exercise our relationship with God in prayer. Jesus told a parable of a widow persistent in her prayers in Luke 18 to show us that we are not to grow weary in our

prayer life.

Paul says: “At every opportunity, pray in the Spirit with every kind of prayer and petition” (Ephesians 6:18, EHV). Neither Paul nor Jesus had a prayer on his lips every single minute of his life. What Paul is saying is that we are not to grow weary of praying about whatever is on our minds. This becomes easier when you recognize your dependence on God for all that you are and have and need. When this is your continual spiritual state, you will find frequent inward prayer thoughts in addition to any outward verbal prayer. When you do this, you will find that you trust God more and more, and *that* will ease your anxiety. Rejoicing and prayer go together.

“In everything give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:18, EHV). It is easy to be thankful under pleasant circumstances. It is easy to be thankful when your life is rewarding: when you are falling in love, getting married, or at the birth of a child or grandchild. It is easy to be thankful when someone is generous or kind to you. It is easy to be thankful when friends and family whom you haven’t seen in a long time come for a visit. These are happy times.

What about the bad times? Is Paul suggesting that we give thanks *for* times of misery or dark moments in our lives? Is Paul suggesting that we give thanks *for* cancer or other health problems or surgeries? No. To thank God for such difficult moments of life would be to imply that *God* is somehow responsible *for* those dark times in our lives. What Paul is saying is that God continues to bless us, even in and through overwhelmingly difficult times. Being grateful even in adversity is evidence of spiritual maturity.

## II.

Now Paul has some don’ts for our spiritual life.

“Do not extinguish the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19, EHV). The Holy Spirit will not leave a person whom he has brought to faith, but such an individual *can* resist the Spirit. Stephen, the first martyr, condemned the Jewish rulers, saying: “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51, EHV).

Paul warns us against extinguishing the Spirit that lives inside. That happens when a person avoids the means by which the Spirit works in us, when we keep ourselves away from God’s Word and the Sacrament. The Comforter can’t comfort us if we shut him out.

“Do not treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thessalonians 5:20, EHV). When Paul speaks about prophecies he is really talking about the entire Word of God. Treating prophecies with contempt can occur when we look for spectacular signs or messages from God. Several books have been written recently in which people claim to have received special and new revelations from God to demonstrate to us that there really is a heaven or that God really wants us to understand that heaven will be our real home. This is treating prophecies with contempt, because God gives us what he wants us to know in Scripture.

Often God speaks clearly to us in his Word, but we think we know better. Societal norms have decided that what *God* considers moral is outdated. To use society’s ideas of morality rather than what God has said to us is to treat prophecies with contempt.

Remember Luther’s explanation of the Third Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regarded as holy and gladly hear and learn it.”

“But test everything. Hold on to the good. <sup>22</sup>Keep away from every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, EHV). There are all kinds of evils out in our world. Paul is not referring just to the obvious evil perpetrated by criminals, but *all* forms of evil. Many false teachers and preachers try to present themselves as biblical scholars in their books and TV shows and promise us exactly what we like to hear about our future, or about our health and wealth — always with a big smile on their faces.

Listening to such evil — listening to promises God hasn't promised — will ultimately disappoint us and only increase anxiety.

Continually prepare yourself to test those teachers. Be in God's Word regularly to fortify yourself and build up your faith. On the solid foundation of God's Word you will be able to test them holding on to the good, while avoiding every kind of evil.

### III.

In the previous chapter, Paul said: "Indeed, this is God's will: that you be sanctified" (1 Thessalonians 4:3, EHV). God wants you to be sanctified. There are two ways that we speak of sanctification. They are sanctification in the wider sense and sanctification in the narrow sense. In the wide sense, or the broad sense, sanctification means that the Holy Spirit gives me faith. In the narrow sense, sanctification means that the Holy Spirit guides my life.

In other words, sanctification in the narrow sense speaks about our good works — the things we do to show our Christian life. God wants us to live lives that reflect what Christ has done for us — loving him and loving our neighbor in all kinds of ways. Some of these are the dos and don'ts Paul listed in our text: rejoicing, praying, avoiding evil. This is God's will for us.

But Paul concludes our lesson today by saying: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, EHV).

This is the important thing to remember about our sanctification — what God *wills*, he *will* do. Our sanctification is not up to us. God makes us holy! It's not a matter of how hard we try, or how confident and joyful we happen to feel on a particular day. *God* is the One who makes it happen.

God doesn't do a halfway job, either. Paul asks that the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and keep your whole spirit, soul, and body blameless when Jesus returns. Your heart, your thoughts, your spiritual being — your whole self is totally holy and perfect in God's eyes — it is God's best handiwork.

All of this *has been* done. Did you notice what Paul said? Paul says our whole spirit, soul, and body will be "kept" blameless. Not *made* blameless — *kept* blameless. *Making* us blameless has already been done.

We were *made* blameless when Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world on the cross. "It is finished," he said from the cross. It is done! *All* people were justified by Jesus.

You have received what Jesus has done for all people. When you were baptized you were made a child of God — you were sanctified — you were made holy. What Jesus did on the cross became *yours* personally by the work of the Holy Spirit.

This means that your sanctification — your life as a child of God — is a result of that. Because you *are* holy, you *do* holy things. The fact that you are holy — and you know that God *will* keep you that way — is the reason you rejoice; it is the reason you know he will answer your prayers; it is the thing you give thanks for. All of this is what the Spirit keeps telling you here in Word and Sacrament.

We do the "dos" of our sanctification and don't do the "don'ts" of our sanctification because of what God *will* do because of what *he* on the cross of Jesus Christ *has done*. It is all done. Amen.