

STANDING FIRM

X. “Restoring the Lilt to Living”

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1 Thess. 5:16-22

TEXT: *In every thing give thanks:*

INTRODUCTION

The first time I experienced the power of our text is etched in my mind. I was in my junior year of high school, working for my dad in his meat market after school and weekends. My dad was a workaholic and expected everyone else around him to follow his pattern, especially his sons. While the store closed at 6 p.m., I was often expected to stay late on Friday nights with Dad, getting ready for the biggest day of the week, Saturday, when hamburger went on sale, three pounds for a dollar. That meant all those pounds had to be ground— many of them by me. On this Friday night I was pretty angry, resenting how much work I had and the father who wanted me to do it. I think it was about 9 p.m. and I was in the backroom all alone, grinding another mountain of hamburger. I was filled with self-pity, feeling I had to be the most abused kid in all of Montana to be serving such a sentence on Friday night. I began to complain to the Lord about my lot— after all, He certainly bore some responsibility for it. And, this Scripture verse from our text came clearly into my mind, *In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you*. I believe I must have heard a sermon on this sometime. But this night, there was a prompting of the Spirit to my disgruntled spirit to just do it. Well, I felt so miserable inside I decided to try it. Between tubs of hamburger, I stepped out the back door under a brilliant starlit sky and made a choice. I began to thank God because He told me to in His Word. It felt like my mouth was full of cotton when I began, but I persisted for maybe a minute or two— certainly not much longer— and I felt my anger dissolving inside, my self-pity begin to evaporate, and deep within, an incredible joy began to bubble up. I could hardly believe it— the effect of putting into practice what God said in His Word. [If this sounds familiar, I referred to this incident three years ago in a sermon— nevertheless, it seemed to serve us well to use it again here].

I felt that I'd made a momentous discovery. I began testing it in other bad circumstances and it always seemed to work. Then I realized that is what my mother had been practicing for years as she praised the Lord and worshiped the Lord all day long around the house. In any disappointment, with any fear, with any crisis, with any loss, with any bad thing that came my way, I had a choice. I didn't have to be unhappy. I could choose God's path laid out for us here.

If this congregation is at all like what statistics suggest, six out of ten of you are feeling burdened, troubled, overwhelmed, anxious about life, or depressed. Often life can feel heavy and lacking in hope, hard to keep putting one foot in front of the other. And, if you are not feeling

that way this morning, certainly we all know times when we are there. The good news is that, when we hit those times, there is something we can do to restore the lilt to life. I remember an article using the word “lilt” to describe the way life in the Spirit should look. I like that word. The dictionary defines “lilt” as, “To move in a lively, springy, buoyant manner.” Wouldn’t you like that to define your life? 1 Thess. 5:16-22 opens the door for restoring the lilt to our living. I’m using the KJV because it fits with the chorus we learned, but I also like the way it reads in seven terse, staccato commands.

READ SCRIPTURE

“GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES” (18)

As the chorus we learned earlier suggests, I believe this 18th verse is the bedrock to this whole sequence of commands, so we’ll start there”

In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Certainly we all know times when we are thankful. But, there are also plenty of times, especially hard times when troubles surround us, we don’t give thanks. So, this is quite a shocking command— *In every thing give thanks*. “Everything” means there is no circumstance we can possibly be in in which we are not to give thanks. However, take careful note of the preposition, “in.” It is not “for.” We should not be thankful for evil, for bad things, for cancer, and for troubles that beset us. But, when they come, we can be thankful to God while in the midst of them. Why? *For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

Just what does that mean? Does it mean it is God’s will for us to give thanks in everything? Yes. Does it mean that the current trouble is God’s will for you? Yes, at least in a general sense. But this needs a little explanation. God is not the source of evil, of sickness, or of any of the problems caused by sin and our fallen humanity. They all come from the devil and/ or our sin-corrupted natures. God is only good. However, in His sovereign wisdom, He does allow bad things to come our way that in His power He could prevent. Yet, He knows they hold the potential for us of refining, developing our character, teaching us faith, and in general growing us spiritually. Romans 8:28 says it well:

In all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called, according to His purpose.

And, Romans 5:3-5

but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

We have the assurance that all the trouble we experience has been filtered by God’s permissive will as something that can develop us. And most of us have to admit that our spiritual lives grow the most when we are in trouble. That’s when we learn to trust. And, remember, God is at work in developing our souls for eternity, not just making us happy in the here and now.

When we give thanks to God in the midst of circumstances we don't like, we do something extremely important. It is a sheer act of will in which we are affirming our belief that God is still in control, that He is greater than anything besetting us. AND, it takes our focus off the troubles and "Why me" or "Poor me," and puts our focus upon God. As I often say, it is not about you. It is about God and His purpose for your life. So, the very act of giving thanks in circumstances not to our liking is a relinquishment of our wills to His will. While we don't thank God for the cancer or the loss we've experienced, in the midst of what we are going through we thank God for His power and grace that will enable us to grow in and through that experience. We are affirming God is in charge.

And, there is wonderful assurance as well in this. It is *the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you*. In Christ Jesus, we are assured of God's unconditional love, power, and redemptive purpose. Jesus is on our side and interceding for us, helping us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

George Frederick Handel put this into practice in a most literal way when he wrote "The Messiah." I've told you before of the incredible adversity he faced as he wrote it. He was broke, owing enormous sums of money, threatened with debtor's prison, exhausted from overwork and had suffered a stroke that left his right arm useless. He did recover from the stroke. In this despairing time, he received an invitation to write an oratorio for a charity concert for people in debtor's prison— people imprisoned because they were too poor to pay their bills. Here, he was facing the same thing, and only a token payment was offered for his work— nothing compared to the debts he had. AND, here's something I just learned recently. At the premier concert, enough money was raised for 128 prisoners to be set free! Handel refused even the token payment offered.

But, think about what he is doing in that incredible oratorio. He is reviewing God's promises fulfilled in Christ's first coming and the whole sweep of salvation history to His return in glory. God's promises are true. While the present may seem hopeless, we can still give thanks because God has been and will be true to His Word. That repeated refrain in the Hallelujah Chorus from Rev. 19:6, *Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth*, says it all. And the creative energy with which he wrote had to be Spirit-given as Handel worshiped the Lord in his writing, for he wrote the entire score in just 23 days!

There is a deeper truth here. When you begin to follow this literally, giving thanks in all circumstances, you are set free. You are no longer imprisoned by those circumstances. You have affirmed your faith in the Lord who is over it all. You are serving Him, not the bad things that have happened.

"REJOICE EVERMORE" (16)

Rejoicing takes us a step beyond just giving thanks, but choosing to be joyful. Phil 4:4 is unbeatable in its expression of this:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Paul is writing those words from prison, and they are given in the grammatical form of an imperative command. DO IT! This is nothing about feelings. God created us with wills to choose our response to what happens. We all know it is childish to say, “You made me mad.” Between the action taken against us and our response is a decision. We’d often like to deny that responsibility. But, just break the word apart, “response- ability.” We have the ability to choose our response. Habakkuk understands this so well and gives us these inspiring words:

*Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
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 Savior. (Hab 3:17-18)*

Choosing to rejoice in the Lord is one of the most powerful spiritual weapons you have in bad times. Doing this vocally helps, for we hear ourselves and it builds our faith to hear those affirmations. When we begin rejoicing, within a short time, joy follows, for God inhabits the praises of His people. Oswald Chambers once said, “Joy is the nature of God in my blood.”

“PRAY WITHOUT CEASING” (17)

Here is the way we handle the day-to-day encroaching anxieties. This a continuing dialogue with the Master, turning everything over to Him. Prayer needs to extend beyond our formal prayers in our morning devotions to little prayers, that can even be in the form of thoughts, offered to the Lord continually through the day. It is living in the presence of God. If you have a prayer language, a personal use of speaking in tongues, it can be very helpful in this maintaining contact as the Spirit prays through us.

When Polly and I spend a day together, there isn’t constant conversation. We may be reading, driving somewhere, working at something, and there are comments but also just comfortable silence in one another’s presence. And, that is the way it should be with the Lord. Even when not talking to Him, there is a sensitivity, awareness, and comfort in His presence. I believe to “pray without ceasing” means living within that consciousness and sharing your thoughts and listening for His.

“QUENCH NOT THE SPIRIT” (19)

The NIV puts this, *do not put out the Spirit’s fire*. Just as on Pentecost, the Spirit was manifested as tongues of fire, with His coming, there is a warmth, a glow that the Holy Spirit brings into our hearts that makes this image appropriate. This Spirit-fire is energy, passion, and enthusiasm. It burns out the impurities, making us more like Jesus. “Quench” means to extinguish or smother.

We quench the Spirit within us when we fail to respond to His promptings or guidance. We quench the Spirit by smothering it under things, obligations, misaligned priorities, and the

busyness of life. Sometimes our schedules get in the way when we cannot deviate from them. There needs to be an element of spontaneity in responding to the Spirit's leading. We are not in control, He is. A resistance to moving forward when God calls us to quenches the Spirit.

And, we must be careful not to quench the Spirit in another. Because the enthusiasm and excitement of another believer makes us feel uncomfortable, we can be critical of them in our hearts. We don't need to even say anything. A mere disapproving look can squelch another's spirit.

“DESPISE NOT PROPHECYINGS”

This is a reference to one of the gifts of the Spirit. Paul singles it out in 1 Cor. 14 as one of the more important spiritual gifts. This is more of a “forth-telling” than “foretelling.” It is speaking a special word given from the Lord. Of course that can involve telling the future, but most often it is a word of guidance or exhortation. It may be couched in a “Thus saith the Lord” formal kind of utterance, or can be part of sermon, teaching or other word in which that portion comes with power and you know in your heart it is a word from the Lord.

“PROVE [TEST] ALL THINGS” (21)

In the midst of being spontaneous, led by the Spirit, and listening to words of exhortation and prophecy, we must not be gullible. Paul calls for a Spirit-led discernment on our part. *Test all things; hold fast that which is good* (21). God's Word revealed in Scripture is foundational in all this. Everything must be consistent with that. God wants us Biblically knowledgeable, thoughtful, with sound doctrine so that we aren't led astray. But when we discover the good, that which really is from God, “hold fast” to that. Good, sound teaching and true words spoken from the Lord are a steady hand for us— something to hold fast to.

“ABSTAIN FROM... EVIL” (22)

In this final admonition, Paul reminds us we need to actively stay away from evil or anything that even looks like it has an evil component to it. *Abstain from all appearance of evil*. Later, Paul will counsel Timothy to:

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. (2 Tim 2:22)

CONCLUSION

Well, there you have it— seven tight commands that will serve us well when our life gets layered under the burdens of life. Doing what God says here through Paul will aerate the heaviness in our souls and restore the lilt to living, the spring in our steps, the buoyancy in our hearts.