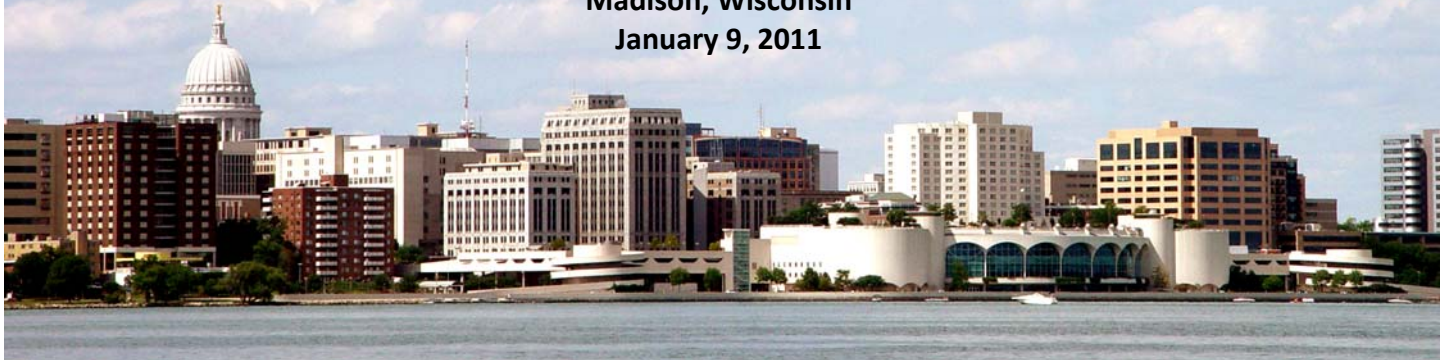


“The Standing Orders of the Gospel”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

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Introduction:

As we begin our lesson this morning, I would like for us to think for a few minutes about some of those things that we do all the time without even thinking about it. I have read that the average person takes a breath approximately 12-20 times every minute. We know that our hearts beat, we digest our food, our eyes automatically adjust for the light; in fact, there are many things we do without needing to make a conscious decision. And certainly one huge example of this is when we blink. I have read that the average adult blinks approximately 10 times every minute. If you normally get the church bulletin by e-mail, then perhaps you had a chance to watch the video that was sent along with today's bulletin (SEARCH YouTube: non-blinking world record). If not, then please give me your e-mail address, and let me know, and I would be glad to add you to that mailing list. But for those of you who followed the link to YouTube, then you know that the video was of a commercial from Japan where a woman was trying to break the world record for going the longest amount of time without blinking her eyes! She started going through her day doing all of her daily routines (dipping her face in the sink, cutting onions in the kitchen, kissing her husband, greeting the dog) and all of these things were going very well. She almost gets hit by a bicycle. She gets hit in the head with a soccer ball. I will not tell you what finally makes her blink her eyes. You can go online and figure that out for yourselves. That is the point of the commercial. But the point for our lesson this morning is that it is not natural to go for such a long time without blinking. My understanding is that the world record for not blinking is something like 62 hours. I'm not exactly sure how (or why) anyone would do that, but again, it is unnatural to go without doing something that we were designed to do.

As we go to the Scriptures this morning, I would like for us to consider a lesson that was requested by one of our members, and the lesson touches on three things that we as Christians are to be doing constantly. In fact, we should be doing these things as often as we blink. The Scripture is found in 1 Thessalonians 5 (p. 1850). The passage is a little bit unusual, because the apostle Paul gives us a quick list of these three things that are to be done continually. It is not like singing that we do from time to time. It is not like the Lord's Supper that is done every week. But these things are to be done at all times and in all circumstances. Perhaps we could compare it to the traditional marriage vows, "I take you to be my husband or wife, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, from this day forward, for as long as we both shall live." That is basically the idea that we are about to consider—things that we as Christians are to do at all

times, no matter what, whether we feel like it or not. These three things, in fact, have been described by one respected author as “the standing orders of the gospel.” If you will, then, please look with me at 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 as we study a request that was made by one of the women of this congregation. Starting in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, Paul says this, **“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”** Again, as we look back at these three verses, we find the words **“always,” “without ceasing,”** and **“in all circumstances.”** Now, if Paul had said that we are to do these things “sometimes,” “occasionally,” and “when we feel like it,” we would not have a problem. But as it is, he tells us to do these things pretty much as often as we blink: **“Always,” “without ceasing,”** and **“in all circumstances.”** This morning, then, let us please think very carefully about what Paul has told us to do here.

I. And the first thing Paul says (in verse 16), is that we are to REJOICE ALWAYS.

One translation says that we are to **“Be cheerful no matter what.”** Another translation says that we are to **“Be full of joy all the time.”** Of all people, Christians have a reason to be happy. We remember the words of the angel who announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds in their fields at night, **“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”** And then later, as the Lord taught His disciples, He told them in Luke 10:20, to **“rejoice”** because their names had been recorded in heaven. And later again, in Galatians 5:22, Paul listed **“joy”** as one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

But here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul gives it as a command. We are to **“rejoice always.”** Now, for some of us, that may seem a little hard! Sometimes we may not feel like rejoicing. Sometimes we may even be distressed or sad. And so the question is: Does **“always”** really mean **“always”**? And of course, the answer is “Yes”! In fact, the apostle Paul set the example concerning what it means to rejoice even in difficult circumstances. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul was writing about some of the difficult things he endured as an apostle. He talked about the beatings, and the imprisonments. He talked about the sleepless nights and hunger. But in the middle of it, he referred to being **“sorrowful yet always rejoicing.”** In other words, somehow Paul was able to be **“sorrowful,”** and yet **“always rejoicing”** at the same time. He might have been going through some tough times, but Paul was able to rejoice. He rejoiced not only in his own salvation but also in the fact that he was allowed to pass it on to others. Sometimes we sing the song, “We have heard the joyful sound. Jesus saves! Jesus saves!” As Christians, we of all people should be happy people. We have so much to be happy about!

It is for this reason that several years ago I began starting my Bible class every Wednesday evening by asking those of you in the class to share some good news. What are you thankful for? What prayers have been answered in your life this week? What interesting thing have you learned from the Scriptures? I don’t know if we’ve thought about this, but sometimes our worship service has a tendency to begin with a long list of everything that is wrong with the world. We refer to that part of our service as the “announcements,” but sometimes it is just a big list of all of the terrible things that have happened to us over the past week—brother so-and-so is sick, this sister is in the hospital, this person lost his job, and so on. There is a place for sharing our concerns, but there is also a place for announcing the good things that have happened. As Christians, we are told to **“rejoice always.”** When we get together with Christian friends, what do we talk about? Do our conversations sound like the announcements? Do we only talk about all of the depressing things that happened to us during the week? Or do we share news about the good things that have happened? Do we count our blessings, or do we find it easier to count our afflictions? Paul, therefore, has a reminder that we are to **“rejoice always.”** Rejoicing should be to a Christian what blinking is to the human body. It is something that we do all the time, no matter what, and it should be weird if we don’t.

II. As we continue with verse 17, we find a second activity that we need to be doing all the time, and that is, we are told here that we are to PRAY WITHOUT CEASING.

One translation says, *“Never stop praying.”* Another one says, *“Pray all the time.”* And again, for many of us, it might seem impossible to pray all the time. And I suppose that it probably would be impossible if we only think of prayer in terms of kneeling down, and folding our hands, and closing our eyes. If we think of prayer like that, then yes, it would be pretty hard to drive! It would be hard to do a lot of things. And yet we also realize that Paul was not giving us an impossible command. And so if we are told to *“pray without ceasing,”* then it must be possible. God would never tell us to do something that cannot be done.

We need to back up, then, and try to find a parallel—we need to find a similar statement that we understand from everyday life. If, for example, a parent says to a child on the way out the door in the morning, “Always be careful,” the parent is not telling the child to walk around terrified that something horrible might happen, but the parent is really saying, “Under circumstances that call for being careful, be careful!” I realize that that is not a perfect illustration, but most of us hopefully understand what Paul was saying here. He was telling us that we as Christians should be living a lifestyle of constant prayer. We need to pray regularly. We need to pray at all times. We can pray before we eat. And there again, a prayer before we eat might not necessarily involve bowing our heads and folding our hands, but even at work or at school, as we unpack that lunch, we can privately thank God for the food that He has provided.

But even beyond that, perhaps we could compare constant prayer to having a phone line to God always open. Several weeks ago, Keola’s dad got her an interesting little contraption for Christmas. It is a Motorola Bluetooth hands-free device for the car. It is a little thing you clip on the visor of the car, and I will admit it is pretty cool. Some of you may have this built into your cars, or maybe you already have it in your phones, but it allows you to control your phone by just speaking. “Call dad,” and dad is suddenly on the phone—at least that is how it is supposed to work! And every once in a while it will talk back to you. Yesterday on our way home from Portage it just blurted out, “Battery condition excellent,” or something along those lines. But that’s a little bit how I picture this idea of unceasing prayer. At any moment and under any circumstances, all we need to do is say something to the Lord, all we need to do is think a thought directly to the Lord, and we know that the Lord is there. That hotline to God is always open. In fact, there is nothing that could ever happen to us that is too insignificant that it could not be improved by us reaching out to approach God in prayer. Yes, there are times when we need to punch the numbers, there are times when we may need to kneel down, but there are other times when we can simply remember that God is able to hear our thoughts, and we can take advantage of that by speaking to God openly during those times.

We need to realize that prayer is communication. We have always explained to our kids that God is our Father, and as a good Father, God always likes hearing from His children. Just as I love hearing from my kids, so also God loves hearing from His children as well. And no concern is too small. In fact, I think it would be safe to say that it would be impossible for any of us to pray too much. Maybe you can correct me if you think of some situation, but I cannot think of any verse in the Bible where anyone has ever been condemned for coming to God too often in prayer. It is impossible, then, to over-pray. But instead, we are commanded to *“pray without ceasing.”*

We can pray as we drive down the road. We can pray as we make a decision. We can pray as we think about our family finances. We can pray as we think about the church’s finances. We can pray for our families. We can pray for our children. We can pray for our parents. We can pray for our government leaders. We can pray for our employer. We can pray for our co-workers. And when we pray it is not to be awkward like it

sometimes is when we meet someone for the very first time, but I believe our prayers are to be like a conversation with an old, respected friend. We are to be comfortable talking to God. We are to ***“pray without ceasing,”*** and if we ever stop praying it should be just as uncomfortable as if we were to stop blinking. Our prayer life is to be ongoing, and that line should always be open.

III. There is a third “standing order” for those of us as Christians, a third thing we should always be doing, and that is, we find in verse 18 that we are to GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.

The NASB says that we are to give thanks ***“in everything.”*** One translation says that we are to, ***“Be thankful, whatever the circumstances may be.”*** Another one says, ***“Whatever happens, keep thanking God.”*** To be thankful means that we realize that our blessings come from God. To thank God means that we recognize that God is the giver of each blessing. We certainly realize this in other areas of life. When someone holds a door open for us and we say “thank you,” we are recognizing that the door did not just open by itself, we are recognizing that we did not open the door ourselves, and we are recognizing that someone opened the door for us, that it was done on purpose and for our benefit. In the same way, when we thank God we are recognizing the fact that God is the one who is responsible for the blessing.

On a slightly related note, have you noticed what happens during any time of national tragedy? Often, politicians and local leaders will say something like, “Our prayers go out to the family.” But think about that? Is that an accurate statement? Yesterday, we heard these words from our president, we heard these words from Senator John McCain from Arizona, and we heard these words from our own representative right here in Madison. But is it accurate to say that our prayers go out to the families involved? Maybe it is a small thing, but personally, my prayers are not being offered to any families. But instead, we have been offering prayers TO God ON BEHALF of the families. We are seeing more of this around the Thanksgiving holiday as well. So often, those in the media remind all of us to “be thankful.” Over and over again, “Be thankful!” But I would ask, “Be thankful to Whom?” They will never tell us that, but we always hear reminders that we are to “be thankful.” The Bible, though, tells us to be thankful to God.

And in this passage, the apostle Paul tells us that we are to ***“give thanks in all circumstances.”*** We thank God for the warm bed we slept in last night. We thank God for our food. We thank God for the gift of another day. We thank God for our Christian friends. In fact, thanking God is what sets apart from the rest of this world. In Romans 1, the apostle Paul wrote about the evil people of his day, and in verse 21 he said, ***“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.”*** In other words, people of the world refuse to acknowledge God. They do not honor God, and they certainly do not give Him thanks. In fact, it has been said that not being thankful is the opposite of worship, and I believe that is a true statement. All around us, people are swimming in God’s blessings, but they say to themselves, “Wow, I’m good!” Or maybe they say to themselves, “Wow, I am so lucky!” I remember a sermon my dad preached when I was really young where he said that there is no such thing as luck. I think my grandmother might have been there for that lesson, because for many years, if she ever heard us say the word “luck,” she would correct us. She would say, “Remember, there is no such thing as luck!” Well, people of this world believe in luck and hard work, but we as Christians see ourselves as being blessed. And so if we will thank a stranger for opening a door, then certainly we should also thank God for everything that He has done. One person has said, “Count your fingers and toes, and if your mind is sharp enough to count that high, then thank God for your mind also!”

Of course the problem comes when we think about giving thanks to God ***“in all circumstances.”*** But let us please look back very carefully at what Paul actually says. Paul does not tell us to thank God “for” all

circumstances. Paul does not tell us to thank God “for” everything. But instead, we are told to thank God “**in**” all circumstances. We are told to thank God “**in**” everything. In other words, we are not necessarily to thank God because we got in a terrible car accident, but we are to thank God that we survived. Perhaps we can thank God that we were not injured any worse than we were.

We need to remember that Paul was writing these words to the church in Thessalonica, a city where Paul was run out of town by an angry mob. The church in Thessalonica was being persecuted, and yet Paul was still able to say, “**in everything give thanks.**” Not in “most” things, not in “some” things, not in “many” things, but “**in everything.**” We are to give thanks to God “**in all circumstances.**” It seems that no matter how bad things might get, we can always find something to be thankful for. Most of you have probably heard the poem,

*Thank God for dirty dishes
They have a tale to tell
While others may go hungry
We've eaten very well.*

*With home, health, and happiness
I shouldn't want to fuss;
By the stack of evidence
God's been very good to us!*

Yes! And even when confronted by a sink full of dirty dishes, we can thank God that we had food to eat. We can even thank God for shoveling snow. As I was preparing for this morning's lesson, I read about a woman who was outside shoveling the driveway after a terrible snowstorm. She stopped to talk to her neighbor, and the neighbor asked why her husband wasn't out there helping. The woman explained that someone had to stay inside to watch the children, so they drew straws to see who would go out to shovel. The neighbor said, “Well, I'm sorry about your bad luck.” And the woman said, “Don't be sorry: I won!” Well, there was a woman who was thankful to be shoveling snow!

Even in those bad circumstances of life, we be thankful for something. We can be thankful that God causes all things to work together for God for those who love Him and for those who are called according to His purpose. We can thank God that Jesus was raised from the dead. Even in the worst of times, we can thank God that our sins have been forgiven. We can thank God that this world is not the “real” world. We can be thankful that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We can thank God that whatever we are going through may allow us to serve others in some special way. We can thank God that, “**...momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison**” (2 Corinthians 4:17). Paul, then, tells us that we are to always be thankful. Thanking God should be just as natural as blinking our eyes. It is something we should do “**in all circumstances.**”

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this short passage, we notice WHY we are told to rejoice, pray, and give thanks in everything. At the end of verse 18, Paul gives the reason as he says, “**...for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**” Or, as one translation says, we are to do these things because, “**...this is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.**” At the beginning of this new year, therefore, let us resolve to rejoice, pray, and give thanks, and let us resolve to do these things as often as we blink our eyes. I am so thankful for the request that led to this morning's lesson!

The Bible teaches that all of us have sinned and that we deserve to be separated from God for what we have done. That separation breaks God's heart, and so in response to the gap, God sent His Son as a perfect sacrifice, as a bridge. We accept God's offer by turning away from our sins and by allowing ourselves to be dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you are already a Christian and would like for us to pray for some situation in your life right now, you can let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com