

1 Thessalonians 5:16-28 Bible Study – Rejoice Always and Closing Blessings

Discussion Questions

- How can we rejoice always, even when things aren't going well or according to plan?
- What does it mean to pray without ceasing? How can you improve your prayer life in the coming year?
- How can we give thanks in everything? What principles from the Bible can help us to do this?
- What does it mean to quench the spirit?
- What does verse 21 teach us about discernment?
- What is our role in the sanctification process?
- How has God been faithful to you in the past year?
- Should we literally greet others with a kiss? Why or why not?

Verse by Verse Commentary

1. Rejoice Always –

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

— *Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*

The pursuit of happiness or joy is the pursuit of every person on the planet. Everybody wants to be happy. They want to be happy now and after they die. This is a supposed basic right inherent to humankind. However, the pursuit of joy will lead people in many directions. It leads some thousands of feet below the ocean, looking for beautiful coral and fish. It leads others miles into the sky, climbing Mt. Everest. It leads some from the countryside to big cities to work and make more money. It leads others from the big cities to the countryside to escape the city noise. It leads some to marriage. It leads others to divorce.

Reflect – What is the source of true joy? Most news we read online is of the bad variety. With natural disasters everywhere, terrorism, broken families, a corrupted culture, and persecution, how can we possibly rejoice? What is the key?

First, we are going to look at the question, “why should we rejoice?”

A. God wants us to be joyful –

Ecclesiastes 2:26 – For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

John 15:11 – These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

God is the giver of joy. It doesn't come from “inside us.” Neither does it come from some mystical source or material possessions. If you want to pursue joy, then you need to pursue God. The closer we get to Him, the more joyful we will get. God wants our lives in this world to be joyful. He doesn't want us going through life depressed, discouraged, and discontent. He wants us to have complete, full joy in Him.

Joy is not equal to an absence of difficulties. God is sovereign and ever since the fall, the world has been full of problems. That was also true in Jesus' day. Some of the very people Jesus promised joy to would endure the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in 70 AD.

This did not change the fact that God wanted them to be joyful in Him. Here in 1 Thessalonians, we are commanded to “rejoice always.” This is a command, not a suggestion. Sometimes rejoicing is a matter of making up our minds to be obedient even when we don’t feel like it.

Habakkuk made the decision to rejoice in the Lord no matter what difficulties he might face.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 – Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.

B. We are to rejoice because our names are in the book of life –

Luke 10:20 Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

1 Peter 1:5-7 – Who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

When you start to feel down and out, remember what position you have in Christ. One practical way to do that is to review Ephesians 1:1-14.

Reflect – What are some of the blessings you have in Christ?

We have an eternal inheritance. We are His sons. We have eternal life and salvation. We have numerous blessings in this life on earth. There is nothing more important for us than having our names in the book of life. Sometimes we lose our joy in this world because we didn’t get the degree we wanted, failed a test, missed out on a job opportunity, etc. But all of those things are nothing compared to having your name where it counts in the book of life.

C. We are to rejoice because of who is our God –

Psalms 21:1 – O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices, and in your salvation how greatly he exults!

Psalms 35:9 – Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation.

John Piper said, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” That is true. We get our joy by enjoying God. At the same time, when we enjoy Him, He is glorified.

God is our strength and our salvation. He is sovereign and in control of everything. He loves us and cares for us and saves us. He has our best interests at heart. His plans are for our good (Romans 8:28). His Word should also be a joy to us as it brings us closer to God. Again, the more we learn about God and become like Him the more joyful we will become.

D. True joy is not dependent on circumstances – We are to rejoice always.

Philippians 4:4 – Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

I was reading a poll online talking about how happy different groups are. Apparently, marrying makes people happier, as 60% of married people describe themselves as joyful compared to 41% of singles. Having children and more money also caused people to give themselves higher happiness scores.

However, circumstances can change and they are not guaranteed to bring happiness. No circumstance can magically fulfill you. Marriage is good, but if you aren't happy without it, you won't be happy with it. Children and money are good, but if you aren't happy without them, you won't be happy with them.

We are to rejoice always, whether or not the girl of our dreams or our perfect job has come.

Even if the worst trials come upon us, we do not have the right to complain. On the contrary, we are commanded to be joyful. What does this show?

It shows that being joyful is largely a decision of the will and not an emotion. We can decide to be joyful always, or we can decide not to be joyful. This is the same as biblical love. It is not just "falling in love and I can't help it." We make conscious choices to love or not to love.

Being joyful means that we have a good attitude and a pleasant spirit even when times are tough. Once again, this is insane to the world. They would advocate that you "need" certain things to be joyful and that a person can't control his joy or not. But by God's strength and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 5:22 – But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.

Reflect and Application: Can you think of examples of any biblical characters who either did or did not follow the principle to rejoice always? Do you rejoice always? What do you need to do to grow in this area?

2. Pray without ceasing –

Read and compare Luke 11:5-13 with Luke 18:1-9 – What is the teaching? In both of these cases, a person did not want to answer the request, was busy, and was not concerned with the person's needs. They had no interest in actually helping the person making the request, yet because of persistence, they helped the person in the end.

The point is that if people who are busy and don't really care about the person making the request will help in response to persistence, then surely God, who is not too busy and does care about us, also will. If persistence works in this world of sinners, surely it will work with a loving God.

In both cases, the person making the request has no shame! The guy doesn't make a little knock on the door and whisper and say, "I guess he doesn't want to help," and then walk away. The widow doesn't say, "Excuse me, sir, I'm really sorry to bother you, but would you mind giving me some protection? No? Ok, I didn't think so, really sorry to bother you, bye." She demands, "give me legal protection from my opponent!" and says the same thing day after day. Don't be weak-hearted in your prayers and don't lose heart quickly. If the prayer is right and according to Jesus' name, pray it again and again for decades if necessary.

The idea in this passage is that we are to have a lifestyle of prayer. We are not to pray a little bit here and there. We are not to pray only when facing emergencies. We are not to offer a recited prayer only before meals. We are not to pray only during prayer meetings. Prayer is to be a major part of our life and something we practice in rain or shine whether or not the answer comes quickly. We know the teaching in this verse and we know what it means. The key question is, "Are you doing it?"

Application: Are you praying without ceasing? If not, it could be that you prioritize the wrong activities. Or perhaps a lack of prayer signifies a prideful spirit and a reliance on self instead of God. Let this passage be another reminder to make prayer a priority in your life.

Reflect – What positive examples are there in the Bible about prayer?

3. In everything give thanks – Pray with a thanksgiving heart.

Ephesians 5:20 – Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4:6 – Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

A. We need to give thanks always and for all things. This tells us that in every situation there is something to give thanks for. We know God causes everything to work together for good if we love Him. It is, of course, much easier to give thanks for things that seem good to us. It is much easier to give thanks if your stock investments triple than if they fall 70%. But in both cases, we need to thank God. Why?

- We are commanded to.
- God is in control and has a reason for it. He wants us to learn a lesson.
- Everything we have belongs to God.
- Money isn't everything. Although 70% is gone, we still have a relationship with God. Money is temporary, but the things of God are eternal.
- We still have 30% left!

B. Request with thanksgiving – What does the phrase “prayer with thanksgiving” mean? Some possibilities:

- Not to forget to thank God for past blessings when asking for new ones.
- Have thanksgiving for what He is going to do.

C. Praying with a thanksgiving heart is similar to praying with a humble one. It simply acknowledges that we don't deserve what we have, but it is because of God's grace.

The key idea of this thought is that we are to have a positive outlook about things rather than a negative one. We are to always look for the silver lining and remember the many blessings in our lives even when things aren't going well. Once again, this is not just a suggestion. Paul says, “this is God's will for you.” To be ungrateful is sinful. To have a complaining and negative spirit is sinful. Rejoicing and being thankful are connected. God knows that a truly thankful person will be a much happier person.

Application: Too many times we just ask for things. Let's remember to be thankful!

4. Do not quench the Spirit – What does it mean to quench the Spirit? Quenching the Spirit is the opposite of being filled with the Spirit. To quench is the same word used as putting out a fire with water. We quench the Spirit when we do not follow His leading. If the Spirit sounds off warning bells in our mind about a temptation we face, and we ignore those and sin anyway, we quench the Spirit. If the Spirit brings sin to our minds and we refuse to repent, we quench the Spirit. If He prompts us to pray for someone and share the gospel and we ignore that prompting, we quench the Spirit.

It is almost as if every time we ignore Him and harden our hearts, His voice will grow a little quieter until He finally is silent. It is not because He abandons us but because we have hardened our hearts to Him. Train yourself to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading by responding quickly and obediently to His leading and conviction.

5. Do not despise the prophetic utterances –

Ephesians 4:11 – And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.

Prophecy was definitely a gift during New Testament times. There is some debate in the church at large about whether that gift still exists or whether it has changed. Without going too deep into that discussion, it is worth noting that most of the message from the prophets in the Bible is not about predicting the future but about exhortation to repent and obey the Lord.

It is likely that the gift of prophecy in the New Testament was given to certain believers to give direct revelation and commands from God to other people within the church. With the Bible completed, there is less need now for direct revelation. But the purpose of a prophet, to give warnings, rebukes, and exhortations to God's people, still remains.

Application: The lesson for us is to be teachable. We just learned not to harden our hearts to the Spirit. We must also learn not to harden our hearts to people sent by the Spirit to teach us or remind us of biblical truth. Sometimes God speaks to us directly through His Word or promptings of the Spirit and other times He speaks to us through people whom He has chosen as instruments. In both cases, God wants us to be humble and teachable.

6. Examine everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil – This is a very important reminder, especially in today's world. These days we are bombarded daily with all kinds of theories. Media, co-workers, family, government, and the very cultures we live in are a source of every type of opinion and worldview. Some of the things we hear are obviously wrong.

For example, there is a significant percentage of the adult population that actually believes the moon is made out of cheese. Obviously, this is absurd. But there are many more subtle and far more deadly doctrines/beliefs/worldviews/theories which can creep into the church and into our own lives almost without us noticing it.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 – For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Do not blindly accept ideas as true. Examine them in light of Scripture. Do not be like a rudderless ship that floats wherever the wind and current takes it. God has given you a rudder (what is our rudder?). Use it. Set the course God wants you to be on and stay the course no matter what obstacles or difficulties you face.

From the time my children were young, we tried to teach them to evaluate what they see and hear as well to see if it is true. For example, they watched nature shows which say "millions and millions of years ago." They also watch a PBS cartoon called "Arthur," which in its theme song said, "You got to believe in yourself. That's the place to start."

When they heard these things, I asked them, "Is that true?" My older one answered, "No, you have to believe in God."

Satan wages his war against our very minds and beliefs. We have to be aware of that and ask God for discernment to learn what is true and what is false.

6. Verses 23-24 –

A. God is the God of peace. He wants us to have peace with Him and peace with each other.

B. It is He who sanctifies. You cannot sanctify yourselves. We must allow God to His sanctifying work in our lives.

C. Paul showed once again that his prayers were focused primarily on the spiritual well-being of those who ministered to. He wanted them to be blameless at Jesus' second coming, which is one of the main themes of this book. We too, must be prepared.

D. He is faithful and His promises will all be fulfilled in due time.

7. Pray for us – We learned in the last passage that we should show appreciation for and respect to those who give of their time and energy to minister to us.

Reflect – Do you regularly pray for your spiritual leaders? If not, how can you make this a regular part of your prayer life?

8. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss –

Reflect – Should we do this? Is this cultural? How do you know you know?

We have to be careful not to too quickly claim a Biblical instruction is cultural as it can set a dangerous precedent. In this case, this does appear to be cultural. Sometimes it is helpful to ask what is the universal principle behind the exact command. In this case, it is to show appropriate affection and politeness when greeting brothers and sisters in Christ.

In many cultures around the world, this is not an appropriate display of affection. If a brother does this to a brother in some countries, he may be viewed as a homosexual. At the very least, the recipient will be very uncomfortable, which is exactly the opposite of the intention of this instruction.

In some societies, if a brother does it to a sister, it is considered wildly inappropriate and may result in being pepper sprayed.

The universal principle is to greet other believers warmly, which in our case could be a warm handshake with a friendly verbal greeting. It differs widely from culture to culture so make sure you understand the culture you live in so that you will be polite and not offensive. In some cultures today, this method of greeting is still widely practiced.

9. Have this letter read to all the brethren – Paul wrote it to the whole church and wanted it read by the whole church.

10. Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you – Paul, as he often does, closes with a benediction. He entrusts them into the hands of the Lord, who loves them even much more than he does.

Application – What is a key verse you remember from this book? How can you apply it in the coming week?