

God's Will for You

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Introduction

Seems like there's always a lot of talk about "finding God's will for your life." This is especially true in our adolescent and young adult years. What is God's will for my life vocationally? Should I go to college and, if I do, where should I go? With such a large investment, we want to know God's will for us. And then there's the really big question, "who does God want me to marry?" Later in life, questions still remain: what about a new job, or the purchase of a home? In the course of our lives, there are many questions in which we want to be aligned with God's will. Within evangelicalism, there are some who maintain that there are exclusive answers to those questions. Others think that God isn't so much concerned about the decision you make as how you make it. I think there is merit to both perspectives on discerning God's will.

The truth is, however, that most of God's will for yours and my life is very clearly spelled out in Scripture. We don't have to go on an intensive search and spend hours in anguished prayer to find his will for our lives. It's right there in front of our eyes, spelled out in Scripture. Today's text is a great example:

Text: I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Context

The Apostle Paul wrote two letters to the church in Thessalonica. Unfortunately, political pressure had forced him from the city after only a short time after establishing the congregation. His first letter to them was intended to calm some fears that had arisen regarding what would happen to some of their people who had died. Much of his focus in the epistle is related to the Second Coming of the Lord. As in any discussion about future things, the topic wasn't just speculation, but it also led to the way in which one conducts his life. Paul's instructions at the end of the epistle are practical and specific so that they would remain faithful until the Day of the Lord finally came. Within that context, the Apostle exhorts them to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks.

Rejoice Always

This isn't the only place where Paul exhorts the church to rejoice. In his letter to the Philippians, he is even more emphatic, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again, I say, rejoice!" (4:4) The essential meaning of the word "rejoice" carries the sense of a feeling or an outward expression of joy or delight. A person who is rejoicing isn't keeping his joy to himself. His delight will show on his face even if it isn't expressed by his lips. Rejoicing should be characteristic of all Christians. In a serious world so full of heartache, Jesus' words to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount seem to be almost crazy:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **Rejoice and be glad**, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Emphasis mine)

Matthew 5:10-12

What is the source of this “craziness?” It’s not crazy at all. The Christian lives in light of the future. We know that God wins in the end. The Scriptures tell us that Christ will “reign forever and ever.” And we know that we are on God’s side. Think of the Apostle Paul who wrote this. When he and Silas were beaten within an inch of their lives in Philippi and thrown into the dungeon, what were they doing? They were singing and rejoicing until an earthquake opened the cell doors and loosened their chains.

Take stock of your life. Do you rejoice all the time? I regret to say that I don’t pass that test. Too often, I forget who I am in Christ and that we are living the Father’s Grand Story. We have been brought into God’s Kingdom. There is no setback, no illness, no difficulty that will not one day bow before Christ. He has won the day. The hymnwriter, Charles Wesley reminds us:

Rejoice the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore!
Rejoice, give thanks, and sing, and triumph evermore;
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice again, I say, rejoice!

The Lord, our Savior reigns, the God of truth and love;
When he had purged our stains he took his seat above.

His kingdom cannot fail, he rules o’er’ earth and heav’n;
The keys of death and hell are to our Jesus giv’n.

Rejoice in glorious hope! Our God the Judge shall come
And take his servants up to their eternal home:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice again, I say, rejoice!

Paul’s admonition to “rejoice always” isn’t crazy. It’s based on the truth of the Gospel!

Pray Without Ceasing

Just like Paul's encouragement to rejoice, he tells the church to pray at all times. In Ephesians 6:18 he instructs the church to "[pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayers and supplications." "Now wait a minute, Pastor," you might be thinking. "Rejoicing all the time I might be able to do, but prayer at all times?" The Apostle isn't encouraging us to take up the monastic life or hold 24-hour prayer vigils every day. Praying without ceasing is a continual sense of God's presence in your life. It's like having a running conversation with him at all times. It's the practice of making the work you do be for his glory.

I haven't arrived, but the older I get, the more I'm understanding and practicing unceasing prayer. It's the first thought that comes to my mind in the morning. "Good morning, Lord" rather than, "Good Lord, it's morning!" Before I get out of bed, I begin my conversation with God. I turn the radio off a lot when I drive to and from work so that I can pray – contemplate and offer my requests to the Lord. Sure, I still have my set prayer times, but I'm learning to keep God in my life every moment. I haven't arrived...but I'm starting to get it. It's the open secret of fellowship with God that is available to every believer.

Pray without ceasing. God is right there with you. Don't close the door in his face. Invite him into your everyday life.

Give Thanks in All Circumstances

Finally, we come to the admonition of this season of the year: to give thanks. An old German mystic said, "The most important prayer in the world is just two words long: 'Thank you.'" (Meister Eckhart – 1327 A.D.)

But giving thanks goes against our nature. Because we're centered on ourselves, we love to complain. When we complain, we're looking for sympathy for our plight – as if somehow "we deserve better than this." When we complain, we overlook our own faults. When we complain we trumpet our expectation to be exempt from hardship. When we complain we tell the world that we are totally oblivious to the grace of God.

On the other hand, when we give thanks we acknowledge that the blessing we have received is a gift of grace rather than a reward we have somehow earned. When we give thanks we change the orientation of the world away from selfish indulgence to consideration of others. Ultimately, when we give thanks, we are living a life of faith, recognizing God's handiwork in all things and our dependence on him for every blessing.

God's Will and Spiritual Discipline

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In every circumstance, give thanks. Do you want to do God's will? If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, of course, you do! Then rejoice, pray and give thanks. That is God's will for you and for me. It is no secret. It isn't hard to find. It's as plain as the ink on the page.

These three, rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks, are spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines don't earn us "brownie points" with God. Through doing them we don't earn greater standing before him. No. But it is in doing them that we will encounter God and receive the all the grace and blessings that he has for us.

Giving Thanks in All Circumstances – Habakkuk

One of my favorite books and stories in the Old Testament is Habakkuk. He was a prophet of God who saw the sin of God's people. He cried out, "When are you going to take care of this problem with your people." God replied, "OK, I'll send the Babylonians to do the job and discipline Judah." Habakkuk was incredulous! "You've got to be kidding! They're ten times worse than we are!" God basically said, "Who are you to question me?" That set the prophet back a bit and it is at that point where we read the well-known words, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." (Habakkuk 2:20) God assured Habakkuk that he would deal with the Babylonians as well. Humbled, the prophet then expressed one of the most beautiful songs of faith and praise in all of Scripture. It culminates in these profound words of faith:

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.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

We can rejoice at all times, we can carry on a running conversation with God and make our lives a prayer to him, and give thanks in every situation. We can do that all because of Jesus Christ. Without Christ, we could not rejoice because we would still live under the curse of sin and death in all things. Without Christ, we would not have direct access to God so that we could boldly approach him at all times in prayer. Without Christ, we would hardly know the grace of God and find no meaning or hope in the difficulties of our life.

But now, we have the truth that the Church has proclaimed for two millennia: “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again!” We have every reason to rejoice, to live a life of prayer, and to give thanks in all things. And that...is God’s will for you and me.

Give thanks with a grateful heart,
Give thanks to the Holy One
Give thanks because he’s given Jesus Christ, his Son.

And now, let the weak say, “I am strong”
Let the poor say, “I am rich
Because of what the Lord has done for us.”
Give thanks. Give thanks.

Henry Smart

© Integrity’s Hosanna! Music