

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

How to Grow a Soul

Study #11

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-28)

Introduction: Gardens seen and unseen...

If you've ever tried your hand at backyard gardening, you know that there are parallels between growing a soul and growing a tomato plant, or a squash, bean, or pepper.

Not that there are many similarities between the invisible, immaterial part of who you are and an edible fruit.

The parallel consists in this: WORK is required of the gardener if there is going to be a good tomato crop, and WORK is required of the owner of the soul if there is going to be movement toward maturity.

One year, not too long ago, I gave particular diligence to my home garden. I spaded the portion of the garden that I had marked out for the tomato plants.

Especially during the plants' early formative weeks, I weeded well. I fertilized when appropriate.

Usually, I plant my tomatoes in late January. I know that's about a month and a half before the recommended date. But I do this on the advice of an old south Texas gardener who assured me, "*You KNOW it is going to get hot and it MIGHT NOT freeze.*"

That particular year, the year of my diligence, when May rolled around I was picking ripe tomatoes. We picked into July that year and had a better crop than I had ever had to that point.

In the years since? Well, most of the time my garden hasn't done so well - but that's another story...

For the bulk of our time together this morning, we'll listen as Paul lines out work for us to do, tasks to which we are called, labors in which we are to engage as we march toward spiritual maturity and tend to the gardens of our souls.

In our last couple of studies in 1 Thessalonians, Paul urged us to be awake and alert to the reality that Jesus is coming (!) and then he told us to be careful to love each other here in the church.

He follows that up with one of the most delightful conglomerations of exhortations we find anywhere in the New Testament as he urges us each on to maturity in Jesus.

They are not simple and easy to apply, but these verses are at least simple and easy to memorize.

Knowing and Doing God's Will (vv. 16-18)

Always Rejoice! (v. 16)

[16] Rejoice always...

This marks the sixth time we find the word "always" in this letter.¹ The tone of 1 Thessalonians is all exuberance and zeal and conviction.

So, Paul doesn't urge us to a generally rejoicing mindset, or to a 51% rejoicing margin. No! "***Rejoice ALWAYS!***"

¹ He **always** prayed for them (1:2), opponents of the Gospel **always** fill up their own guilt with their sin (2:16), the Thessalonians themselves **always** think kindly of Paul (3:6), believers will **always** be with the Lord, even into eternity (4:17) and we are to **always** see that which is good for each other and for all men (5:15).

And at first blush, that may appear to be among the more ridiculous commands ever given.

But Paul seems to have given it with a straight face. So, we're left to understand that there must be something so powerful about life in Christ that this command is both imminently reasonable and perfectly doable.

So, let's think about it. Despite whatever may happen to you or to me today or tomorrow, the following is always true:

- An all-powerful and all-loving God is in control of the universe (randomness and chaos does NOT reign supreme!);
- We have a relationship with this Almighty God and refer to Him as "Father";
- Our sins are forgiven because of our faith in Jesus;
- We are part of the Body of Christ, the family of God;
- Our eternal home in Heaven is secure.

And we could go on and on. But you get the idea.

Sure, life comes at you fast. Things can go badly without warning. But because we have been blessed "***with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ***" (Ephesians 1:3), there is no time when we cannot rejoice!

And Paul wasn't an armchair practitioner when it came to rejoicing. He knew suffering firsthand and he knew that suffering was not incompatible with rejoicing.

Once he rejoiced while languishing in a Philippian jail. (see Acts 16). The first disciples rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for the Name of Jesus after they had been beaten by the Sanhedrin guards for preaching the Gospel (see Acts 5). Persecution came to the Christians at Thessalonica early.

And this - rejoicing, regardless of circumstance or situation - was the experience of sincere believers throughout the early years of the church.

As the world sees it, it's normal to rejoice when things are pleasant. Rejoicing when life slaps you in the face is distinctively Christian.

And when we rejoice in the face of hardship, we are expressing our FAITH that God's final word is not our hardship, but some greater good for us and His greater glory.

Following on the heels of the call to rejoice is Paul's next command. Another great memory verse and another stiff challenge.

Unceasingly Pray! (v. 17)

[17] pray without ceasing

Increasingly, and as the years pass, I sense my inadequacy and insufficiency. I look at what the Lord has given me to do - as a man, a Christian, a husband, father, pastor - and I am overwhelmed as I consider what is expected of me. I'm fully confident that I'm not up to it.

On the one hand, I'm not perfect in any of these roles.

But more to the point, what I long for as a husband and father, I am inadequate to accomplish. I hunger for the emotional health of my family, and great relationships all around and spiritual vitality and meaningful engagement and rich love flowing back and forth. It's beyond my ability to pull that off.

As a pastor, I'm committed to our church fulfilling what we say we're all about here - the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with our world. But I can't make sure that it happens. That's beyond me, too.

These things I hunger and thirst for are outside my control. They are God-sized matters. And you may sense the same when it comes to the things you care about most in life, too.

I have come to believe that this sense of inadequacy is one of God's greatest gifts to us! He wants us to feel the full weight of our inadequacy for the stuff that really counts. He wants each of us to sense that, truly, we are not "up to" the tasks that are ours.

And the reason He wants us to sense our personal insufficiency is that it is only when we own our inadequacy that we will cast ourselves in dependence on Him - a dependence that is best demonstrated by prayer.

Now, as many others have observed, it is impossible for us always to be uttering the words of prayer. But the words “*pray without ceasing*” don’t require that we maintain an uninterrupted prayer vigil.

Paul himself wasn’t always on his knees. He carried out a busy, active schedule.

I think that “*pray without ceasing*” means that we are to always be in a spirit of prayer and are to be always consciously aware of our need to depend on God.

Paul’s third command follows fast. Similar to “*rejoice always*” he now urges us to an attitude of gratitude.

Continually Give Thanks! (v. 18)

[18] in everything give thanks...

“*Everything*” lifts this command above the level of what we naturally do. Like the first two, carrying out this assignment *assumes* and *requires* God.

It’s tempting to think that what happens in our lives is governed by chance. But if we fall for that temptation, we’ll welcome those things that please us and will object to those things that trouble us.

However, once we come to know God through faith in Christ, everything changes. We come to see that God’s purpose is being worked out in our lives by the things that come our way.

We accept that the same loving purpose is being worked out in our live through those events we enjoy and those we don’t enjoy.

Trials and tribulations are unpleasant. Period. They are unpleasant for me and for you and they were for the Apostle Paul.

But, in the midst of trials and tribulation, who would not give thanks if they knew that the Father who loved them enough to send His Son to die that they might live was permitting that tribulation so that they might grow? So that their lives might bring glory to Him? So that others might somehow be blessed eternally?

Romans 8:28 says, “...*we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*”

Those words are not just glib cliché. We believe them - and therefore can give thanks, regardless.

And at the end of this collection of commandments, Paul clarifies one thing that is often not as clear as we wish it were. Ever wonder what is God’s will for you? Well, here it is.

NOTE: God’s will made clear!

[18]..for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.²

Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks is God’s will for you and me. That’s not ALL of God’s will. But it is always (there’s that word again) His will that we rejoice, pray, and give thanks.

And when we obey God’s will in this manner, we are sowing good seed in the garden of our souls. We are being diligent spiritual gardeners.

The crops produced by such diligence will produce a bountiful harvest of spiritual maturity as we obey and it will impact our friends (believing and unbelieving) in powerful ways for Jesus’ sake.

Now, Paul’s not finished with instructions for soul development. He follows up the first three exhortations with three more.

Next up, we are to be open and receptive to the ministry of the Holy Spirit of God.

Releasing Passion for God with Purity and Wisdom (vv. 19-22)

Be Open to the Spirit (vv. 19-20)

No quenching the Spirit!

[19] Do not quench the Spirit

² In the original Greek language, in each case the modifier comes before the verb.

The Spirit's effect is sometimes pictured as a fire. For instance, on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3), the Spirit's presence was manifested by tongues of fire resting on the heads of the first disciples.³

So it makes sense that Paul would use the term "quench" to picture whatever might hinder the work of the Spirit.⁴

The Spirit wants to fill us with His power for service, make our character Christlike, cause our witness to be effective, produce His fruit in us (love, joy, peace, etc...), and energize us for the exercise of the gifts He has given us.

All these things the fiery Spirit wants to accomplish in your life and in mine. Paul says that it is possible that we might stand in the way of His work. It is conceivable that we could pour cold water on His fire.⁵

Now, notice that Paul doesn't explicitly tell us HOW we might quench the Spirit's fire.⁶ And in the absence of a clear, "*Thus saith the Lord - 'THIS is how you quench the Spirit...'*" it's tough to say.

Positively, though, I think that when we:

- love one another;
 - are sensitive to His nudges to reach out to someone who is hurting;
 - are giving thanks and rejoicing and praying;
 - are practicing sexual purity,
- we are throwing logs on the Spirit's fire. Those are the things that make a Holy Spirit bonfire in our lives!

³ The baptism of Jesus is said to be "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16)

⁴ Metaphorically, "quench love" (Song of Solomon 8:7); "quench anger" (Jer. 4:4; 21:12).

⁵ Paul is prohibiting the continuation of a course of action already in progress. It must be stopped.

⁶ Unless it is by what he says immediately after this, in which case he would be saying "Don't quench the Spirit BY despising prophetic utterances." This, though, would not be the most normal way to read these words.

Conversely, when we are NOT paying attention to what He has explicitly told us in Scripture⁷ and when we are not being sensitive to those urges and nudges to love and serve, the effect is similar to taking a snuffer to extinguish a candle.⁸

If we want to experience the full flame of the Holy Spirit, we need to obey the Bible AND take risky steps to love and serve, trusting that the nudges to do so have come from Him.

Then Paul says that in our personal and congregational life, we are not to despise prophetic utterances.

Don't despise prophesying!

[20] do not despise prophetic utterances.⁹

For someone to serve in a *prophetic* role means that he or she speaks to others on behalf of God (just as to serve as a *priest* is to act or speak to God on behalf of man).

At times, it means to speak brand new revelation from God, as when an Old Testament prophet would proclaim God's Word to the people.

More often, though, especially in New Testament settings, prophesy has to do with representing what God has already said to a church, to a group, or to an individual.

When a Christian speaks in whatever context and seeks to represent God to someone else, he or she is filling the role of prophet.

Paul says that this effort is to be taken seriously by those who hear. It is not to be dismissed lightly or despised. Rather, it is to be considered - and examined carefully.

⁷ Scripture is, after all, the *magnus opus* of the Holy Spirit

⁸ There is even room for understanding that it is possible, by the way we deal with each other, that we might not only be quenching the Spirit's fire within ourselves - we might be quenching His fire in each other.

⁹ We don't really know what prompted Paul to give this warning to the Thessalonians. It has been suggested that some at Thessalonica had come to think of prophesy more poorly than they should have and he is trying to re-establish its place as a valuable gift for the church.

And that is Paul's next word to us.

Discern! Discern! Discern! (v. 21a)

[21a] But examine everything carefully

As important as is the prophetic word that a Christian might offer, it should never be accepted without careful examination.

Just because someone urges you to believe something or to do something or to change something - don't **necessarily** do it.

Even if they say, "*This is what the Lord says*" about the job you should take, the college you should attend, or the wife you should choose - unless you can find it written in Scripture, don't automatically buy it. They **might** be giving you wise and godly counsel and they **might not**.

Every Christian needs to practice discernment. "***Examine everything carefully.***"¹⁰

- Examine everything you hear me say on Sunday mornings.
- Examine what your Sunday School teachers teach.
- Examine what you hear on the radio.
- Examine what you read in books.
- Examine what you read or hear or see on the Internet.

The final standard by which you can measure the truth of what someone says in God's Name is THE BIBLE! And if what you are listening to does not measure up to the standard of truth as revealed in the Bible, throw it out.

¹⁰ According to Leon Morris (who wrote a very helpful commentary on 1 Thessalonians), from the earliest times, there is a saying that has been attributed to Jesus which never finds its way into the Bible. We don't know if He actually said it or not, but it fits with other things that are recorded in the Bible. The saying is, "*Be approved bankers*" (or money-changers" i.e. men who test coins), and the thought behind those words is that we are to test what we hear, discern its truth on the basis of how it measures up to the truth we KNOW from God's revealed will as found in Scripture.

There is no virtue in being gullible, and we, God's people are to be discerners!

Finally (whew!!), Paul calls us again, as he has done several times in this letter, to moral purity.

The Passionate Pursuit of Purity (vv. 21b-22)

[21]...hold fast to that which is good; [22] abstain from every form of evil.¹¹

I love this translation! I think it perfectly reflects what Paul is getting at.

At issue is this: What is to be the Christian's relationship to things that are evil? Answer? Stay as far away from it as possible! As Eugene Peterson renders it in *The Message*, "*Throw out anything tainted with evil.*"

But Paul didn't mean that we are necessarily to stay away from things that might appear to some people to be evil, but are, in actuality, not evil. And for my first witness, I call to the stand - Jesus!

The Pharisees of Jesus' day would never have done some of the things Jesus did. They thought that some of the things He did were evil - but that didn't keep Jesus from doing the things He did.

The Lord was certainly committed to abstaining from evil. But He was also perfectly content to offend the Pharisees whenever it was necessary in order to serve needy people.¹²

¹¹ In 1611, the King James Bible was the most cutting edge English translation available. It was produced by the most brilliant scholarship of its day and its Elizabethan rendering was literate, beautiful, and accurate. The King James translates 1 Thessalonians 5:21 with this, "***Abstain from every APPEARANCE of evil.***" And while that was a very appropriate way to render it in 1611, those words give a different sense in 2008. They imply that we should avoid any activity that might appear to be evil to someone. That is NOT what Paul is saying.

¹² Offending someone who is weak is another issue; see Romans 14 for some guidelines.

He ate with tax-gatherers and sinners and met with immoral women - Samaritans, no less! He was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton because of his associations.

For witness #2, consider Paul himself.

Paul didn't shrink from putting himself in situations that might have appeared evil to some. When he was in Ephesus he couldn't find a suitable place to hold evangelistic meetings. So, he rented the school of a philosopher named Tyrranus and risked having his reputation linked with that philosophy.¹³

While we should generally abstain from actions which will knowingly offend others, it is impossible to abstain from everything that might appear evil to somebody!

By what he says here in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 Paul means to say that if a thing is evil - of whatever form that evil may consist - we are to have nothing to do with it whatsoever. Don't play with it. Don't coddle it or cuddle it. Be done with it.

There are many kinds of evil. Evil speech, sexual evil, violations of integrity. We've got to recognize and resist all of it. Christian growth requires not that we cling to the good but also that we reject evil.

So, if we would make progress spiritually, we could do no better than to pay close attention to what we have just seen.

[16] Rejoice always; [17] pray without ceasing; [18] in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. [19] Do not quench the Spirit; [20] do not despise prophetic utterances. [21] But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; [22] abstain from every form of evil.

In other words, if you want to grow as a Christian, it's going to take work!

¹³ In 1 Timothy 3, it is required that elders be above reproach. Yet our Savior, who was sinless, was reproached (!), as was Paul, as are many Elders who follow the dictates of their consciences.

But thus far, Paul hasn't given us the whole story on how to grow a soul. In his next comments (the last we're really going to focus on), he assures us that gardens of soil and gardens of the soul require human effort AND more than human effort if there's ever going to be a crop.

The Crucial Ingredient: God's Strength and Purpose (vv. 23-24)

[23] Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body¹⁴ be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. [24] Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

At the beginning this morning I mentioned my successful tomato crop of a few years ago. It was great. I did everything right. But my successful garden really wasn't the result of my green thumb.

That Spring season, the weather was perfect. We received fourteen inches of rain - all of it gentle soakings, ideally timed. And the thermometer never rose to normal South Texas levels.

To harvest some tomatoes, it was important for me to work, true. But, the bumper crop was ultimately dependent on a force (weather) completely outside of my control.

In the same way, spiritual maturity is not, ultimately, dependent on our effort. If we would make individual or congregational progress, it is true that we must work. We must obey. We must expend energy.

But, our hope for a crop, for maturity does not rest on our efforts.

Our hope and confidence for arriving at our goal is ultimately our confidence that God is at work in us, that He is growing us, that He is sanctifying us - body, soul and spirit!

¹⁴ It is probably not a great idea to make too hard a distinction between soul and spirit. They are sometimes used interchangeably in Scripture. In this setting, though, a difference is intended. Spirit - the life principle imparted to man by God who is Spirit, enabling him to know and communicate with God. Soul - the self-conscious life of man, the seat of personality