May the Lord bless you and keep you.

With the Lord’s help, I think I am ready to start back into the duties of being a pastor. Please continue to pray for me, that my work will glorify God and edify His people.

I want to thank you all for your prayers, support, and understanding during this time leading up to Connie’s passing. I grieve, but take comfort knowing that she is seeing and experiencing things beyond what we can imagine.

I pray God’s blessings on each of you and the church for the future.

In Christ’s love

John

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6-6-21

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

In this letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul has been complementing the church on their faith during trials and their works. He encourages them, not only to continue as they have been, but to excel even more in what they are doing. There is a lesson for us: Christianity always involves growth in this life. We never reach a point of perfection while we are here; our perfection comes when we see Christ for the first time when He comes to get us. But we are still to strive to become as close to Jesus as we can; to become as much like our Master as we can.

It is for us to always remember, that while God will do things for us, that is not our focus. Our focus is to be pleasing to God. We are here for His glory and we are to serve Him. He is God and He is far above us in all things.

We can see that Paul is driving at this in the second half of this letter. He shows that it is the Lord’s doing to come back and raise the Christian dead to life, and collect all His people to Himself. He then talks about Christian conduct with respect to church elders, brothers and sisters in Christ, and the rest of the world. So, when we come to our verses today, we can see that Paul is talking about congregational worship. Yes, each of these things can be applied to individuals, but in context he is referring to the gathering of a church body in a worship service.

Our church service ought to be, truly, a worship service. Each thing we do needs to be God centered and worshipful of Him. Our singing of worship songs praise Him or express to others the need to praise Him; our Hymns are based on His word and we sing of His glory. When we give offerings, they should be a sacrifice of worship. Our prayers must be reverent and in the name of Jesus; when we read His word, it is in awe of Him; when we listen to preaching it is to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts so that we become more aware that He is God almighty.

When God created people, He built into them a desire to worship. In the Garden of Eden, He would have been the obvious recipient of that worship. But man rebelled against His creator and refused to worship Him. That desire to worship, though, is still there; and everyone will worship something. Most of the time, they don’t realize it, but they do. A person is worshiping whatever has preeminence in their life, whatever takes up most of their time and attention. It may be a career, the self, or alcohol; but they are worshiping it.

We read about this in Romans 1:21-23.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures.

While the idols may have changed, the idolatry has not. People will still worship something; and anything other than God is sin. The object of our worship must be God; our Almighty will not accept second place. When we read a passage like that, other people spring to our minds that fit that description. It is easy to come up with someone we know who idolizes football or worldly success or even their family. But each of us needs to stop thinking about them, and take a hard look at ourselves.

Idolatry slips in quietly and it may even be something good, but the Christian must never let anything come before God. This is something a Christian is called to do: we must frequently check our lives to make sure that we haven’t allowed an idol to come before God. God must be the only recipient of our worship. There are things in life that we can enjoy spending time doing and things we must spend time doing. There are others we can love and admire. We can even praise someone for a job well done. But worship must be reserved for God alone.

We have considered worship generally, but there is an important aspect of worshiping God that we must try to understand. One of the hard truths is that only Christians can worship the God of the Bible. Those who worship any other god or who even try to worship God by means other than Jesus Christ, are not acceptable to God. Now certainly the Old Testament saints are accepted because of their faith and because Jesus’ sacrifice was retroactive to them. God’s acceptance of worship comes from John 4:23-24. This is Jesus speaking.

But a time is coming, and even now has arrived, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks *to be* His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

With the arrival of the incarnate Word of God, those who worship God must do so in spirit and truth. Jesus tells us that God is spirit, not “a” spirit. This is one description of God but it is not a full description. The Bible also tells us that “God is light” and “God is love”. Since God is spirit, He wants to be worshiped in spirit and truth. We are physical creatures so how do we do that? Well, we need help.

Our help comes from Jesus and the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we can pray in Jesus’ name; also, as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us and always ready to help us in Godly endeavors. We worship in truth by worshiping in Jesus’ name and according to Scripture. Remember that Scripture is the word and that Jesus is the Word made flesh. Also, Jesus is the truth; as is Scripture.

Praying or worshiping in Jesus’ name is not some magical formula we use to get our prayers answered. Anything we do in Jesus’ name is done in accordance with everything He is and everything He stands for. We are submitting our worship and petitions to God in the power of Jesus. So don’t use His name without thought or without submitting to God’s will.

To worship in spirit is best done by asking the Holy Spirit to help us worship. He can give us direction in our worship and also quicken our own spirit to join in the worship. This does not mean to work oneself up into a frenzy; God is a God of order and spiritual worship will be also. There can be great emotion in spiritual worship: great feelings of peace or weeping or closeness to God. But not chaos.

These are things for us to think about as we come together for a worship service. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Prepare for church other than getting dressed for a mad dash out the door. Give yourself some time to repent of any sin; quietly spend time in the Bible or in prayer before coming to church so that your mind and heart are prepared for worship. Come ready to worship in spirit and truth.

In our Scripture for today Paul begins with:

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

We, as Christians, are admonished to “rejoice always”. The word “rejoice” appears in the Bible over 200 times; it is an important concept. To rejoice carries the ideas of being glad, of being joyful. It does not necessarily mean “happy”. Rejoicing is active, it is expressing joyfulness or gladness. So, we are to express joy and gladness in our worship; we recognize that the very existence of God is reason for joy. This reminds us of the primary reason to worship God: simply for who He is. God is worthy of worship because He is God; all His attributes are glorious, everything about Him is awe inspiring, He stands apart from, and above, all creation.

As Christians we always have a reason to rejoice: our salvation. Nothing is more important in our lives. If we are not saved, nothing else matters. Our salvation is completely undeserved and comes strictly by the grace of God. Another reason to worship Him.

True joy can only come from the Holy Spirit; it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. So God gives us the ability to rejoice; let us use that ability to rejoice in Him. Joy, and rejoicing, are a state of our spirit; it is not tied to our circumstances. We can have joy in the Lord even when we are suffering. We may suffer persecution, we may suffer a bad day or days, we may suffer great personal loss. During these times we grieve. But our spirits still recognize the goodness of God, who He is, and our redemption from His wrath; and we can rejoice.

We tend to get hung up on the “always” part of “rejoice always”. How do we do that? We need to understand what it means. We usually take it to mean that we rejoice every moment of every day. There have been interesting explanations of how we might do this. But in reality, we can’t do that. We as human-beings aren’t capable of continually rejoicing. Additionally, we wouldn’t be able to do anything else. So, in this case, that’s not what “always” means.

Remember that the context here is worship. When we worship God, it should not be dreary; it should not be something we do because we have to; we must not worship with resentment, wishing we were somewhere else or doing something else. Our singing must come from our hearts, glad of what the words are saying. Our tithing must be done joyfully, thankful that we have something to give and that it will be used for God’s glory. Our prayers are offered knowing that God hears and is powerful to act. Bible reading and preaching are things that bring us closer to our Saviour and we are joyful that we are being made more like Christ.

Paul next admonishes us to “pray without ceasing”. Prayer is such a wonderful gift from God. Consider: we have direct access to the creator and ruler of the universe at any time. Not only do we have access, but He hears what we pray, He is able to perfectly take care of what we pray about, and He loves us and truly cares about our concerns. When we come to Christ, we become adopted children of God, and He hears us as a perfect Father. What a beautiful thing to meditate on.

Note that again, God is only concerned with the prayers of Christians. Jesus said, “No-one comes to the Father but by Me.” Nobody can come to salvation except through Jesus Christ; likewise, nobody can even come before the throne of God in prayer except through Jesus Christ. Again, this is why we pray in Jesus’ name, we are praying through the power of Jesus and His righteousness to be heard by God.

We run into a similar issue as the previous verse with the words “without ceasing”. Does this mean that we pray continually at all hours of the day and night while doing nothing else? Obviously, we aren’t capable of doing that; so there must be another meaning here.

First off, the context here is worship, and worship is a form of prayer; we are speaking to God. But worship is not the only form of prayer, so we need to pray in other contexts. We don’t just pray in worship and nothing else. Worship and prayer both take place in the special setting of a church service. This is a gathering of Christian brothers and sisters in fellowship as the body of Christ. But we are also to worship and pray the rest of the week too. Prayer isn’t just an activity for church.

Also, recall Jesus’ parable of the widow and the unrighteous judge. She was persistent in bringing her case to the judge until he finally ruled in her favor. This parable was to teach us to keep bringing our petitions before the Father until we get an answer. Prayer is a vital part of the Christian life. In addition to set times during the day we have for prayer, we should be quick to offer up prayers for any situations we face during the day, good or bad, large or small.

Along with rejoicing and prayer, and included in both of these activities, is the giving of thanks. We are to give thanks in everything. It is important to note that God’s word says to give thanks in everything not for everything. We are not called to give thanks for a lousy day where everything seems to go wrong. We are not called to give thanks for a cancer diagnosis. We are not called to give thanks for the death of a loved one.

We are to give thanks in the bad day. Jesus is still Lord of that day and we can rejoice in it. We are to give thanks in spite of a cancer diagnosis. We know that our Lord is good and nothing can happen that He doesn’t allow. If He allows such a thing, then it is for His glory and will work out for the benefit of His people. We still give thanks to God while grieving the death of a loved one. If He has chosen to take His child home, then their work was done, and they are continually rejoicing before the Lord with joy unspeakable.

We do all these things because they are God’s will for us in Christ Jesus. God’s will must always come first for us. Even, and especially, if His will is different from ours. This is where we trust Him and submit to Him in obedience. Notice that this is His will “in Christ Jesus”. In the book of Ephesians, we learn of the importance of this point. In verse 1:10, we are told that God has a kind intention that He has purposed in Jesus, “regarding *His* plan of the fullness of the times, to bring all things together in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.” It is God’s will, it is His plan, to bring all creation together in Christ. That’s why it’s so important for us to strive to do all things in Christ.

Prayer

Merciful Father, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit; You are one God, worthy of all our worship and adoration. How grateful we are that we are able to worship You. It is a privilege for us, because we are not worthy to offer You praise. It is only by Your grace, because of the bestowed righteousness of Christ, that You will accept our offering of praise.

Holy Spirit, we ask Your guidance over this congregation, over this fellowship, over this body of Christ. We have been saved by the blood of Jesus; we have been purchased at great cost; keep this ever in our minds that we thank our God with deep gratitude. How merciful He is that He has saved us from His own wrath.

It is our desire that we become true worshipers of God in accordance with what He seeks: those who worship in spirit and truth. May Your Holy Spirit quicken us into heartfelt and honest worship. May the truth of Your word and Jesus Christ guide us in the praise we offer. Sanctify us that we may be acceptable to You and deeply concerned to follow Your will.

It is in Jesus’ name we pray these things

Amen