

Message #10

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1 Thessalonians

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HEALTHY LIVING IN A HEALTHY CHURCH

IN AN UNHEALTHY WORLD

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-22

I.

Can any of you identify this? (PROJECTOR ON--- TALE OF 2 CITIES QUOTE) **"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of enlightenment, it was the age of foolishness."** It is the opening sentence of Charles Dickens' [A Tale of Two Cities](#). The era that he was describing was the French Revolution that began in 1789. The two cities are London and Paris.

That opening line could describe 21st century America. In many ways this is a wonderful time in which to live. We enjoy tremendous benefits from technology. We have cell phones. A generation ago those were communicators, which were reserved for the science fiction of Star Trek. We have computers. My son is able to go to college online.

We can go to buffets and choose among a gazillion different food items. Most of us don't worry about where our next meal is coming from. We can fly to another part of the country in a few hours. We have modern medicine that has raised average life expectancy in the US from about fifty a century ago to almost 80 today.

As Christians we enjoy freedom of worship. We have a smorgasbord of churches from which to choose. We can watch Christian programming on TV. We can watch sermons from excellent preachers online.

In other ways it is the worst of times. Polls in the last several years consistently show that people think that the nation is headed in the wrong direction. Political discourse is increasingly polarized. We are concerned about terrorists who blow up innocent civilians in our cities. Public schools are struggling to educate our kids. Gangs attract children as young as 12. A recent psychiatric journal described a survey that found that 36% of teen girls in the US are depressed or have had a recent "major depressive episode," which is much higher than rates during the Great Depression or World War II. Here in seemingly prosperous Boulder City over 40% of the kids attending the elementary school qualify for subsidized school lunches because of their family's low income. We Christians have to deal with gay marriage, and we are forced to talk about who should use men's and women's bathrooms.

On this Father's Day we appreciate the fathers in our midst. Yet today a third of all American children live apart from their biological father. Fifty-eight per cent of all African-American children do not live with their biological father. The sociologists tell us that there are all kinds of negative results that come from these situations.

In first century Thessalonica there were likewise good and bad things about the times. The *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, allowed its citizens to enjoy a time without major conflict. Roman law prevailed and gave the era a certain stability. Educational and commercial opportunities were available to citizens of a city like Thessalonica.

But it was also a very immoral era and there was much family instability. Crime and disease and immorality were prevalent. Christianity was a relatively new sect that faced considerable persecution. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our passage today the Apostle Paul gives Christians living in this setting practical advice about how to live healthy lives in a healthy church in an often unhealthy world. Hopefully this advice will have application to our lives as well.

We have seen in the last couple of weeks in our ongoing study of 1 Thessalonians that Paul moved from a discussion of the Second Coming of Christ, which relates to the Christian virtue of hope, to a discussion of proper relationships among Christians, which relates to the virtue of love. In the passage before us today he seems to move into a discussion of the practical outworking of faith, which is the third virtue that Paul has promoted in his description of a healthy church.

II.

Thus in vv. 16-18 of #5 we find that A HEALTHY FAITH REQUIRES A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON LIFE. (II. A HEALTHY FAITH REQUIRES A POSITIVE...) The Apostle Paul had been at Thessalonica in Greece for only two or three months at the most. Some Gentiles and a few Jews came to Christ through his ministry and through Silas and Timothy who were with him. These were the only Christians that these new believers had ever encountered.

So it must have been distressing for them to see Paul and his companions kicked out of town after only a couple of months. These missionaries had no Gideon Bibles to leave behind. They did not have any manuals about how to conduct a church to give to them. They did not even have any tracts to offer them.

To external appearances these brand new Christians were on their own. At the same time, according to #1, they started to experience persecution. This could have all been very discouraging. Yet they had God at work among them. The Holy Spirit was there also. They were able to not only carry on but to do well. Paul said that they were a healthy church. For they demonstrated faith, love and hope.

After talking about hope and love earlier in the chapter he now focuses on the need for continued demonstrations of faith. Thus he exhorts his readers in v. 16, "**Rejoice always.**" In Greek this is the shortest verse in the New Testament: "*Pantote kairete.*" About seventy times in the New Testament the followers of Jesus are encouraged to experience, or demonstrate, joy.

President John Adams (JOHN ADAMS) was an excellent father. In 1813 the former president saw his daughter struggle and die from cancer, his daughter-in-law suffer from severe tuberculosis and his wife endure constant pain from rheumatism. He wrote to his son John Quincy, saying, "**Rejoice always in all events, be thankful always for all things is a hard precept for human nature, though in my philosophy and in my religion a perfect duty.**"

Some have made the helpful distinction that happiness is related to circumstances while joy is related to a more fundamental outlook on life. Jesus, Paul and the New Testament as a whole never promise Christians that their lives will be filled with happy circumstances. In fact there are many warnings that we should expect just the opposite. (JOHN 16:33) On the night of His arrest Jesus told His disciples, "**In the world you will have tribulation.**" He also said (MARK 8:34) to them, "**If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.**" Paul warned in 2 Timothy 3 v. 12 (2 TIMOTHY 3:12), "**Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...**"

In Acts #5 we are told about an incident in the early church where the apostles were hauled before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem and told to stop preaching about Jesus. In vv. 40 & 41 (ACTS 5:40) we are told, "**...and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. (ACTS 5:41) Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.**" So difficulty is to be expected for the followers of Jesus, but there is a certain joy that can come from persevering in the face of persecution and from realizing that we are serving the God who is really there, the God-man who died to pay the penalty for our sins so that whoever puts their trust in Him might have eternal life. We are part of a cause that is much bigger than we are.

The Thessalonians experienced this joy in the face of persecution. In #1 v. 6 of our book (1 THESSALONIANS 1:6) Paul wrote, "**And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.**" So there is a supernatural element

involved in this ability to experience joy in the midst of persecution and tribulation. Ultimately it comes from the Holy Spirit.

In Galatians #5 v. 22 Paul talks about certain characteristics that are the result of being connected to the Holy Spirit. (GALATIANS 5:22) He writes, "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...**" and several other qualities. So joy has to do with being connected to the Holy Spirit and maintaining a close relationship with God. Joy in the face of persecution comes from realizing that we are serving Jesus and from maintaining a relationship with, and a dependence upon, God's Holy Spirit.

There are other causes of stress and difficulty in our lives besides persecution. Most of us do not get much persecution compared to what Christians experience in other parts of the world. What about other causes of stress--- health problems, money problems, family problems, relationship problems, aging problems?

Lee Tillman (LEE TILLMAN) was the last of the original 31ers in Boulder City who worked on Hoover Dam at the beginning. At the end of his life he was a resident of the Homestead here in town. Lillian Morrison and Peggy Harry, who were part of our congregation, were also at this assisted living home. All three of them used to eat together at the same table in the cafeteria. I showed up at mealtime just to hear the interaction among them. On one occasion Lee talked about the last three years of his wife's life. Though she was sick during this time he recounted with great fondness that those were the best years of their lives together. In the midst of health difficulties they found a certain joy. So joy is possible even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

In James #1 vv. 2-4 that apostle (JAMES 1:2-3) instructed believers, "**Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (JAMES 1:4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**" Besides maintaining a close relationship with God, James says that there is joy that comes from the realization that God uses trials to develop our faith and to mature us. We grow spiritually only through the testing of our faith.

Another element that is crucial to our experience of joy in challenging times is the conviction that God is sovereign over our circumstances. We are not alone, and there is a divine purpose for our suffering. Paul wrote (ROMANS 8:28) in Romans 8:28, "**And we know that for those who love God all things--- persecution, joblessness, money problems, health problems, relationship issues--- work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**" In the long run there are good things that will come to us out of our difficult circumstances. We just need to be convinced that God is sovereign and that He will keep His promises.

As most of you know, my wife and son have suffered from health difficulties for a number of years. I don't know what the divine purpose for this is. But I am confident that these difficulties are part of a good plan from a sovereign and good God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 17 of our passage Paul adds, "**Pray without ceasing.**" Unceasing prayer is tied in with rejoicing always. To rejoice always requires a Christian to have a heavenly perspective on life. Having a heavenly perspective on life requires prayer, unceasing prayer. It is part of the outworking of genuine Christian faith.

The Greek word for "unceasing" was used originally of a hacking cough. It described a person with a scratchy throat who could not help but to break out frequently in actual coughing. So it is with unceasing prayer. It requires a mindset that is directed heavenward and that frequently breaks out in prayer.

We see that way of being in this letter. At the end of #3 Paul talks about wanting to see the Thessalonians again. In v. 11 he breaks out in prayer: "**Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.**" Next week we will find in v. 23 of #5 that Paul breaks out in prayer again: "**Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" Unceasing prayer requires a heavenly perspective focused on God that frequently breaks out in prayer.

The original word for "prayer" in v. 17 is a general term that would include various kinds of prayer: thanksgiving, praise, confession, petitions and so on. The unceasing prayer then involves filtering everything that comes our way in the day through a heavenly filter. "God, what are you doing here? I rejoice because you are in charge. I pray for this person whom I have just encountered. I give thanks for this event. This situation over here does not make sense to me. But you are in charge. Work it out in a way that is best for everyone."

John Wesley (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN WESLEY) is known as the founder of the Methodist Church. He once described the ideal model for this unceasing prayer warrior. He wrote, "**His heart is ever lifted up to God, at all times and in all places. In this he is never hindered, much less interrupted, by any person or thing. In retirement or company, in leisure, business, or conversation, his heart is ever with the Lord. Whether he lie down or rise up, God is in all his thoughts; he walks with God continually, having the loving eye of his mind still fixed upon Him, and everywhere 'seeing him that is invisible.'**" Such is the goal to which we can all aspire in our prayer life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 18 of our passage Paul hits us with another exhortation: "**Give thanks in all circumstances...**" Verses 16 & 17 are directly related to time. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Verse 18 relates to circumstances. In all circumstances give thanks.

Romans 8:28 (ROMANS 8:28), which we referenced a few moments ago, says, ""**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**" If all of our circumstances, good and bad, are part of God's sovereign plan, then we can rejoice and give thanks, even in the midst of the bad circumstances. For we can be confident that God has a good purpose for us in the end.

When we fail to give thanks, it is a sign of unbelief. We do not really believe the promise of Romans 8:28. We either don't believe that God is good or that He is all powerful, or perhaps both. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Religious Jews of today reflect a tradition of giving thanks that goes back at least to the time of Jesus. The Babylonian Talmud (Rerakhot 35a) says, "**It is forbidden to a man to enjoy anything of this world without a benediction, and if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a benediction, he commits sacrilege.**" There are suggested prayers in this tradition for hearing bad news as well as good news, for smelling plants, for eating food and drinking wine, for seeing lightning and rainbows and comets. Typically these prayers begin, "*Baruk attah adonai...*" "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, the King of the universe... who provides us with bread to eat... who gives us rainbows after the rain that remind us of the promise of God... etc." Now the motivation behind this may be legalistic, and it may come from a desire to win favor with God. But as Christians we can appreciate the intent to give thanks in all circumstances.

To give thanks in every circumstance is possible only when we are convinced that there is a good and all-powerful God who is in control. Pastor and author Warren Wiersbe writes, "**Thankfulness is the opposite of selfishness. The selfish person says, 'I deserve what comes to me! Other people ought to make me happy.'** But the mature Christian realizes that life is a gift from God, and that the blessings of life come only from His bountiful hand."

Christians see good and bad events as the outworking of God's purposes. They see God as being in control of the course of history. Biblical scholar Leon Morris says, "**This leads to the thought that the same loving purpose is being worked out even in those events which the believer is not inclined to welcome at all.**"

Many of you are familiar with the story of *The Hiding Place*. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE HIDING PLACE) A Christian family in Holland during WWII hid Jews in their house. Eventually they were found out. Corrie

ten Boom and her sister ended up in Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany. The two of them were put into a crowded, flea-infested room. They had a Bible to share, which was not permitted. They also started having services in this large room every evening, which also were not permitted.

One night they were studying the passage before us. Sister Betsy encouraged Corrie to think of things for which they could give thanks in this seemingly horrible situation. Betsy gave thanks for being able to be with her sister. She thanked God for having a Bible and for being able to have services and for being able to tell others about Jesus. Betsy encouraged Corrie to give thanks even for the fleas. This was a bit too much for Corrie. She could imagine no possible benefit or value to having fleas around. It was only later that she learned that they were able to have their nightly services because the German guards refused to enter this room with its infestation of fleas. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 18 in our passage concludes with the statement, "**...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**" At times we may wonder what the will of God is for us in various situations. We can know for sure from this statement that the will of God for us is to rejoice always, pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all circumstances. These are commands that deserve obedience. They originate with God. They require the work of Christ in our lives to carry out. We need to depend upon Him to do it.

III.

In the second half of our passage we find that A HEALTHY FAITH REQUIRES A WISE DISCERNMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. A HEALTHY FAITH...) Verses 19-22 contain five verbs of command. The first two are negative. The next three are positive.

In v. 19 Paul writes, "**Do not quench the Spirit.**" The Holy Spirit is often compared to fire. John the Baptist told his audience that the Messiah was coming soon and that this Messiah would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Then on the Day of Pentecost we learn that the Holy Spirit came upon the Christians in Jerusalem and that there were visible flames of fire.

There are two primary ways in which the Holy Spirit manifests Himself. He does it through spiritual gifts and through changed behavior. Galatians #5 v. 22, which we referenced earlier, describes this changed behavior. (GALATIANS 5:22-23) Paul says, "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.**"

How is the Holy Spirit quenched? By sin. In #4 in 1 Thessalonians Paul talked about problems involving sexual immorality and about Christians who were not working and providing for themselves. In Ephesians #5 v. 22 Paul used similar terminology. (EPHESIANS 5:22-23) He wrote, "**And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.**" In the preceding verses

he warned Christians about lying and stealing and unresolved anger and not working hard and using corrupt language. The implication is that these kinds of behavior grieve the Holy Spirit and, by extension, quench the Holy Spirit. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Restraining and prohibiting the exercise of genuine spiritual gifts also quenches the Holy Spirit. Thus in v. 20 Paul writes, "**Do not despise prophecies.**" In the early church manifestations of miraculous spiritual gifts like prophecy and healing and tongues and interpretation of tongues were common.

Prophecy was especially important. A young church with new Christians like the one at Thessalonica did not have much for a church constitution. It did not have a church library. There was no Christian bookstore. There was no New Testament. The Old Testament had been written. But this was mostly a Gentile church, and Gentile Christians would not have been familiar with it. We don't know how much access they would have had to it. Probably Jewish Christians were able to help them learn about it.

So God met this need for divine instruction by providing prophets for the early church. These were men and women who received revelation from God concerning His will for the present, revelation concerning church life and individual spiritual life. Occasionally this revelation contained information concerning the future. Other miraculous gifts of the Spirit were also manifested. We see that especially in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Perhaps some of the emerging leaders were seeking to limit the exercise of some of these spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. Genuine gifts, especially prophecy, were not to be limited.

After the New Testament was put together, it seems that this gift, and probably others of the more spectacular variety, died out. Occasionally people come along today who claim to have the gift of prophecy. But I have yet to find any who are willing to submit to the Biblical test for prophets. In Deuteronomy #18 God told Moses that one way that people could know if someone was truly a prophet from God was if what he predicted came true--- 100% of the time. If a supposed prophet predicted something that did not come true, he was to be regarded as a fake, and he was supposed to be stoned to death. If you come across one who claims to be a prophet, see if they will submit to this test.

We have seen from our study of 1 Thessalonians that the Second Coming of Christ was a major concern for the church there. In 2 Thessalonians we will find out that there was wrong teaching floating around concerning the Second Coming. Perhaps some Christians in Thessalonica were wrongly claiming to have the gift of prophecy and were saying wrong things about the Second Coming.

Perhaps church leaders at Thessalonica overreacted to the situation and were quenching the exercise of the genuine spiritual gift as well as the fake one. Paul may have been cautioning them about throwing out the good with the bad.



In v. 21 the apostle seems to argue for a balanced approach: "...**but test everything; hold fast what is good.**" Christians need to exercise discernment. A healthy faith requires wise discernment. It will test those who claim to be prophets.

In Matthew #7 v. 1 Jesus tells His followers, "**Judge not that you be not judged.**" The term that our Lord used there referred to a condemning kind of judgment. He did not want Christians to throw away their common sense and their spiritual discernment. Paul in our verse says that we are to examine things carefully. We need to have wise discernment.

Too often Christians are gullible. We believe too many of the quacks who come along and claim to be working for God. Some of them are on TV. They tell viewers that they need to unlock their faith by sending them big fat checks in the mail. If they will do that, the promise is that they will be cured of their disease, or rescued from the money problems, or saved from their enemy. Meanwhile the supposed prophets fly around in their jets to their various mansions.

Finally, in v. 22 Paul writes, "**Abstain from every form of evil.**" Some translations say, "**Abstain from every appearance of evil.**" Some understand this to mean that Christians should stay away from everything that could be interpreted by others as being wrong. In and of itself whatever the activity or behavior is, it might not be inherently wrong or evil. But if it has some resemblance to evil, or could be taken in a wrong way, the Christian should stay away from it.

Now that might be a wise approach to life that a Christian should take, but that is not what this verse is actually saying. The original Greek word has to do with "kind" or "manifestation." The author is saying that a Christian should stay away from every kind of evil, or every manifestation of that which is truly evil. The opposite of that is holding fast to every kind of good, which is the encouragement in the last line of v. 21.

Healthy faith in a healthy church in the midst of an unhealthy world requires a wise discernment and a positive outlook on life. We especially need that among us fathers. We need fathers to be involved. Author and speaker Jay Payleitner tells the story of visiting his son when he was at the University of Illinois. (*Guideposts*, 5/16/2011) His son had been participating in an intramural coed flag football league. Though it was a long drive, Jay decided to show up for one of his games and cheer his son on, as he had done many times in high school. It turned out that he and his wife were the only ones in the stands, besides an injured player on crutches. Then the son came over and told him that the other team did not show up and the game was forfeited.

On the long drive home Jay was thinking that it had been kind of a silly thing to do to waste all of that time in going to a game that was cancelled. He writes,

**"Ahead I saw a bridge crossing over the Fox River. A distant memory stirred...from back when I was a Boy Scout. Every fall our troop made a two-day, 40-mile canoe journey down the Fox.**

**There was one year I would never forget. My dad dropped my brother Mark and me at the launch, made sure our life vests were snug and said goodbye as our flotilla set off. I plunged my paddle into the water and pulled hard, then lifted and stroked again. Mark, in front, did the same.**

**Before long we had a good rhythm going. I wish Dad could see us, I thought.**

**About a mile downriver we came to a bridge. I looked up and there he was. Dad, standing right in the middle of the span. He didn't shout instructions or do anything embarrassing. He simply waved until we passed underneath. I looked back and he was gone. Huh? Was I just imagining him?**

**But several miles later, at the next overpass, there he was again. And the one after that. And the next.**

**It turned into a game. The whole troop began looking for him. Every time we rounded a bend that day someone would shout, "There's Mr. Payleitner!" All the boys were waving now, but no one was happier to see him than I was.**

**My dad had taken a chance and literally gone the extra mile (and then some) to show us his love. All these years later it had never left me.**

**Now I drove across the bridge in the darkness. I imagined Dad standing there, waving, still encouraging me. It made me think of a nightly prayer I'd said when the kids were younger, asking God to help me be the kind of dad my kids need.**

**At last I understood the most important thing I could do for my children—just be there, even if it meant going the extra mile, the way my dad did for me, cheering me on."**

We need that kind of dad in our families and in our churches. It is a sign of genuine health.