

## **Living God-Centered Lives**

### 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

This morning we conclude our sermon series in the book of 1 Thessalonians. A couple of weeks ago we looked at verses 12 through 15 of chapter 5. Paul gave us a primer on relationships in the body of Christ emphasizing how we should treat each other. In the verses we'll consider today Paul, in effect, gives us a primer on our relationship with God, telling us how we ought to treat God.

Basically Paul says that God should be at the very center of our lives. God should dominate our thoughts and words and affections. We should want to experience as much of God as possible. God should be the “main thing” in our lives, not merely an add-on.

Last week Brenda and I went to a banquet/dinner. When we got to the end of the buffet line, I opted for the beef. The guy with the knife and fork put a slab of meat on my plate that went from edge to edge (it was about a fourth of a cow). At that point, meat became the main thing and everything else became secondary. I had some vegetables and bread and salad and fruit, but that meal was mainly meat; it was the main thing. I apologize for likening our relationship with God to that slab of beef, but in the same way God is supposed to dominate our lives; He is supposed to be front and center; He is to be the “main thing.”

When you think about it, if what the Bible says about God is true, living a God-centered life is a pretty obvious thing to do. The Bible says that God is not merely a “player” in this world; He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe! Scripture says that God is so passionate about knowing us that He sent His one and only Son to die for our sins. If that is who God really is, He should be front and center in our lives. In Psalm 16:8 David said, “I have set the LORD continually before me. . .”

Today I'd like for you to think we me about a couple of specific ways that we can pursue God-centered lives. First, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 tells us that we put God front and center. . .

***Through continual conversation with Him. (vv. 16-18)***

I would remind you that letters such as this one that we call 1 Thessalonians was originally read to the entire congregation. The commands we are about to read were intended for the entire church to hear and obey (the verbs are plural). The point is that this passage tells us things that we as a church are supposed to embody; these are not so much things we are supposed to do individually in isolation from everybody else. We shouldn't think merely in terms of what we should do when we gather at this building. We should think in terms of what we do every time we're together – whether on Sundays or in conversations or in study groups.

Consider what Paul writes:

16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

This is the second time in this letter that Paul has highlighted an aspect of the will of God. In chapter 4 Paul wrote, “This is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality. . .” There's no doubt about sexual purity being God's will for us. In the

same way, we don't have to wonder whether or not it's the will of God for us to have continuous conversation with God. It is. The implication is that if such a life of conversation with God is the will of God, we should pursue it wholeheartedly.

Notice first the emphasis on continually communicating with God: "Rejoice *always*; pray *without ceasing*; *in everything* give thanks." Paul is challenging the church to make communication with God a defining characteristic of its fellowship, not an add-on every now and then. It is supposed to be our preoccupation, not an afterthought.

"Rejoice always." The command is not so much that we always have to "be joyful" (as the NIV suggests); rather, it is that we should always express to God our joy. Joy is a deep satisfaction in God and His ways. This means that even when our circumstances aren't particularly good, we can still express to God how satisfying we find Him. God's character and God's ways are always satisfying when we understand them rightly. The idea is that we should *always* express to God how satisfying we find Him to be.

"Pray without ceasing." If you pray unceasingly, you continually turn to God in prayer. Paul uses the most general word for prayer here. This prayer could be petition (asking God for things), confession (saying "I'm sorry" for things we've done), adoration (expressing how much we love God), etc. Of course it's not that praying incessantly means that we quit doing everything else. Rather, *in the midst of* everything else we pray. This does mean that everything we do has to be compatible with prayer; if I can't talk with God while I'm doing something, I shouldn't be doing it.

"In everything give thanks." We don't have to thank God *for* everything, but we do need to thank God *in* everything. In every circumstance we need to express our gratitude to God for what He has done or is doing. You might think that those who seem to have the best/easiest circumstances might give more thanks than others. But that's not necessarily true. It turns out that those who are most clued in to what God is doing around them give thanks more than others. Thankfulness isn't really tied to circumstances; thankfulness is really tied to noticing what God has been doing around you.

Paul is describing a very God-centered focus for the church and for our lives that quite honestly is probably very foreign to most of us. When you get up in the morning, do you think, "This day is going to full of prayer from first to last. In everything I do I'm going to rejoice, pray, and give thanks." Or do you think, "I've got so much to do that I hope I can fit some prayer in somewhere. . ."?

When you think about prayer, is it the main thing or is it an accent? Paul is suggesting that it should be the main thing. Our conversation with God should really dominate our days and our times together. This is how it might look.

- You wake up in the morning and you thank God for a new day (a gift really).
- As you launch into your morning routine, you thank God for running water and heat and coffee – the essentials of life.
- You pause to read the Word and you do so prayerfully, asking God to speak to you. As you read you really listen. And based on what you hear, you respond in prayer.

- At that point all the things you have to do that day flood into your mind; when that happens, you don't ignore them, rather you lift them to God in prayer. You ask for grace to handle each responsibility well.
- You eat breakfast – giving thanks of course because God has given you daily bread.
- You head into your day – caring for children, going to school, heading to the office or jobsite – all the while paying attention to what God is doing so that you can rejoice when you notice how satisfying He is and pray when needs arise and give thanks for what He's doing.
- When you say something unkind to someone, you confess it to God asking for grace to be more gracious.
- When something difficult or troubling happens, you turn to God in prayer rejoicing that He is right there with you (He hasn't abandoned you), asking for wisdom that He promises.
- You go home that night and watch the news. You are reminded that we're supposed to pray for our governing authorities; while you're watching the news you pray for our president and governor and local leaders; when you watch a story about our troops, you pray for their safety and for the efforts they're leading. As a God-centered person you watch the news with God and so you can't help but praying.
- Perhaps that night you get together with Christian friends; of course you pray together because prayer has been your preoccupation all day. This individual lifestyle of prayer fuels our fellowship (we have a lot more in common than otherwise).

I don't know how that strikes you, but Paul is describing a type of life that might seem overwhelming. Most of us probably don't think we can "pull off" what I've just described. That's a good realization: we really can't have this type of God-centered existence in our own power; we really can't pull it off. If we're going to experience continual conversation with God, we'll need a type of transformation that only the Spirit can produce. But it begins by wanting it. If we want this type of God-centered life in which we continually talk with God, it's possible that God will give it to us.

These verses are a great lead-in to the series we will begin next week on prayer. We are going to spend around eight weeks looking at various aspects of prayer. Part of our Vision for Faith for the next 3 to 5 years involves deepening our prayer life. Lowell Bliss and I will be team-teaching that series. The fact that it is the will of God for us to live in continuous conversation with Him is confirmation that it is good to study and think deeply about prayer.

***Through giving Him full freedom to work in our midst. (vv. 19-22)*** Paul gives five rapid-fire commands in these verses.

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.

It's really an amazing thing that we can actually "quench the Spirit." The word quench was used of putting out a fire (see Matthew 12:20, 25:8). That's why the NIV translates this phrase, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." There are a couple of presuppositions behind this command. ***First***, this command presupposes that the Spirit is active among us. We know from the teachings of Jesus that that's the case. Jesus taught (John 14) that when He went back to the Father that the Holy Spirit would dwell within the believer; Jesus' comment was that "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." In the person of the Holy Spirit Jesus is with us and in us. The

Spirit does the same things that Jesus did with His disciples: He teaches, convicts us of sin, leads us into truth, directs our lives.

The *second* presupposition is that we actually have the ability to “quench the Spirit.” The Spirit might want to do something in our midst – teach us something, cultivate some area of holiness, etc. – but we can thwart and nullify those efforts. It’s like throwing a bucket of cold water on a match: we can squelch what the Spirit wants to do in our midst. Sometimes this happens in selected areas of a church’s life; sometimes a church can quench the Spirit to the point where that church feels virtually dead. (The book of Revelation speaks of Jesus removing the lampstand of such churches.) Paul’s challenge is, “Don’t quench the Spirit. Give the Spirit full freedom to do His work in your midst.”

The Spirit does these things within us individually, but the emphasis here is that the Spirit is at work among us corporately. Let me give an example of how this happens. As I mentioned earlier, next week we will begin a sermon series on the topic of prayer. We are convinced that deepening our prayer life is something that God Himself wants to do in our midst. We believe that we’ve been led of God and that this is one of the most strategic things we can pursue if we’re going to see people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life.

As a church we can either give God full freedom to do this work in our midst . . . or we can quench the Spirit. We quench the Spirit through unbelief (something illustrated throughout the gospels). If we don’t believe that God can deepen our prayer life and give us rich experiences in prayer, then we’ll quench the Spirit. You might behave yourself and sit quietly through a series of sermons, but God won’t have full freedom to do His work in our midst. If that happens, it could be written of us what was written of Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown: He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief (Mt. 13:58). We are going to preach what the Scriptures say about prayer not only for information but also to draw out our faith so that we don’t quench the Spirit.

We can quench the Spirit through our patterns of disobedience. It’s not that God says, “You’re messing up so I’m not going work in your life anymore.” It’s more the case that when we intentionally walk down a path of disobedience in some area of our lives we are saying to God, “I don’t want what you have to offer me. I prefer my anger/lust/jealousy/pride/sloth to Your ways.” **We** are quenching the Spirit by our lifestyle. Can you identify patterns of disobedience in your life that you know are quenching the Spirit in your life? If you’re genuinely humbled by your sin, the good news is that “A broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

A specific example of not quenching the Spirit is given in verse 20: “Do not despise prophetic utterance.” We discussed the gift of prophecy at length last April when we came to 1 Corinthians 14. If you’d like a fuller explanation of how we understand the gift of prophecy, go to the message from April 27<sup>th</sup> on the podcast section of our web site ([www.faithmanhattan.org](http://www.faithmanhattan.org)). In short, however, we understand prophecy to be a specific message from God to a person or people. Sometimes that message is directive (or even predictive) such as when the prophet Agabus predicted a famine in Judea. Other times a prophetic message reflects and reinforces a biblical truth.

Paul’s challenge is “do not despise prophetic utterance” (NIV “Do not treat prophecies with contempt”). There are any number of reasons why people might despise prophetic words. For

example, some people have only been exposed to the abuses of prophecy. Sometimes people have used prophecy in a controlling, manipulative way; sometimes people have claimed to have a “word from God” when their message was clearly contrary to Scripture. Such abuses can make us cynical and tempt us to “despise prophetic utterance.”

The mindset here is, “God, if you want to communicate something to me, I want to hear it. If You want to speak to me through a message You give to someone else, I’m all ears.” Despising prophetic utterance prohibits God from speaking into our lives as fully as possible.

Verse 21 reinforces something we saw in 1 Corinthians 14, namely that the gift of prophecy in the new covenant is not infallible; it is not to be accepted uncritically. In the old covenant a true prophet spoke the word of God infallibly; if someone prophesied something that was false, that person was labeled a false prophet. Not so in the new covenant. There is the presumption that the gift of prophecy – just like every other gift – is fallible; those with the gift of prophecy don’t always hear the voice of God clearly. That’s why Paul writes this in verses 21 and 22:

21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

If someone puts forth a prophetic word, others are supposed to examine it carefully – presumably in light of Scripture and in light of wisdom. If something passes the test and is deemed “good” then we should hold on to it; if it doesn’t pass the test we should reject it. The last command in verse 22 might either be referring to avoiding prophetic words that are evil, but it probably has the broader application of abstaining from every kind of evil wherever we encounter it.

Let me give you a simple example of how God can use a prophetic word in the church. A couple of months ago someone handed me a piece of paper upon which was written, “It is the glory of God to love one’s enemy.” This person had been praying when this statement came to his mind. When you think about it, “It is the glory of God to love one’s enemy” is a very biblical idea and something I’d thought about quite a bit. But a prophetic word can be the application of a known truth to a specific person’s life; it’s not a brand new word. The next morning as I was praying that “word” came back to my mind in a powerful way and God used it to impress upon me something I needed to do.

Giving God full freedom to work in our midst is another way that we put God front and center in our lives. As I mentioned earlier, it begins by “wanting it.” We are going to have an extended time of worship now. The songs express to God that we want Him to be the center of our lives. If you honestly do want a more God-centered life, sing from the heart. If you honestly don’t yet want a more God-centered life, consider asking God to give you that desire.

**Note about 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.** Today’s benediction is taken from the end of 1 Thessalonians 5 - a benediction that I use quite often. Since we’re wrapping up our study of 1 Thessalonians, I thought I’d say a few words of explanation. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 Paul records this prayer for this church that he loved so much. This prayer reflected much of what he’d already written in this letter.

23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body 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.

He refers to God as “the God of peace” – the God who can bring peace, shalom, wholeness. Paul wants this God to give them this wholeness – or holiness - through and through. Paul wanted their transformation to extend to every part of their being.

Paul looks forward to “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” On that day he wanted their “spirit and soul and body to be preserved complete”; in other words, he wanted their salvation to extend to every part of their being. It isn’t enough for God to save our souls; Christ died to save every part of us.

In verse 24 Paul stressed that our sanctification – becoming more like Christ – isn’t in our hands; we participate with God, but He is the One who accomplishes it. Paul emphasizes that God is faithful to finish what He’s begun in us. This should be a great encouragement to us. Sometimes we have serious doubts about whether or not we have made any progress in following Christ. We feel the weight of our own sin; we feel so dragged down by this world; we feel like the cards are stacked against us and that it’s highly unlikely that we’ll ever be conformed to the image of Christ.

Not so says Paul: God is faithful and He will bring it to pass. This verse reminds us of what Paul wrote in Philippians 1: I am convinced that He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.

In light of that understanding, please stand and receive this good word from the Lord. Allow it to fill you with faith and hope.