2021 Thanksgiving Sunday

**GIVE THANKS WITH A GRATEFUL HEART**

1 Thessalonians 5:11-22

Key Verse: 5:16-18

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Happy Thanksgiving! Celebrating Thanksgiving is a uniquely American tradition. It has its root in the Pilgrims, who survived deadly conditions while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. What was worse, they were unprepared for a harsh winter in the New Land, and nearly half of them died of starvation and sickness before the spring. We can hardly imagine how they had to deal with such overwhelming tragedy and suffering. Yet, surprisingly enough, they chose to give thanks to God. That’s the beginning of the tradition of Thanksgiving.

Today’s passage includes Apostle Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonian Christians going through severe hardship, persecutions, and even the death of their loved ones. Apostle Paul encouraged them in many ways in his letter. But his encouragement to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances stands out. He even said that God’s will for them in Christ is rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks in all circumstances. Well, that sounds like a stretch. How can we rejoice and give thanks to God when things go badly? Can we do that from our hearts? Let’s find out.

Before getting into today’s passage, we should briefly review what Paul said in the previous passage. In 4:13-5:10, Apostle Paul talks about Christ’s second coming. Look at 4:13-14. “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Apparently, some of the Thessalonian Christians were grieving due to the loss of their loved ones. We are entirely devastated, especially when someone we love dies unexpectedly

The pandemic during the last two years was unprecedented. It’s unbelievable that so many people have lost their lives: 5 million globally, and a little over 0.9 million Americans passed away. They are not just numbers. They are somebody's precious father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, grandpa, grandma, brother, sister, uncle, and aunt. The sad reality is that we all die someday. Yet, amid the sadness, what distinguishes us, as Christians, from the rest of humanity is that we have hope, the hope of the glorious resurrection through Christ Jesus, who died and rose again. When Christ Jesus comes down from heaven, those who have fallen asleep will rise first, and after that, we who are still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds. And there will be no more pain, sorrow, or death in heaven (4:6-17). Indeed, the resurrection of the dead is our genuine hope in Christ Jesus.

In today’s passage, verses 11-24, Apostle Paul shares crucial spiritual wisdom about how we should live as holy pilgrims on the earth. Look at verse 11. “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” It seems that there was mutual encouragement and edification among the believers in the Thessalonian church. When some believers faced hardships, such as sickness, imprisonment due to persecution, or even death, the whole church came together in support. While sharing their joy and sorrow, they built each other up. Paul wanted them to do it more and more. I always feel that surviving in New York City is more challenging than any other place in the world. Everyone is busy and stressed. Yet, it’s beautiful to see how most of us are willing to encourage one another, offering time, energy, or other available resources. We should do it more and more, not less.

In the following passage, Paul gives practical instructions on building one another up as a body of Christ (12-15) and as individual believers (15-24).

**First: We should uphold spiritual leadership (12-13a).** Look at verses 12-13a. “Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord, and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” Each individual in the body of Christ is essential and precious regardless of their talent or position. However, Paul encourages the Thessalonian brothers and sisters not to take spiritual leadership for granted. Those who work hard in establishing and serving others should be appropriately acknowledged. It does not necessarily mean to praise them in public. But we should uphold healthy spiritual leadership by giving proper appreciation and gratitude for those who work genuinely hard for the church. I think that in this regard, we have made some progress and surely need more improvement. By doing so, the whole body of Christ can grow healthy and strong. I believe that establishing team leadership will be suitable for us - NYUBF.

**Second: we should learn to live in peace among ourselves (13b-15).** Look at verse 13b. “Live in peace with each other.” Some people think that the church shouldn’t have any disagreement because we believe in the same Jesus. But that’s not true at all. Conflicts are everywhere, including the family, community, and nation. Conflicts are unavoidable because each person has a different upbringing, personality, expectations, culture, and ethnicity. Therefore, certain levels of conflict among church members are expected and normal. The real issue is not the conflicts themselves but how we deal with them.

Conflict resolution requires a lot of self-discipline. When we have conflicts, each of us and we as a group should learn to deny ourselves. We should try to understand the other party, tolerate and forgive rather than criticize or blame others. In that way, the body of Christ can grow mature, and we can bring praises to God our Father.

Relationships in the church are often complicated due to many elements. It requires a lot of wisdom to resolve conflicts. Look at verse14. “And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” From time to time, some church members, who have no sense of accountability, can take advantage of others and become disruptive. Then they should not be allowed to disrupt and take advantage of others. They should be warned and, in some cases, be disciplined by the church. Yet, the body of Christ should be patient with everyone and be mindful of those who are weak and broken.

Look at verse 15. “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” Even though Christian brothers and sisters who have done wrong should be held accountable, we should not fall into the temptation to pay back evil for evil, even in a subtle way. We should not retaliate against them. Instead, we should overcome evil with good, especially by doing good for everyone. It’s not easy to do. But that’s the kind of love we should practice in the body of Christ. Romans 12:19-21 states, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If you enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Now, Paul turns his focus to individual responsibility in verses 1`6-22. **Third: we should look beyond our hard reality (16-18).** Read verses 16-18. “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” These verses are well-loved among us. When Paul said this, Christians in the Thessalonian church faced many challenges, including sporadic and systematic discriminations against them and imprisonment. Some had lost their loved ones in death. Paul became broken-hearted for their endlessly suffering. He, as their leader, also felt horrible that he could not do anything to change their difficult situation, except prayer.

Yet, he didn’t remain discouraged with them. Instead, he encouraged them to look beyond their hard reality. He said to them, “Rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Wow! Some people might have been offended by his encouragement. *“What are you talking about, Paul? Are you real?”* Yes, Paul meant it. We don’t need to analyze what it means to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances. But we need to think about how God’s will for us in Christ has to do with our rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks in all circumstances.

Let me ask you a straightforward question. Do you think God our Father wants His children to be happy or unhappy? Of course, God wants all his children to be happy and satisfied. Yet, it does not mean that God wants to make all his children rich and famous. We often pray, *“Lord, help me to get this and to get that.”* Okay. I get that. I don’t think we can help not doing so. There are so many competitions among people to be rich and famous. Yes, some people would be more successful than others. But we must know that God doesn’t necessarily make all of us successful, rich, and famous in the world.

Why not? It’s because material wealth or fame does not make us truly happy. Some people may deny it. But that’s true. It’s because we are created in the image of the infinite God. In other words, we are also infinite creatures, like the infinite God. So by nature, we cannot be satisfied with finite things, such as material wealth or other visible things, even successful ministry. Yet, we are so preoccupied with these temporary things. The fact of the matter is that we should have to let go of those things one by one, whether we like it or not, especially when we die.

So what is God’s game plan for our ultimate happiness? Simply speaking, it’s **Christ Jesus.** Romans 8:29-30 states more profoundly. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those who God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” Here, we learn that God’s game plan for us is far beyond our reality in this world. God the Almighty works for the ultimate good of his loving children without failure or a mistake in all things, both good and bad.

Some children are born with congenital disabilities, while others face different challenges in life. Life isn’t easy for anyone. At present, we feel that our sufferings are unfair and meaningless. We feel sad and discouraged. But we should look beyond our reality by accepting God’s mysterious game plan for each of us, which God will fulfill through his power, wisdom, and faithfulness. So instead of being discouraged, we should always rejoice, pray continually and give thanks to God in all circumstances. We have more positive energy circulation in our body through the indwelling Holy Spirit when we do so.

**Fourth: we should not suppress the Holy Spirit. (19-24)** Look at verses 19-22. “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.” We don’t have time to think about everything in these verses today.

But I would like to focus on the first phrase, “Do not quench the Spirit!” The word “quench” means to suppress, extinguish or snuff out. Can we extinguish the Spirit’s fire? Yes. How? I know it by my own experience. Whenever I am aware of my anger, I can either control it or be controlled by it, with totally different outcomes. But when I let my anger run over me, I am unintentionally suppressing the Holy Spirit. We can also grieve the Holy Spirit through our habit of complaining or blaming others. It’s crucial to manage our emotions, especially anger and negative and hostile remarks. Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 4:29-30, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that is may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

Let me close my sermon today. We have received countless blessings from God our Father despite all the troubles of the pandemic. This morning, I tried to count the blessings one by one. There were so many of them. It’s easy to take God’s blessings for granted. The lack of gratitude or ingratitude is not a small matter. I can be one of the primary causes of emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual problems. The life we live in this world is a blessing. But life is difficult because it’s a series of many issues. But we should not forget that sometimes hard times are God’s blessings in disguise. We must also remember that we are in the good hands of God our Father.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sister, let us give thanks to God for all His blessings. Let us not forget to show our appreciation to parents, spiritual leaders, friends, coworkers, and all those who work hard to serve us. Let us continue to build one another with respect and patience and live in peace. May the Lord fill us with the joy of heaven when we give thanks with a grateful heart. “Rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” ***Happy Thanksgiving!***