

Sunday 15th November 2020

1 Thessalonians 5: 12-18 (Always be joyful)

Talk by Russ Jones, Prayers by Hazel Willson

Welcome to this morning's service.

We will be thinking about patience and peace this morning as we continue to look at first Thessalonians, which seems very appropriate as we wait patiently in lockdown again. As Christians, we have each other, we have hope, and we are thankful for God's loving care as we wait. To help us focus our thoughts and prepare for worship, here are some verses from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

Phil 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

These words echo the message we will hear later in today's passage from his earlier letter to the Thessalonian church.

Now Hazel will lead us in our prayers.

Prayers

Father God, as we come to you this morning, help us to keep in mind St Paul's words to the church in Philippi: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, Rejoice! ...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God'. In doing this Father, you promise we will experience Your special peace.

We acknowledge Your sovereignty, Father, and we *do* give you thanks for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life – but we come also, aware of your hurting world and the many great needs around us – to humbly ask your grace, mercy, and forgiveness for the ways in which we have fallen short of your standards in our thoughts, words and deeds this week. Help us to serve you and our neighbours better in the days to come; and may we your church be united and vocal in our prayers for our land during this month of Lockdown.

In this season of remembrance, we pray for all those who mourn loved ones taken from them in any way – through violence and conflict, whether in wars or on our streets; through hatred, whether perpetrated by the State or by individuals; through disease, pandemic or chronic illness; through poverty, famine or natural disasters; and particularly at this time all who are not able to comfort loved ones near to death. Please bring *your* comfort, your healing, your restoration, and your peace. So often circumstances threaten to overwhelm that peace – may we, your people be an example to others, by living out our faith in action, trust and thanksgiving – showing that in your strength we can have victory over circumstances.

We pray for those who hold power - who are called to leadership or who seek it. Father, may they have integrity, honesty, humility and wisdom to guide and direct others. We particularly pray for our Government, scientific and medical leaders at this time. We give you thanks for the hard work of so many that has meant the possibility of a vaccine to combat COVID-19, and pray for safety and patience in testing it. We continue to pray for medical staff throughout the world as they care for those affected – especially those in poorer countries.

Father, we pray for Penge, and for our own localities. We lift our neighbours to you, both those we know and those we don't. Help us to be known as people of joy, thankfulness and prayer. We pray for our emergency services, local councillors, social services and schools, and for Christians within those organizations, that they may be salt and light. We pray too, for local churches, and give thanks for the different ways they have been able to respond to the pandemic restrictions. Continue to bless their outreach. We pray for the church family at St John's and at Holy Trinity, and for the person you are calling to lead us. May they hear and respond to that call. Thank you for those who lead us during this time – for Ian, Steve and Sue, and the PCC – help us to care for one another.

We pray for healing for Yvette's son, Zak, and for others including Audrey, Val, Lorraine, Eva, Anthony – and all those who need your special touch.

Father God – thank you that you are ultimately in control – may we wait patiently and stand firm on your promises joyfully.

*There is a hope that burns within my heart,
That gives me strength for every passing day;
A glimpse of glory now revealed in meagre part
Yet drives all fear away:
I stand in Christ, with sins forgiven,
And Christ in me the hope of heaven!
My highest calling and my deepest joy,
to make His will my own.*

*There is a hope that lifts my weary head,
A consolation strong against despair;
That when the world has plunged me in its deepest pit
I find the Saviour there!
Through present sufferings, future's fear,
He whispers 'Courage' in my ear,
For I am safe in everlasting arms,
And they will lead me home.*

*There is a hope that stands the test of time,
That lifts my eyes beyond the beckoning grave,
To see the matchless beauty of a day divine
When I behold His face!
When sufferings cease and sorrows die,
And every longing satisfied,
Then joy unspeakable will flood my soul,
for I am truly home.*

Fulfil now Lord, our desires and prayers as may be best for us and our hurting world.

Amen.

Reading 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

¹² 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. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 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.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord – **thanks be to God.**

Sermon

This passage has the sub-heading 'Final Instructions' in my NIV Bible, which is duller than the passage deserves, because it could be called 'How to be a joyful and effective church'. Paul starts with some advice about how we should treat our leaders, and notice that he calls them 'those who work hard among you, who are over you'. It is hard to lead while being both 'among' and 'over', and it seems to have applied to our church this year especially, with our democratic setup, and most of the considerable work has fallen on the broad shoulders of Ian and Steve. Let's appreciate them. Let's also appreciate each other. God has given many gifts to different church members and back in February there were 42 people on different rotas in the church, with more than 30 in 3 roles or more than three. That is a lot of people taking on responsibilities and serving, leading according to their individual gifts. We are told here to accept them, hold them in the highest regard, and live in peace with each other. Leaders are following God, and we must follow them.

Some people need special encouragement and Paul mentions them in verse 14, the idle, the timid and the weak. Oddly, the idle Thessalonians at the time were probably people of strong faith. They were so convinced that the Second Coming was about to happen that they had given up their jobs so they could prepare for it. Their leader here tells them to stop interpreting Scripture to suit themselves and get back to work. 'The weak' doesn't refer to physical weakness, but almost always in Paul's letters it refers to Christians who were afraid to abandon observance of Jewish food restrictions, circumcision rules, and Holy Days. The key lesson from this is how those strong in faith should treat those who are weaker. 'Be patient with everyone' he says, because the weak may grow into great leaders themselves. A look around your own family will see that those who need help and support at one time can later become strong and supportive of others. The attitude to beware appears in verse 15, 'Don't pay back wrong for wrong, but be kind to each other, and everyone else'. We're a forgiven people who should forgive, and Jesus taught that retaliation isn't an option, with his shocking words: 'If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also', which doesn't mean 'help someone to keep punching you in the face', but rather, as Paul puts it, 'don't pay back wrong for wrong'. The overwhelming emphasis of all this advice is that when we seek praise, it won't be given, but when we serve each other with patience and love, we will never be disappointed. In fact, we will be joyful.

'Be joyful always', Paul advises. It's not easy to be joyful, never mind 'always', and here he adds 'give thanks in all circumstances'. This sounds like a tall order, so let's look at it closely. I think he's trying to draw a distinction between Christians and everyone else. Others may be joyful because of circumstances on particular occasions, but Christians can feel the joy of Christ's loving sacrifice and support for them, and that's something which doesn't change – it doesn't depend on circumstances. Imagine you have to write down a reason to be joyful in your life. On the other side of the paper write down all the obstacles to joy that you face. This is rather like the newsreader who, before he began to read out a serious news story, thought of a positive event each time. Some people can't rejoice because the world is full of suffering, and, if you feel like that, then it shows you're a sensitive person, and it's good to have a heart of flesh rather than a heart of stone, but Paul tells you to rejoice because of faith (he gave the same advice to the Corinthian church).

What's his reasoning? Well, it's that great standby verse to carry around with us, Romans 8.28, 'we know that for those who love God all things work together for good'. We trust that God is in control of our lives, that he loves us and works for our good, which means he works to bring us, and others around us, into closer relationship with him. It's our purpose, so as we fulfil that purpose, we are fulfilling the good that can exist in our lives. It sounds impossible to give thanks in all circumstances but a thankful heart is the essence of a prayerful attitude, and that is an attitude that draws close to God, sharing our lives, our joys and concerns, with him, so that all the extreme sounding demands of verses 16 to 18 can be seen to fit together.

'Pray without ceasing', the central verse of the trio, is another of Paul's tall orders, at least on the surface. We don't think of God at all times, muttering prayers to ourselves as we wander through the supermarket, but God does think of us, so we can be thankful. Praying is a way of life in this way of seeing; other letters from Paul speak about praying 'in the Spirit', which means that prayer is not only our effort, but it is a gift from God, a result of God's Spirit living and operating within us. We may pray for hours without seeing an effect or feeling different, but waiting in love and faith is part of the prayerful experience. We may pray from the depths, or we may pray from the surface of our lives, but the Spirit understands and helps us to pray – in Romans Paul reassures us that 'the Spirit intercedes for believers in accordance with God's will', so that just as we have had our intercessions where Hazel led us in asking God to help in various ways, the Spirit steps in and helps us when we pray, even praying for us. The Spirit knows what is 'God's will for us in Christ Jesus', verse 18. Love and peace, mentioned in verse 13, joy and patience are four of the 'fruits of the Spirit' mentioned in Galatians. We can't manufacture these spiritual qualities – they are given as we allow the Spirit to thrive in us and lead us.

When you combine the three verses, 16 to 18, you can see that being joyful, praying and having a thankful attitude are all connected, closely connected. Is it really possible to continually find joy in prayer and be thankful for it? Well, Paul says it is and tells us to do it. He finds inner peace, an equilibrium that we all seek but which is elusive. It takes patience. To find this joy in prayer might take weeks, months, years, because patience is what God desires from us. Waiting patiently is closely tied to our feelings of trust – 'it will happen, I trust God to answer eventually; I'll stand on his promise, even when I'm in the depth of the pit' – and therefore also tied to our feelings of hope, and of love. So don't forget to plead with God to help you, like this: 'Please Lord, give me patience. Now!'

Or perhaps like this instead: Heavenly Father, grant us patience so that we may love others and receive the inner peace that you desire for us. Grant us patience in prayer so that we may wait on your answers, enjoy your constant presence, and trust in your promises. Grant us the joy that comes from knowing the salvation you have given through our Lord Jesus. Amen.

We often end sermons with a prayer, but today I want to end by picturing how we encounter God.

When someone first welcomes the gift of God and experiences the power of prayer, they feel as if they stand at the entrance of heaven, can reach out and touch it. As time passes, that feeling is very likely to change and be less immediate, but instead there is a lasting sense of God's presence on a long journey. God's silence is not the end of the story. It's rather like this. You're alone on a mountain when you catch sight of a deer. You approach it to take a photo of this magnificent sight, but the deer smells you and runs; it hides itself behind a rock. You hurry, stumbling over the difficult ground, tripping and falling, to capture your experience and record it. The deer has disappeared but you know it's still there, somewhere. Similarly, those who have experienced God seek him, and their desire grows. You can look up information and pictures about deer in books, or go to the zoo to see a captive creature, but the deer that you saw, the one that you scarred your knees for, is your deer. Sometimes you can look all over the mountain in the hard and rocky places before you come down, exhausted, and then discover that - the deer is right next to you! God doesn't follow our orders, fit in with our plans, but he will appear in situations that we didn't expect, or even hope for.

Blessing

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Have a blessed and holy week. Goodbye.