

Daily Habits for the Christian Life

1Thessalonians 5:16-22

If I say the word habit, how many of you think of something negative?

That is where my mind goes when I hear the word habit.

I think of something that I say or do on a regular basis that is bad and I usually do it without thinking.

Some of my more common ones are interrupting people, slouching, talking with my mouth full, speaking without thinking, wiping my hands on my pants, and losing track of time.

Those are all patterns of behaviour that I can easily fall into and often times not even realize it because I'm so used to doing it.

Bad habits can be very dangerous things, but habits can also be good.

We can develop the habit of listening, we can train ourselves to stand up straight, we can practice taking smaller bites, and we can learn to consider a situation before we open our mouths to say something.

We can get into the habit of reading God's word, spending time in prayer, coming to church, and putting others before ourselves.

We can seek to be doers of God's word instead of hearers and forgetters of what the LORD says.

In fact, I would suggest to you that the best way, perhaps the only way to conquer bad habits in our lives is to replace them with godly habits instead.

[That, I believe, is where our text for this morning points us. Turn again in your bibles to **1Thessalonians 5:16-22**. In these few verses the apostle gives us a series of commands and the theme that runs through these instructions is constancy. These are things we need to be looking at every day as we seek to live for the LORD in this world. These are habits that we are called to as believers and they are intended for our good. The command we see in verse 16 shows us that...]

Point #1 – Christians are called to constant joy. (Verse 16)

While life in this fallen world is cause for much sorrow, those that follow Jesus must hold that sorrow in tension with an unconquerable delight in our glorious saviour.

Look with me a verse 16.

Wow! That is a hard command that we must think carefully about.

To rejoice is to express either inwardly or outwardly the delight of our hearts.

Putting on a smile and saying, "Everything is fantastic" falls short of what we are commanded here.

The LORD is after something much more substantial than putting on a show for people.

He is after our hearts in this command.

Our Facebook or Instagram might work to fool some people but the LORD sees right through that and so do the people who are closest to us.

To obey this command means feeling genuine joy in our hearts and it means feeling that all the time.

This command makes our need of grace extremely clear, because we often fail to keep this command.

With all the stuff that happens in this fallen world, why would God say to His people “Rejoice always”?

Because whatever may happen in this world the LORD remains unchanged, His faithfulness to those in Christ is unwavering, and His promise to act in everything for our eternal good still stands.

If we see this command as, “Be happy in your situation” we will be missing the point entirely.

This command is, “Be happy in the LORD as you trust Him in everything.”

[As in all things Jesus is our greatest example in this. Hebrews 12:2 says, “...for the joy that was set before him (Jesus) endured the cross.” There is nothing joyful about the cross itself. He suffered tremendously, He was filled with sorrow and grief, and yet the bible tells us that He went through all of that for the ‘joy set before him’. What does that mean? The only way to make sense of that is to say that Jesus’ delight in God remained throughout His agony. His joy is rooted in eternal things rather than temporary things.]

If we really believe what the bible says about the LORD being unchanging, all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal, holy, just, loving, and faithful to His promises then we always have reason to rejoice.

God is not asking us to be happy in the trials and sorrows that come our way, He is asking us to be happy in Him regardless of what life may look like.

God is for something much greater than a moment of happiness, what He wants for us is eternal joy in the light of His glory.

You see brothers and sisters our greatest problem in life is not wanting to be happy, it is wanting to be happy in temporary things which is all this world has to offer.

Christian joy is rooted in what is yet to come believing that the LORD is faithful to those that are in Christ.

That is something the world cannot give, neither is it something the world can take away.

[We can cry and still rejoice in the LORD. Jesus did that and we are called to follow His example. How is your joy this morning? Can you see the goodness of the LORD through tear filled eyes? Is your heart unwilling to be content with fleeting things? That is what we are called to here! Rejoicing in the LORD is to be a daily habit for the believer. Here is another...]

Point #2 – Christians are called to constant prayer. (Verse 17)

Since believers ought to know their need of God and want to be growing closer to Him, we should always be turning to Him moment by moment.

That is the command of verse 17.

Let us consider for a moment the question, “What is prayer?”

At the most basic level we might say, “Prayer is talking to God.”

It is important to consider how amazing that is!

When Jesus taught His people to pray He taught as a matter of first importance the holiness of God.

When we start speaking with the LORD we are speaking with the One Who created all things by the power of His Word, we are speaking to the One Who knows all things, Who is before all things, Who sustains all things, Whose visible glory in its fullest degree is so great that we cannot remain with Him apart of His grace.

The Christian ought to pray in humility depending on the blood of Christ as he seeks an audience with the King of the universe.

Because the LORD is all-knowing and omnipresent He hears every prayer from every person no matter how many people are praying.

[How many kids here this morning have ever tried to talk to your mom or dad at the same time as your brothers and sisters? What does your mom or dad say when that happens?]

If multiple people try to talk to use at the same time it becomes a jumbled mess pretty quickly, but no matter how many people are talking to the LORD He knows exactly what is said and He has the capacity to give attention to every detail.

That is a small reminder of what prayer is and it is possible because God is incredible beyond what our minds can understand.

He commands us here to pray ‘without ceasing’.

Commentators are quick to point out here that he can’t mean being on our knees with folded hands and closed eyes all the time.

I agree we don’t have the capacity for that, but we should not be quick to dismiss the ongoing nature of the command that is given to us here.

One of the most basic functions of prayer is to express our dependence upon God.

What do we need the LORD for? Everything.

When do we need the LORD? Every moment of every day.

We should without a doubt have regular times of folded hands and closed eyes bringing our praise and our petitions before our Father in Heaven Who cares for us, but we should never rise from our knees as though we are hanging up a phone or unplugging a computer.

Rather, we should proceed into whatever it is we are doing next realizing that we need the LORD to carry us moment by moment.

[Our brains have incredible processing power. It is more than possible to have our minds upon the LORD in all that we do. That is not something that comes naturally to us. That is a habit we have to build into our lives. When we do, it makes a big difference. That brings us to a third command which comes in verse 18 and is certainly connected to constant rejoicing and prayer. This command shows us that...]

Point #3 – Christians are called to constant thanksgiving. (Verse 18)

Absolutely everything good in our lives is a gift from God and any real hope we have for the future is because of God; therefore, gratitude should always be in our hearts and on our lips.

The first half of the verse gives us the command and the second half gives us the reason for the command.

Let's look at the command (**Verse 18a**).

It is a bit surprising, even difficult to accept that there are no exceptions here.

To my mind there are some situations that are worth complaining about.

It is important to remember that he is writing this to a church that has gone through some persecution and hardship.

Paul himself endured all kinds of difficult and costly things and yet he says here 'give thanks in all circumstances'.

Wow, how can he say that?

The reason comes in the **second part of verse 18**.

The will of God here is referring to God's desire for His people and this likely extends to all three commands given from verses 16-18.

God wants His people to 'rejoice always', to 'pray without ceasing', and to 'give thanks in all circumstances'.

Why does He want that? The only thing that makes any kind of logical sense is the sovereignty of God.

God wants His people to act in these ways because He is ordering our lives, in fact He is ordering everything in the universe, from moment to moment to bring about His plans and purposes for His eternal glory.

Our rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks is a demonstration that we believe He is seated upon His throne and will see to our highest good.

[Imagine for a moment a friend went undercover and wore a tiny camera and microphone and recorded everything we said and did in a day. Would thankfulness be a substantial part of what was recorded? If not we have a heart problem that we need to deal with.]

Grumbling and complaining reveals a heart that has little delight or rest in God's ordering of all things.

We grumble and complain because we don't get what we want.

We grumble and complain out of a sense of pride and entitlement.

When think we deserve more or better and that blinds us to the countless things God is doing all the time for our good.

[The best way to fight against that is by giving thanks. As believers we always have a great place to start with thanksgiving. We can start with the gospel. In the gospel we are reminded of what we deserve. We deserve eternity in hell under God's just wrath because we have shown utter contempt for His infinite glory in our sin. Not one of us deserves anything good from the LORD and yet He sent Jesus into the world to suffer our punishment, to die in our place and if we can see our problem, turn to the cross for forgiveness, and trust in the power of His resurrection we are covered by His blood and made right with God. That is a lot to be thankful for and that is just the beginning if we are thinking rightly. That is God's will for our lives! Rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving are really good habits that the LORD wants us to pursue but in order to do that well we need to think rightly about life which is why we are called to something really important in the next few verses. We are given four commands which show us that...]

Point #4 – Christians are called to constantly discern truth. (Verses 19-21)

God has made Himself known to the world and we are called to exercise our minds as much as we are able to understand Him rightly and shape our lives based on that proper understanding.

The two commands are given in verses 19-20.

Commentators point out here that Paul is clearly picking up on the biblical image of fire in connection with the Holy Spirit. (tongues of fire Acts 2)

To quench a fire means to put something on it for the purpose of putting it out.

It is an illustration which is intended to portray opposition to the work of the Spirit.

We need to be careful how we understand this. Some would take this illustration too far and suggest that somehow human beings have the power to stop the work of the Spirit.

The Spirit, like all the Persons of the Trinity, is omnipotent meaning He has the power to do all that He pleases.

One could sooner put out a raging forest fire with a small glass of water than overcome the power of the Spirit.

The apostle is likely intending us to see the command about quenching the Spirit and the command concerning the despising of prophecies as closely connected.

Likely what was happening in the Thessalonian church is people were keeping silent men particularly gifted by the Spirit for the preaching of God's word and in that sense they were opposing the work of the Spirit in the church.

There may have even been good intentions of protecting the church from error but in the process they were silencing men that they should have been listening to and therefore quenching the Spirit.

Instead of keeping the word of God from being preached what believers should do is commanded in **verse 21**.

It is possible to make the mistake of stopping up our ears and it is also possible to make the mistake of blind acceptance of what is taught in the church.

We are to avoid both mistakes by testing 'everything'.

Testing implies there is a standard by which we can test things against.

The first hearers of this letter had received the teaching of the apostles directly from Paul and they also had the Old Testament Scriptures to test what they were being taught.

Today we have the completed word of God both Old and New Testament by which we can evaluate what we are taught.

If what is taught is in accordance with what God says we ought to 'hold fast' that is bind ourselves to that truth so that we will not be moved from it.

[A church's theology should not swing from one end of the spectrum to another simply because there is a change in pastor. Instead each one of us should take seriously the call to grow in the ability to discern truth so that we will think and act according to what God wants rather than the whims of the world. Once we can hold fast to what is good we will be well prepared to obey the final command of our text this morning. In addition to rejoicing, prayer, thanksgiving, and the discernment of truth...]

Point #5 – Christians are called to constantly refrain from what God hates. (Verse 22)

Those who know Jesus as their saviour have changed hearts and those new hearts have a new desire to stop our natural desire for evil.

Just like the previous seven commands in these verses this one is both constant and pervasive. (Verse 22).

To abstain from something means to keep from participating in whatever that something is. That means our own personal participation and I believe it also means enabling or affirming someone else to do the same.

Here we are told to keep ourselves from participating in “every form of evil.”

Again we are reminded of our need of grace here because this is something we have all failed at in the past and we continue to fail at on a regular basis.

It is a terrible mistake, however, to use our shortcomings as an excuse for giving up the struggle against evil in our lives.

It is also a terrible mistake to make light of our sin.

We should never think, “Oh it’s just a small sin so it is ok!”

The bible says the wages of sin is death. That is the wage for every sin because every form of evil is an offense to the infinite glory of God.

Let us not make light of such things.

Neither should we think, “That is just the way I am and I can never change.”

That kind of thinking denies the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the heart of the believer.

Instead of making excuses for evil in our lives we should be seeking, by God’s grace and power, to conquer our sin.

If we minimize evil or think ourselves at the mercy of its power then our thinking is more in keeping with atheism than it is with Christianity.

Genuine Christians do not use the grace of God as a license to sin.

Genuine Christians do not give up the struggle against evil simply because it is hard.

Genuine Christians seek to conquer sin in their words, thoughts, feelings, and actions because we love Jesus and see His commands as good and life giving.

That is hard in an unbelieving world and it is getting harder day by day.

I understand there is a Bill working its way through the House of Commons in Canada right now that would criminalize parts of the Bible because it is opposed to sin that our world now calls good.

We must not bow the knee to such things brothers and sisters, but instead we must “hold fast to what is good and abstain from every form of evil.”

That is something we must do every day.

How are the habits of our lives this morning?

Is there any rejoicing? That is what God’s calls us to always.

Are we praying? God calls us to pray without ceasing.

Is there any thanksgiving? God calls us to give thanks in all circumstances.

How about our ability to recognize what is from the Spirit? God calls us to discern what is true and has given us His word through which we can test all things.

Are we trying to keep ourselves from evil? God wants us to abstain from every form of it.

These are some of the daily habits of the Christian.

Jot them down, stick them on your fridge, and strive for progress depending on God's grace.

If we do that, we will see the LORD at work in us and that will be amazing.