

Rejoice Always
1 Thessalonians 5:12-22
Communion Meditation
March 29, 2009
FBC Waynesboro

Verses 12-22 in 1 Thessalonians five form one unit in which we find three parts. We have already examined the first two parts and today will simply look at the opening sentence in the third part. The first part of this three part unit addresses the issue of leadership in the church looking generally at all spiritual leaders and specifically at the pastor in his relationship to the people and the people in their relationship to the pastor. The second part of this three part unit addresses the issue of our love for one another in the body of Christ, how is it that we are to relate to one another. And this third part of this unit addresses the issue of our lifestyle as it lived out in the face of God and before the world in the body of Christ.

It is important for us to see that this entire section is carried along by mandates. There are no suggestions here; what we find here are very strongly stated imperatives, fifteen of them in fact and eight of them in verses 16-22. God sets before us in this section that is controlled by these eight imperatives seven characteristics of a Christian lifestyle lived out in the context of the body of Christ. What is recognized here in this text is simply what is recognized everywhere else in Scripture: there is no Christian lifestyle outside the body of Christ. And the first imperative that we are given is: Rejoice always.

The word always covers time, space, and circumstance. It is a command for us as the children of God to be joyful at all times and in every place and in the midst of every circumstance. Now this reality brings us immediately face to face with at least three challenges that we need to address. The first is that if we are honest and are brought face to face with this mandate in the light of how we live our lives, we would have to admit that we are not always joyful in every time and in every place and in every circumstance. So, we just have to admit that the Bible is wrong here and just overstates the case or that there could be something wrong with us. That brings us to the second issue: what is wrong with us it seems to me in our

context is that we don't know what joy really is. We think of joy in terms of happiness and we think of happiness in terms of ourselves and we think of ourselves in terms of having what we need to make us feel good about ourselves and the world around us. When we have what we perceive that we need or want, we are happy or joyful; when we don't we are not. Now there is our problem because Biblical joy has nothing to do with us in relationship to either our needs or wants. The word for "joy" is derived from the word for grace so that we find the meaning of joy in the manifestation of grace. Joy is what we know to be true about us because when we were sinners deserving the judgment of God, God intervened and brought us grace that brought us life and that life that is given us from God and by God through His Son is real life and it is living this real life that brings us what joy really is. And that life demands death to our desires so that we can live in increasing devotion to Him. That is joy and that is what Paul is speaking of here. Now here is the question that I want you to think with me about for a few moments as we prepare to come together to the Lord's Table: If we are commanded to rejoice always, what are those realities in which we are to rejoice as defined biblically? I want to lift four from Scripture and set them before us today. There are others but I want to lift up four. No time to examine them, just want to expose them.

First, we are to rejoice in the Redemption that has been accomplished. Listen to these words from Hebrews 12:1-11. Joy in the face of the cross. Joy in the face of the force of the heavy hand of God's discipline. Yes, because it is through the cross and only through the cross that our redemption is accomplished and we know that we are among the redeemed because God is at work in us through His Word and by His Spirit to develop us in our devotion to Jesus which requires the heavy hand of his hard discipline. That is why the believer can rejoice in rejection by the world and the one who professes to be a believer who can live in the world and be of the world and consider it a good thing that the world loves them because they don't preach to them is worse than an infidel because such a person makes a mockery of the redemption that has been accomplished. What in us deserves His grace? What in us can earn His mercy? What in us is worthy of what He did for us? Jesus sent out the disciples on their first mission and they saw the power of God at work assaulting the demonic world and when they returned to tell their stories Jesus said, "don't rejoice that the demons are subject to you; rejoice that your names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Your redemption has been

accomplished. You have been reconciled to God through the blood of His Son. That is the foundation of all joy.

Is that true for you as you sit here today? Do you know by the experience of the work of the Spirit of God in your life that you have been saved? That is how you know. When a man or woman has been born again it is the work of God by His grace. Do you think God would do what He did in the death of His Son to deliver you from sin so that you could live life on your terms? No. God saves us for Himself and for His purpose that He works in us from the moment of our salvation. He draws us to worship Him on the Lord's Day. He draws us to join with the body of Christ. He draws us to drink deeply and eat heartily from the feast that is His Word and He draws us to declare the praises of His Name in the world---all of these are the first and foundational evidences of the redemption that is accomplished through Jesus that brings us great joy.

I was sitting in the conference I attended last week when the man sitting down the pew from me looked at my nametag, "Waynesboro, Georgia—Bible belt; I am from San Fran. Started a church there 28 years ago. Tough place. My family grew up there. My daughter just married and her husband got transferred to Charleston. Never been in the south. Always heard about it as the Bible Belt, but my daughter had only been here a few months when she called me and said, 'Dad, it is tougher here than where San Fran. Everybody here thinks they are Christians but so many don't even know what that mean.' " Then he paused, looked at me and said, "how would you respond to that Al Wright from Waynesboro, Georgia?"

We rejoice because our redemption has been accomplished and we know it is real in us because we see and sense the evidences of His grace in us absent which we are far worse off than those who have never heard the Gospel. We rejoice also the relationships in which we are engaged in the Body of Christ. The Psalmist looked at the day of worship for the people of God and declared, "this is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." Or "I was glad when they said to me, "let us go into the house of the Lord." Or listen to these words in Philippians 4:6 when even in the midst of disruption in the church Paul could speak of the joy that was his together with them because of the relationships that they enjoyed with one another in the Body of Christ.

Our redemption that has been accomplished in Christ should lead us into

relationships in which we are actively engaged in the body of Christ. There should be no more important investment of time and energy in the lives of others like those we invest in our fellow members in the body of Christ. Here is a source of great joy for us as we see to grow together into Christ. Something is dreadfully wrong with someone who professes to be a believer whose most meaningful relationships are outside the body of Christ while those relationships in the body of Christ are tangential, superficial and functional. One of the joys of this body to me is that there are pockets of people everywhere who are investing heavily in one another's lives and the level of spiritual support and spiritual strengthening.

Further, we rejoice in the great privilege that God has given us to fulfill our responsibilities for the glory of God and the exaltation of Christ as a part of this body of believers. Listen to what Jesus says in John 15:8-11. This fruit here is not the fruit of the Spirit which is produced in us and through us by the Spirit. This fruit is the fruit of our faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus which brings us great joy and great trial. That is why James says that we are to consider all joy when we face trials and tribulations because those come in the context of faithfulness that is producing fruit. Peter echoes the same sentiment in 1 Peter 1. When we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus we are brought without fail into the body of Christ in which and through which we have the great privilege of joining in the praise of God as the church gathered and the proclamation of the Gospel as the church scattered. And this is our joy. It is the center of the life of every child of God. It is the core value for every born again believer. I believe that one reason we are running to and fro as people in our day chasing happiness is simply because we don't have real joy. We profess a faith that has not possessed us as in consuming us and controlling us and that is very clearly seen in how we see and treat the body of Christ both in terms of our gathering for worship and our scattering for witness.

There is one other foundational source of all true joy. We rejoice in the absolute sovereign rule of our God. He reigns. I want us to come to the Table of the Lord today with our hearts focused on His sovereign rule over His World but with particular focus in the lives of His people. If you have been redeemed by Him then you know it through the evidences of grace in your life that draw you to worship and study in the church and drive you to witness for the glory of God in the world. So that as a child of God you can hear these sacred truths as if God is sitting

and talking with you. The first is from Habakkuk. His world was falling apart. All outward evidences were that the enemies were winning. His society was saturated with sin and God gave Him two very special moments; the first was His revelation that those who are right with God are those who are made right with God by God's grace alone and that grace from the faithful God enables them to be faithful to this God. And those who are made right by faith can say these words with Habakkuk 3:17-19. That is a reason for rejoicing. The other word is very particular in its focus as well; it can be owned only by the redeemed, Romans 8:28-39. Here is your joy. But what if you don't know Him? What if He isn't Lord of your life? You have no cause for rejoicing and that is why you are looking everywhere to find a reason to laugh or to smile; that is why your external laughter may simply be a cover for a deeply depressed heart. That can change for you today if you would but trust Him as you sense He is calling you to come to Him today.