

Intentionally Faithful: Joy and Gratitude

I Thessalonians 5:1-21

Intro

We have talked about intentional faithfulness in a variety of ways over the last few weeks. From being with (God and those around us), to moving beyond the should've of life, to the type of faith that we are preparing to live (cruise ship as opposed to battleship), we have talked about some of the ways that we've got to intentionally engage with the leading of God's Spirit so as to begin to thrive.

But before we depart from underneath this umbrella of thought, I want us to talk about one more area of intentionality and, hopefully, its response: joy and gratitude.

These are areas that we certainly nod and say, 'yes, I would love to have more joy in my life...now how does that happen?'

As we read these familiar verses we are able to have the reiteration that we do not know the time of Jesus' return and that we should, therefore, encourage one another to remain diligent and prepare for his return (and yes, we did talk about that last week). Well, it is out of these verses that speak to preparation that we hear the Spirit of God speaking through Paul in a way that implores us to 'rejoice always'.

Having looked around at the world,...that seems more than a little difficult.

And yet, the reality is that when Paul authored these words it wasn't like there were multiple unicorn's pointing out the ever abundant rainless rainbows that revealed the multiples pots of gold that the leprechaun's were holding in safe keeping.

Yes, there was a little bit of sarcasm there...and I hope that you were able to pick up what I was putting down: the call to rejoice always was not said in a vacuum where life was easy for anyone, let alone believers in Jesus Christ. Which therefore means, that it holds an immense amount of importance for us in our day and time.

So hear these words and as you do, begin to recognize the intentionality that needs to be exhibited in order to begin to move in the direction that we are called to abide. The scripture reads this way.

I Thessalonians 5:1-21

5Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

Romans 12:9-21

Intro

Our second passage shows us that this call to live joyfully weaves its way through the prism of life's experience. This does not mean that we are meant to smile in the midst of abusive situations and not seek recourse from that mistreatment (as scripture has been used inappropriately in multiple circumstances).

But it does remind us that the circumstances of life should not dictate how we feel about, and respond to God as those circumstances unfold. Hear the Word of God. **Romans 12:9-21**

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' ²⁰No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

'Intentionally Faithful: Joy and Gratitude'

Geraldine and her family were visiting New York City from their home in Ireland. It was their first visit. Having spent a little bit of time in the city I can think of many of the things that I would do.

Geraldine went a different direction. Apparently their trip to the city was based around one thing: seeing 'Hamilton' on Broadway. Did they have tickets?

They did not.

However, they did have a plan. Geraldine stood in line outside of the theater for four days to try and scoop up the unused tickets that would occasionally avail themselves. She did this for four days!

Well on day 4 her focus was rewarded: she was going to be able to get tickets! I can imagine just how excited she and her clan were: this was clearly a dream that was being fulfilled.

And then tragedy began to strike. As she counting her money, Geraldine realizes that she doesn't have enough: she's \$20 short. What happens next sounds like a poorly written scene out of a TV show...but it happened. Geraldine somehow has someone save her place in line and she runs toward Times Square trying to find someone who would meet the shortfall. She, and apparently her daughter as well, ended up at the NYPD booth right there at the crossroads of the world, and explained her story on the verge of a full on panic attack to the officers. One of those officers, Ricardo Dicandia, pulled a twenty out of his pocket and handed it to the distressed mom who then bolted back to the theater in time to buy the tickets.

Well, this family, upon returning to Ireland, wrote a thank you note...to the Mayor, Bill DeBlasio, who actually ended up seeing it, and put it out there to the public to the point that I'm able to use it as a sermon illustration. Included in the note from Geraldine was the line: 'It was without doubt the best night that would not have been possible without Officer Dicandia's generosity and kindness.'

Here is a family that was this close (can you see how close my fingers are?) to having a terrible story, who are catapulted into a state of joy-filled euphoria because of the unexpected generosity of a stranger, who then take the time to express their gratitude to that stranger's boss's boss.

Maybe in a world that thrives on the negative, these sorts of stories happen more often than we think, being pushed to the fringes of cultural recognition in favor of the next tragedy or personal attack, only to rarely burst to the surface because of the viral nature of the story.

I hope that's the case, because the other option (that people being kind and grateful, being filled with joy and gratitude not happening near as often as we would like it), makes me lament the sensibilities that we have fallen prey to.

But, leaning upon the sorts of passages that we have heard this morning, I'm going to yank myself out of that negative space, prior to making myself too comfortable. Being intentional faithful means holding on to the promise that in God 'all things are possible' (Matthew 19:26), and that includes the children of God not being overcome by evil but overcoming evil with good, rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances.

And yes, it's something that we've got to work at...something that we have to be intentional about, both in our own selves and also in how we relate with and to one another.

We actually stumbled into this conversation the other day during Men's Group on Thursday morning. We were in the 12th chapter of Matthew which details three examples of how 'the Pharisees' were trying to catch Jesus doing something 'illegal' so that they could bring him up on charges, throw him into jail (at least), and quiet down this man from Nazareth who had been stirring the pot which, so often, leaves those in authority, feeling worried for their own seats of power. The latter two events speak to miraculous healings.

What ended up being said, about the Pharisees, was that the way they saw Jesus was so skewed, so clouded by their own religious and cultural perspective, that they were unable to appreciate, let alone celebrate, the beautiful things that were there...right there in front of them...begging to be seen and joyfully lifted up in gratitude.

Any guesses on where I'm going to go next?

That's right! We're not any different! Our prism may be dramatically different than that of the Pharisees, but the reality is that we continue to struggle to be joyful even when we have the opportunity to be grateful for amazing joys that do take place. We look out at the world and see the pains, and the trials, and our heads begin to fall downcast thinking that there's nothing to be thankful for, or if there is, it's not happening all that poignantly in our life.

Fires? The ravages of storms of all sorts? Politics? People just being mean to the point of seeming evil?

Yes, there are more than a few things that can cause us to look at the world and feel like 'we're done! We're clearly in a handbasket and you know where that's taking us.'

I get it. I live that too.

That's why we need these reminders that the life of faith that we have been blessed with needs to be engaged in such a way that put down the prism of doubt and skepticism that can so easily be worn, and keep looking for those moments that cause our hearts to be filled with joy and it's dovetailed emotion gratitude, both to God and to the person/people who have allowed that moment to become the joy-filled moment that we are able to experience. As we talked about that reality in Men's Group we talked about how we need to actively look for those moments of joy (if, for no other reason, because there feels like there are so many negative things that we are bombarded with on a daily basis), actively look for those moments of joy...and then remind ourselves of them later...or even better share them with someone else, thereby allowing the truth that is God in the world to become ever more a part of how we experience the world (do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good, rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances).

This needs to be part of our intentional faithfulness!

Another story: a mother walked into a doctor's office down in Alabama with her infant child sleeping on her shoulder. She goes to the reception desk and checks in and receives a clipboard filled with paperwork. She clearly had a look of, 'so how's this going to work?' on her face: sleeping baby...paperwork...not a well-connected combo.

Well there was an older gentleman who must have seen the reality this mother was facing because he spoke up from across the waiting room asking, 'May I hold your baby for you?' The mother replied, beaming, 'Yes, that would be amazing.'

The person who snapped a picture of this moment said the following, 'This man has provided me with hope & a sweet memory that I will never forget. If you know this man, tell him what an extraordinary person he is!'

Here's the picture.



So,...what's your heart filled with?

Does joy show up in there at all?

Mine too.

There are days when we have to go looking for it, and I mean needle in a haystack hard, but the joy of God is in the world. Allow those moments of joy to fill your heart and lift your perspective so that you too might rejoice always. As you do, express your gratitude, both to God but absolutely to the people who have filled you with joy as well. Who knows, maybe expressing gratitude toward someone will become that moment of God-breathed joy for someone else.

Regardless, the intentionality of this search is essential for our faithfulness. The world will always be the world (at least until all things are brought into God's closer presence), but the promise of God is sure and the joy of the Lord is our strength. Seek out the joy that is of God. Seek it out and rejoice in that joy by showing your thankfulness!

After Sermon Prayer

Holy Lord, the world can feel so dark, even to the point that we experience moments of joylessness. But that is not the life that You are leading us to embrace. Help us to seek out Your presence in our world Lord, help us to intentionally seek it out thereby allowing our hearts to be filled with joy. God, thank You. Thank You for always showing us Your still better way. It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.