



## What To Do All The Time

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There aren't very many things in life that all of us should always do in every circumstance. I'm a person who by nature always looks for exceptions. I'm skeptical of extremes. I get nervous when people start making generalizations. I take words like "every" and "always" and "never" as personal challenges to find a loophole, and I *almost* always can.

But I also know that life can become so confused and complicated that we don't know what to do. We can become paralyzed by too much information and by overanalyzing everything. Sometimes we need to simplify. Sometimes we need to know just a few things that always apply. Sometimes we need to know what all of us should do always and in every circumstance.

I think the apostle Paul knew that. In 1 Thess. 5:16-22, as Paul begins to close out his letter to this young fellowship, he tells them a few of the things that all of us should always do in every circumstance. Listen to his words:

**"Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil."**

Did you notice some of the words which keep showing up: **"always...in everything...all things...every form."** It's even more pronounced in the original Greek text where Paul keeps on placing the verb last. Here is a literal reading from the Greek text: *always rejoice...without ceasing pray...in everything give thanks...all things examine...every form of evil abstain.* These are things we should always do in every circumstance. He emphasizes the all encompassing nature of these actions.

And they're commands - shot off in machine gun style. Paul is like a mother leaving her kid at summer camp. Before she says good-bye she shoots off a list: "Take a shower every day! Change your underwear every morning! Brush your teeth after every meal! Always listen to your counselors! Never kiss a banana slug!"

These are the "must do's" of the Christian life. And, by the way, it's these things that will make us stand out. If you always live this way in every circumstance you'll live a life that demands explanation. It's more powerful than the fish on your car, or the cross around your neck, or even the Bible in your hand. Live this way consistently and people will wonder what makes you tick.

The commands can be divided into sections. Each section contains several commands, which are like

the links in a chain. In the first chain he says three things, all of which have to do with what we pay attention to; what we focus on. He says I want you to always and in every circumstance pay attention to God; pay attention to his worth.

### **I. We should pay attention to God's worth (vv. 16-18).**

**A. Rejoice always:** First, he says always rejoice. That's the first link in the chain. This is NOT telling us to feel something; it's telling us to do something. This is not Bobby McFerrin telling us to "be happy." This is the apostle Paul telling us to make a decision to rejoice always.

Immediately we wonder how we can do this and still be genuine. How can I rejoice always when I lose my job, or struggle through a difficult marriage, or face an uncertain future? Do we just grit our teeth and pretend that everything is fine? Paul is not calling us to a superficial, Pollyanna, reality-denying existence.

He's calling us to simply live out the implications of our faith. We're not rejoicing in the difficult marriage, or the uncertain future, or the unemployment. We're rejoicing in the Lord. We're rejoicing in who he is and what he's done for us. He's always faithful. He's always present. He's always sovereign. He's always full of mercy and love. So we can always rejoice in the Lord. In a weird kind of way, I can be sad or disappointed or confused or in real pain, but still rejoicing in the Lord.

I think of Paul and Silas, first beaten with many blows, then thrown into a dark prison with their feet fastened in the stocks. Scripture says "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." How do you think they felt? Happy to be in prison? I don't think so! But they had joy in the Lord!

In an article by Annie Chapman in *Decision* magazine she writes about her experience at a woman's conference: "All alone, she sat in the back of the church. The rest of the 500 women...that weekend had already exited the auditorium. I was gathering up my books, papers, and props when I saw her at the back of the room. I walked over to where she was sitting; her head was bowed low, and her shoulders were drooping. I sat down, and she began to tell me her story. She was the mother of three. Her oldest son, suffering from muscular dystrophy, had been confined to a wheelchair for most of his 17 years. Her other two children had a variety of learning and emotional challenges. With her head still bent, she whispered, 'I'm married to a mean, hateful man who makes my life miserable. He won't help me with our son. He even refuses to help while I hold our son when he

goes to the bathroom. I buried my father this week,' the woman continued. 'At the funeral I learned that my father had disinherited me from his estate because he hated my husband.' Then she told me something that still haunts me: 'I came this weekend with one prayer,' she said. 'I asked God to kill my husband. I prayed, "Lord, I need a way out! I feel like a bird in a cage."' Finally she lifted her eyes and said, 'When I prayed that prayer, God spoke to me as clearly as I've ever sensed His voice. He said, "Even a bird in a cage sings."' With tears running down her face she asked, 'What am I supposed to do with that? How do I live with that answer?' Feeling utterly impotent, I replied, 'If God says, "sing," you need to find your song.'

She's right. And the only way to find your song is to remember that even in the cage he is God. And he is with you in the cage. And he is bigger than that cage and he can open it whenever he chooses.

**B. Pray without ceasing:** But in order to do that, we'll have to pay attention to God in another way. The second link in this chain is to pray without ceasing. If you're going to rejoice always, you'll have to constantly pray. Prayer is the pump from which our joy in the Lord springs. Without it, you'll dry up. Spurgeon said, "As you are tempted without ceasing, so pray without ceasing."

But let's face it, this is one of those commands that sounds good, but how can you really do that? Do you go around mumbling prayers? Do you cloister yourself in some desert monastery? How can you pray while you study chemistry, or read a book to your kid, or fix the lawnmower? How can we do this when we have other things to do? It seems to me this calls for a new understanding of prayer. Could it be that prayer is not just talking to God, but more akin to living with a continual sense of his presence; being in constant communion or fellowship with Him? Someone said, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed, the motion of a hidden fire, that trembles in the breast."

Maybe it's a little like leaving the phone off the hook while God stays on the line. Or maybe it's like working on a computer and keeping an eye on the little box that tells you when you've got mail. It's staying tuned into God. Or maybe it's like that game we used to play in the pool as kids - Marco Polo. You know, the one you used to cheat at. It's tag with your eyes closed. The only way to know where the others are is by continuously calling out, "Marco," to which they reply, "Polo." As we go through life we should always and in every circumstance be calling out to God and listening for his response.

**C. Give thanks in everything:** One of the things you'll find yourself doing as you pray is giving thanks. You can't help it because you're paying attention to God. Your focus is on him and his worth. That's why the third link in this chain is to give thanks in everything.

Don't get this wrong. Paul doesn't tell us to give thanks FOR everything. He says to give thanks IN everything. What's the difference? You get bad news. You have cancer. You're not thankful for the cancer, but you're thankful in the midst of the cancer. You're thankful that he never changes and he's with you and he's more powerful than cancer. You thank him that he's at work in you, and nothing can thwart his purpose. Paul is not saying thank God for everything that happens to you, but thank God in every circumstance you find yourself in.

I think gratitude is underrated. I think it's one of the two or three most important things we can do to keep our walk with God healthy and alive. I thought about why that is. I'm reminded of the relationships I have. When someone does something for me, or gives me something, and I fail to acknowledge that, to write them a note or to give them a call, a kind of wall comes between us. They may not even be upset, but I feel strange seeing them until I've given thanks. Could that be true with God?

Paul says I want you all to always and in every circumstance give thanks, not just in the good times but in the hard times, because even in those times, especially in those times, he doesn't stop giving to you. And he adds that this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. He's talking about all three links of the chain - always rejoice, pray without ceasing, in everything giving thanks. You want to know God's will for your life? There it is. He can't be much more specific than that. If he specifically told you his will was for you to pack up and move to Arizona you'd probably do it. Well, why won't you do this? Are you in God's will today? Are you always and in everything paying attention to God's worth?

Early in the summer I was preaching at another church across the Bay, and my heart was broken for one of my kids. I won't go into the details; it was one of those minor crisis that I had allowed to become larger than life. It was during the part of the service when we were singing, and I was really battling to enter into the spirit of praise and thanksgiving. And then in my heart I just heard God say: "It's not about you." That's all. God said, "It's not about you; it's about me. Get your eyes on me." It was what I needed to hear and somehow it freed me to rejoice and pray and give thanks - to pay attention to God's worth.

But there is another chain. The first one dealt with what we say to God; the second one deals with what he says to us. Not only should we pay attention to God's worth, we should also pay heed to God's word.

## **II. We should pay heed to God's word (vv. 19-22).**

**A. Do not quench the Spirit:** There are five links in this chain. Here's the first: Do not quench the Spirit. Throughout the Bible the Spirit of God is symbolized by fire. To quench the Spirit is to extinguish that fire in our lives. Now the Spirit works in a multitude of ways. We could quench his fire by failing to rejoice and pray and give thanks. But here Paul has something different in mind. I think he's talking about quenching the fire of his Spirit by despising prophecy.

**B. Do not despise prophetic utterances:** In the early church, it was not uncommon for prophets to receive a

message from God; a word for a particular person or the church. It wasn't always a prediction about the future; it could just be a word for the present. Remember, they didn't have the completed NT like we do. They needed this prophetic ministry. But for some reason, there were people (perhaps leaders) in the Thessalonian church who were despising prophecy; they weren't open to the possibility that God really was speaking through these prophets.

If we read the letter, we can at least surmise why that might have been. We know for a fact that there was a lot of end times speculation going on in this fellowship. Paul addressed it in both his letters to them. Throughout history, one of the dangerous things Christians have fallen into is listening to so-called prophets make predictions about the Lord's return. In keeping with Paul's warnings, I think there was backlash in this church against all prophecy. I think they wanted to throw out the baby with the bath water. Paul says don't do that. Don't quench the Spirit; don't despise prophetic utterances.

Today, our situation is a bit different than theirs. We do have both the Old and New Testament Scriptures. The prophetic ministry today is in large part taking those Scriptures and applying them to the church or even to individual believers. God still speaks today, but he speaks primarily through the proclamation and application of his word.

**C. Test everything:** That's why he says to examine everything carefully. This is the next link in this chain. Be open to God's voice, but don't be gullible. Test it. Just because someone comes along and says he has a message from God, don't automatically buy it. Don't believe everything you hear. Examine it. Check it out.

How do we conduct this test? How do we know if a message is from God? Let me suggest a few tests. *First, there is the plain truth of Scripture.* It's not enough that they quote Scripture. You can make the Bible say just about whatever you want. But is it consistent with the way Christians have understood the Scriptures for the last 2,000 years? *Second, there is the person of Christ.* Is what they are saying consistent with what we know is true about Jesus, especially that he is fully man and fully God? Most false teaching is centered in Christ. *The third test is the Gospel of God's free and saving grace.* Does the message in any way pervert the basic truth of the Gospel, that we're saved by grace through faith? *Fourth, look at the character of the speaker.* Jesus said about false prophets, "You'll know them by their fruits." Do some fruit inspection. Are they godly, loving, kind, generous and pure? *Finally, the fifth test is the degree to which what they say edifies.* Does this message build up, encourage, strengthen? Does it bring conviction of sin and an awareness of God and a desire to obey him?

I'm reading a book right now called "Under the Banner of Heaven." It's a tragic book about two Mormon fundamentalists who believed God had told them that the end of the world was right around the corner and they were his chosen servants and one of the things he wanted them to do was kill some of the people who were opposing them.

That's exactly what they did. They killed a mother and her small old daughter.

That's an extreme case. Most of us could see through that one. But we live in a culture today that is incredibly gullible about spiritual things. And sometimes Christians are the worst culprits. Just because a guy has a plexiglas pulpit, and a Bible in hand, and a nice looking suit, and a huge crowd listening to him, doesn't mean that he speaks for God. Apply the test. Stay open to God's voice; he still speaks, but examine everything.

**D. Hold fast...abstain:** And after you've done that, what do you do? Look at the last two links in the chain: You hold fast to what is good and abstain from every form of evil.

That last phrase, "every form of evil," was translated by the King James translators as "every appearance of evil." From that many have taught that we should avoid everything that might even be construed to be evil. So a guy shouldn't wear an earring because people might get the wrong idea. Or a couple shouldn't walk into a bar even to have lemonade because of the appearance of evil. But that's not what Paul means. He is simply saying, abstain from every kind of evil.

This is such a challenging command. How many of us really take this to heart? Do you abstain from every kind of evil? There is all kinds, you know. There is evil that is packaged in religious pride. There is evil that is an act and evil that is the failure to act. There are evil thoughts and evil deeds. There is individual evil and societal evil. There is evil done to ourselves and evil done to others. Whatever form it comes in, abstain!

What should you always do in every circumstance? You should pay attention to God's worth: always rejoice, never stop praying, give thanks in every circumstance. Not only that, you should pay heed to God's word: don't quench the Spirit by despising the words of his prophets, test everything, hold fast to the good and abstain from every kind of evil. The great thing about both of these things is that they never change: Life changes but God's worth and God's word never change. Because of that, these are things we all should do all the time.

## CONCLUSION

In the White Mountains of New Hampshire, there is a 40-foot tall natural outcropping of granite ledges which looked like the profile of an old man. It's called "The Old Man of the Mountain." Two hundred years ago Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a famous story about it: "The Great Stone Face." The image was on New Hampshire license plates and quarters; it was the official state emblem. In May of 2003, in a heavy fog, the 700-ton face fell. It broke apart and slid down the mountain in the dark.

Jayne O'Conner said, "I grew up thinking that someone was watching over me. I feel a little less

watched over now." Steven Heath, one of the nearby residents, said, "It's something that has been a part of our lives forever. At first it was disbelief. No one could believe he came down. It's like a member of your family dying." Another man said, "I'm absolutely devastated by this. It makes you wonder if God is unhappy with what is going on."

There are times when it seems the most dependable, reliable presence in your life disappears into the fog in the middle of the night. The next morning, that "mountain" you've depended on is gone, and it makes you wonder if God is unhappy.

But the Bible teaches again and again there is only one Rock: God. His worth and his word will never crumble. Because of that, these are things we all should do all the time. Pay attention to his worth; pay heed to his word.

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