

1 Thess. 5:12–28 (Monday Matins)
KELC Retreat
Lutherstadt Wittenberg
September 5, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

In his final instructions to the Thessalonians, at least in this first letter to them, the Apostle Paul tells the congregation in Thessaloniki and all Christians everywhere, “Rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, give thanks in *all* circumstances.” Always, without ceasing, all. Is Paul using hyperbole here? Is he using exaggerated, over the top language to prove a point? Can anyone rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances? On our own we cannot, and we experience this in our lives. But in Christ Jesus, baptized into the name of the Triune God, we can and do rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances.

To rejoice always does not mean that we always feel happy. It does not mean to just put on a happy face and always try to see the glass half full, to be the eternal optimist. God is not telling us to ignore the sin and destruction in the world and everything that leads not to joy but to devastation. No, to rejoice always is deeper than our feelings, which constantly change. To rejoice always is to recognize that God is working everything for our good. Even as God worked through the suffering and death of Christ to bring us salvation, so does God work through crosses and trials in our lives to conform us to the image of His Son. That’s why Paul can say to the Romans, for example: “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:3–5). Paul can tell us to rejoice in our sufferings because Paul knows what

the end of suffering is. We rejoice always, because the eternal salvation we have in Jesus Christ is ours even today. We can get through the difficult times in this life knowing the eternal reward we have, the light at the end of the tunnel.

To pray without ceasing does not mean you have to stop everything else you are doing and put all other thoughts out of your head. It does not mean you have to renounce your life and enter a monastery or convent. Even there, could you really pray without ceasing? To pray without ceasing is an impossible task on our own. Man is not capable of it. Of course, we do pray often. We make a habit of praying when we wake up in the morning and when we go to bed at night. We pray before and after meals, and at church on Sundays. We pray at a church retreat where the topic is prayer. But to pray without ceasing is something only the Holy Spirit can do for us. That's why in Romans 8, Paul says that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). In Holy Baptism, "you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom 8:15). It is the Holy Spirit given to us in Baptism who is praying without ceasing in and for us, and that overflows into a life of prayer.

Finally, Paul instructs us to give thanks in all circumstances. No matter what is happening in your life, as a Christian you can be thankful. The creed outlines so well all that the Lord has done for us for which we can be thankful. You can be thankful that God created you and that He has preserved your life up to this time. You can be thankful for your redemption in Jesus Christ, that God took your salvation into His hands and resolved to bring you to life everlasting. You can be thankful for your sanctification, that the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, and kept you in the true faith. In the name of Jesus Christ we can thank God for everything (Eph 5:20), knowing that in Him we have the victory (1 Cor 15:57).

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Jesus rejoiced in His Father's will (Luke 10:21) at all times, even when God's will was His Son's suffering and death for the sins of the world. Jesus had a heavy heart, yet He still rejoiced in His sufferings. He was able to endure the cross and its shame because of the joy that was set before Him (Heb 12:2). Jesus prayed at all times. He would often withdraw to deserted places and pray (Luke 5:16), sometimes all night (Luke 6:12). In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears (Heb 5:12), and even now in glory, He always lives to make intercession on our behalf (Heb 7:25). Jesus gave thanks in all circumstances. Even on the night when He was betrayed, our LORD took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it (1 Cor 11:23–24). Jesus was thanking God for the true bread that comes down from heaven, His own, life-giving flesh. That's why the Early Church continued calling the Lord's Supper the Eucharist, which means, "thanksgiving." The Lord's Supper is a feast of thanksgiving for the Lord's work of redemption

The Christians in Thessaloniki became imitators of Paul and his companions, and imitators of the LORD, by receiving the Word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, and so the Thessalonian Christians also became examples to Christians in the entire region to imitate. Joy, prayer, and thankfulness are characteristic of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in Him, they become characteristic of all Christians as well. We rejoice in the LORD always, we pray in the Holy Spirit without ceasing, and we give thanks to God for everything and in all circumstances in Christ Jesus our LORD. To Him be all glory now and forever. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.