

Take Action!

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

Strong & Ready! (Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

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Introduction: Open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians 5. I want to bring a teaching to you tonight entitled: “Take Action!”¹

“Words can never adequately convey the incredible impact of our attitude toward life. The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it.”

- Charles Swindoll

Reading of Holy Scripture

1 Thess. 5:16-22, “Rejoice always,¹⁷ pray without ceasing,¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit.²⁰ Do not despise prophecies,²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good.²² Abstain from every form of evil.”

Paganini ... and One String

The colorful, nineteenth-century showman and gifted violinist Nicolo Paganini was celebrated for his extraordinary command of the instrument. One legend has him standing before a packed house, playing through a difficult piece of music. A full orchestra surrounded him with magnificent support. Suddenly one string on his violin snapped and hung gloriously down from his instrument. Beads of perspiration popped out on his forehead. He frowned but continued to play, improvising beautifully. To the conductor’s surprise, a second string broke. And shortly thereafter, a third. Now there were three limp strings dangling from Paganini’s violin as the master performer completed the difficult composition on the one remaining string.

The audience jumped to its feet and in good Italian fashion, filled the hall with shouts and screams, “Bravo! Bravo!” As the applause died down, the violinist asked the people to sit back down. Even though they knew there was no way they could expect an encore, they quietly sank back into their seats. He held the violin high for everyone to see. He nodded at the conductor to begin the encore and then he turned back to the crowd, and with a twinkle in his eye, he smiled and shouted, “Paganini ... and one string!”

After that he placed the single-stringed Stradivarius beneath his chin and played the final piece on one string as the audience (and the conductor) shook their heads in silent amazement. “Paganini ... and one string!” And, I might add, an attitude of fortitude.²

¹Some of the outline and many thoughts for this study come from Howell, Mark (2015-01-13). *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) B&H Publishing Group.

² Swindoll, Charles R. (2015-05-12). *Strengthening Your Grip: How to Be Grounded in a Chaotic World* (Kindle Locations 3017-3018). Worthy Publishing. Kindle Edition.

One Thing We Get to Choose

Dr. Victor Frankl, the bold, courageous Jew who became a prisoner during the Holocaust, endured years of indignity and humiliation by the Nazis before he was finally liberated. At the beginning of his ordeal, he was marched into a Gestapo courtroom. His captors had taken away his home and family, his cherished freedom, his possessions, even his watch and wedding ring. They had shaved his head and stripped his clothing off his body. There he stood before the German high command, under the glaring lights being interrogated and falsely accused. He was destitute, a helpless pawn in the hands of brutal, prejudiced, sadistic men. He had nothing. No, that isn't true. He suddenly realized there was one thing no one could ever take from him— just one. Do you know what it was? Dr. Frankl realized he still had the power to choose his own attitude. No matter what anyone would ever do to him regardless of what the future held for him, the attitude choice was his to make. Bitterness or forgiveness. To give up or to go on. Hatred or hope. Determination to endure or the paralysis of self-pity. It boiled down to “Frankl ... and one string!”³

The Attitude of the Thessalonians

As Christians, we are not commanded to feel, but told what we are in Christ. We are to live according to who we are, not according to our feelings.

Paul moves the discussion from the Thessalonians' interpersonal relationships with one another to their spiritual relationship with God. He gives a series of eight imperatives directed at each member's personal devotion to God. All these imperatives are stated in the present tense, calling for continuous action. Because they are in the imperative, they are clearly meant to be commands and not suggestions. Therefore, these are not habits that the Christian is to clearly meant to be commands and not suggestions. Therefore, these are not habits that the Christian is to practice occasionally; these are identifying characteristics that mark a Christian's life. Paul underscores this fact when he asserts, “For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:18b).

1. Be Joyful in outlook (5:16)
2. Be Persistent in prayer (5:17)
3. Be Grateful in attitude (5:18)
4. Be Sensitive to the Spirit (5:19)
5. Be Obedient to Scripture (5:20)
6. Be Committed to discernment (5:21-22)

I. **Be joyful in outlook**, (5:16)

1 Thess. 5:16, “Rejoice always.”

Swindoll Quote

I like Charles Swindoll's opinion of the importance of attitude: “This may shock you, but I believe the single most significant decision I can make on a day-to-day basis is my choice of attitude. It is more important than my past, my education, my bankroll, my successes or failures, fame or pain, what other people think of me or say about me, my circumstances, or my position. Attitude is that one thing that keeps me going or cripples my progress. It alone fuels my fire or

³ Ibid.

assaults my hope. We must admit that we spend more of our time concentrating and fretting over the things that can't be changed than we do giving attention to the one that remains, our choice of attitude."⁴

Stop and think about some of the things that suck up our attention and energy, all of them inescapable (and occasionally demoralizing).

- The tick of the clock
- The weather ... the temperature ... the wind
- People's actions and reactions, especially the criticisms
- Who won or lost the ball game / election, etc.
- Delays at airports, waiting rooms, in traffic
- Results of an biopsy
- Cost of groceries, gasoline, clothes, cars— everything
- On-the-job irritations, disappointments, workload.

Joseph Haydn's Joyful Music

Paul says, **1 Thess. 5:16**, "Rejoice always." '**Be Joyful Always.**' The great composer, Joseph Haydn, was once asked why his church music was so cheerful. He replied, 'When I think upon God, my heart is so full of joy that the notes dance and leap, as it were, from my pen, and since God has given me a cheerful heart it will be pardoned me that I serve him with a cheerful spirit.'

A Christian's joy is not a natural joy that ebbs and flows according to the circumstances that surround us, but a supernatural joy that comes from God and is rooted in our relationship with him. It is a joy that fills our hearts even in the midst of persecution. Joy was one of the marks of primitive Christianity, which amazed the heathen world and attracted men to Christ.⁵

Inside out (Spirit-filled) Joy

Given life's hurts, pains, and sorrows, one may legitimately question how a person could possibly always rejoice. The answer is not as difficult as it may appear. Joy is not something that we work on; Joy is something that we live in. We are able to experience constant joy because of the presence of God's Spirit in you (Gal 5:22). Our joy is never generated from the outside in but always from the inside out.

II. **Be persistent in prayer**, (5:17)

1 Thess. 5:17, "pray without ceasing..."

What Does it Mean to "Pray without ceasing"?

The command to "pray constantly" has also been the source of misunderstanding and confusion. Does Paul mean that you should always be praying— like 24/7? Or is he suggesting that you memorize written prayers and recite them incessantly, as is the practice of some religious groups?

What is at the heart of this imperative? We know that Paul does not have in mind that Christians should be praying at every single moment of the day. This, of course, would be

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Shenton, T. (2006). *Opening up 1 Thessalonians* (pp. 108–109). Leominster: Day One Publications.

impossible. We can also be sure that Paul is not advocating the “vain repetitions” of memorized prayers. The Bible condemns such a practice (**Mt. 6:7 KJV**).

When Paul commands that we pray, we are to keep on praying— earnestly, passionately, and expectantly. Jesus commands you to pray in this way:

Luke 11:9-10, “And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”

Mark Batterson explains why God wants you to pray in this way:

“God has determined that certain expressions of His power will only be exercised in response to prayer. Simply put, God won’t do it unless you pray for it. We have not because we ask not. . . . The greatest tragedy in life is the prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked.”⁶

If we truly expect that God will answer our prayers, then we had better learn to pray with such tenacity and persistence that we allow nothing to hinder us from bringing even our boldest requests to God.

Hebrews 4:16, “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

We are as **Eph. 1:6** says, “accepted in the Beloved One.”

We are to keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking. We are to pray “importunately.”

James 5:16 says it this way, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

III. Be **grateful** in attitude, (5:18)

1 Thess. 5:18, “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Not For All Things, but IN All Things

At first blush this appears to be a very unusual command. Given how tough life is, we might wonder how it could even be possible for a person to give thanks for everything. While we may concede the need to give thanks for some things, we would certainly question the legitimacy of giving thanks for all things. When we read the verse carefully, however, we might be surprised to learn that Paul says we are to “give thanks in all circumstances...” not FOR all circumstances.

Thankfulness in God’s Providence

This imperative speaks more about our perspective toward life than it does about our attitude toward our circumstances. To obey this command we must keep the big picture in view, and to keep the big picture in view we must understand how God’s providence works.

J. I. Packer defines providence as “The unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill, He upholds His creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory.”⁷

⁶ Batterson, *Circle Maker*, 17.

⁷ Packer, “Providence,” 990.

Calvin states it a little more succinctly when he writes, “For what is fitter or more suitable for pacifying us, than when we learn that God embraces us in Christ so tenderly, that he turns to our advantage and welfare everything that befalls us?”⁸

All Things Work Together For Good

Romans 8:28-29 explains the doctrine of God’s providence: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

We can thank God in all circumstances because He is using them as a chisel to conform us to the image of His glorious Son!

Providence affirms that no detail is irrelevant or insignificant. God is using everything for our ultimate good and His everlasting glory (Rom 8:28). Hence, to “give thanks in everything” is to affirm our resolute belief that God is overseeing every detail of our lives. Paul, by no accident, concludes this verse by reminding us that such an attitude is “God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:18b). What more could please the heavenly Father than for Him to know that we trust Him so much that we are willing to live each moment in a constant state of thankfulness?

IV. Be sensitive to the Spirit, (5:19)

1 Thess. 5:19, “Do not quench the Spirit.”

Don’t Put Out the Spirit’s Fire

Paul’s command, “Do not quench [stifle] the Spirit,” could be translated, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.” The Greek word translated “stifle” is used in several places in the New Testament to speak of putting out a fire (Mark 9: 48; Heb 11: 34). In a very simple but straightforward manner, Paul is commanding the church to avoid any activity that will thwart the Spirit’s work.

The Spirit and Unction

What Paul is talking about is what Martyn Lloyd Jones called the Spirit’s “unction.” Paul does not want the Thessalonians to **smother or suppress the supernatural workings of God’s Spirit** in their midst by being insensitive to what God is doing.

He is likely referring to an expression of the gift of prophecy, the forth-telling or foretelling of God’s word, which is a burning flame in the church and must not be extinguished. When the gift is used properly it strengthens, encourages and comforts the church.⁹

Oswald Chambers Quote

Listen to Oswald Chambers: “The voice of the Spirit of God is as gentle as a summer breeze— so gentle that unless you are living in complete fellowship and oneness with God, you will never hear it. The sense of warning and restraint that the Spirit gives comes to us in the most amazingly gentle ways. And if you are not sensitive enough to detect His voice, you will quench

⁸ Calvin, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 297.

⁹ Shenton, 110.

it, and your spiritual life will be impaired. This sense of restraint will always come as a “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12), so faint that no one except a saint of God will notice it.”

He goes on to say that the thing that quenches the Spirit is idolatry in the heart, and the Spirit’s grief will crush whatever you are hanging on to.

He says: “Suppose God brings you to a crisis and you almost endure it, but not completely. He will engineer the crisis again, but this time some of the intensity will be lost. You will have less discernment and more humiliation at having disobeyed. If you continue to grieve His Spirit, there will come a time when that crisis cannot be repeated, [and a new trial will begin, but this one more difficult, in order to separate you from your idol.] But if you will go on through the crisis, your life will become a hymn of praise to God. Never become attached to anything that continues to hurt God. For you to be free of it, God must be allowed to hurt whatever it may be.”

Do not stifle the supernatural fire of the Holy Spirit in you! You might do this through self-righteousness or overly eloquent prayers. You may do it by out and out sin. Do not do it. Instead listen for and obey the gentle voice of the Spirit.

V. **Be obedient to Scripture**, (5:20)

1 Thess. 5:20, “Do not despise prophecies...”

Foretelling vs. Forthtelling

Walter Kaiser notes that prophecy can mean either “foretelling” or “forth-telling.” The former speaks to the specific function of the prophet who predicted the future activities of God. The latter speaks to ongoing activity of the prophet who spoke as “a preacher of righteousness to his generation and his culture.”¹⁰

More than two thirds of all prophetic activity in the Bible is forth-telling rather than foretelling.

Commitment to the Word

The church will only be as strong as its commitment to preach, teach, and obey Scripture. Paul knew that the health of the church would ultimately be determined both by its commitment to preach and by its desire to honor God’s Word. Although written more than 30 years ago, Walter Kaiser’s sobering words are as relevant today as when they were first written:

“It is no secret that Christ’s Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, “junk food”; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church.”¹¹

The church will only be as strong as its commitment to preach, teach, and obey Scripture.

¹⁰ Kaiser, *The Christian and the Old Testament*, 128).

¹¹ Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 7– 8.

VI. Be **committed** to discernment, (5:21-22)

1 Thess. 5:21-22, “Do not despise prophecies,²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good.²² Abstain from every form of evil.”

Examine for Authenticity

He commands the church to put everything to the test. The word translated “test” means “examine closely for the purpose of determining authenticity.” Some of its many uses in the New Testament include testing to see what pleases the Lord (Eph 5: 10), testing to evaluate the genuineness of faith (2 Cor 13: 5; 1 Pet 1: 7), and testing to determine the nature of God’s will (Rom 12: 2). Paul may very well be referring to testing the various “prophecies” that were circulating among the Thessalonians (2 Thess 2: 1-2; see also 1 Cor 12: 10). If this is the case, then he is commanding them not to dismiss such messages summarily but to evaluate their truthfulness carefully. Calvin agrees with this view when he writes,

“Paul . . . prohibits them from condemning anything without first examining it . . . [and] he admonishes them to exercise judgment, before receiving what may be brought forward as undoubted truth.¹²”

Put Everything to the Test!

While there is much credence to this view, seeing Paul’s statement as a command to put everything to the test seems best. For the believer, all of life must be viewed through the lens of Scripture. Before making any decision, accepting any teaching, choosing any course of action, or setting off in any direction, the first question that every Christian must ask is, What does the Bible say? Those things that prove to be “good” must be embraced. Those things that prove to be “evil” must be rejected (5: 21-22). The word translated “stay away” has the sense of “abstain or hold oneself away from.” Paul used the word when he instructed the Thessalonians to “abstain” from sexual immorality.

¹² Calvin, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 300.