



Sermon – 11/27/2022
Patrick McGinty

Verses Covered

1 Thessalonians 5:16 - 18

Well, howdy! That was pretty good, but I was expecting maybe a little better after that win over LSU last night. Let's try that one more time. I said, howdy! That's what I'm talking about. Hey, Central family. It is such a joy and honor to be here with y'all this morning. Whether you're a first time guest joining us online, a long time member, or anything in between, I want to start by saying, welcome home. We are so glad that you're here. I love the local church. But I especially love this local church. As we've gone through this past week and celebrated Thanksgiving, I have had to stop several times just to thank the Lord for Central Church. For the men, the women, the children who gather together week after week to worship the Lord in song, to open God's word, to live in community, and to proclaim the name of Jesus like brothers and sisters. That is something worthy of our praise. That we get to gather together in a place like this and open God's word. So let's do that now. If you've got your Bible, would you turn with me to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. If you're wondering where that's at, it's going to be in the back of your Bible right 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. Right before 1 Thessalonians chapter 6. In all seriousness, it's right after Colossians, right before 2 Thessalonians. And as you're turning there, let me just challenge you this morning to lock in. If you're like me, it'd be really easy to zone out this morning. Maybe you're still coming out of that Thanksgiving food coma. Got the heavy eyelids. You're already thinking about that glorious Sunday afternoon, post-Thanksgiving, post-church nap. Don't even need to worry about being woken up early to watch the Cowboys. They already took care of business. How about them Cowboys? Also want to, say maybe you're like me and you turned off your notifications, to be present with family the past couple days. If you're like me, it's been really hard not to look at them. But there's this growing anxiety about that to do list that will be waiting for me tomorrow morning. Or maybe you're just really excited about Christmas and you're already thinking about the Christmas music and decorations and you're ready to debate anyone who would say there's a better Christmas movie than Elf, unless of course, it's grandma and she says, It's a Wonderful Life. That's an acceptable answer. But look, I don't know where you're at mentally this morning, but I do know physically that you're here at Central Church. So I just want to challenge you, lock in for the next 30 minutes or so. See what God has to say for us today through His word which comes from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, starting in verse 16. Paul writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸giving thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God and Christ Jesus for you.

Church, I'm going to read that one more time because it's short and it's powerful. I want you to listen to the words.

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸giving thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God and Christ Jesus for you.

Would you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, I want to come before You this morning, this Thanksgiving weekend and I just want to start by saying thank You. Thank You for this day that You've given us, for the gift of being able to gather together as a church body. Thank You for the opportunity to worship You in song and to open Your word. Lord, I thank You for the many blessings that You have given us, but I thank You most of all for Jesus Christ. For His sacrifice on the cross. For the forgiveness that is offered to each one of us as a free gift that we don't deserve. And Lord, if there's anyone in here this morning who doesn't yet know Jesus as their Savior, would You let today be the day of their salvation. Would You work even now in their hearts and prepare them to receive Your word this morning. And Father, I pray for the rest of us who are believers to do Your will even when it's challenging. Lord, would You help us to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances? And if you would, I'd like to ask you to take a moment in the quietness of your own heart and just pray, ask the Lord to remove any distraction, to prepare your heart to receive His word this morning. And if you would, please pray for the those around you. Ask the Lord to knit our hearts together in love as a body and to use us for His glory in whatever way He pleases right here in Bryan/College Station. Father, we love You. We're grateful for You. We pray these things in Jesus name. Amen.

So I don't know about you guys, but Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays of the year. You've got the family, the food, the friends, the football, that post-Thanksgiving meal nap. Like it just hits different. They all combine together and make for a varsity level holiday. It's a great way to kick off the holiday season. I heard one person describe Thanksgiving as the John the Baptist of holidays. It is the predecessor to an even greater one to come. But it's pretty awesome itself. And I would have to agree with that. When it comes to the holiday season, one of the things that has stood out to me this year is it seems to me that there are a lot of people who are passionately discussing the appropriate time to start celebrating Christmas. You've got, in one camp, the crew that's post-Halloween, and the other camp that's post-Thanksgiving. And just interesting that it's a heated topic to discuss. And I'll say, topic. I don't think it's a debate or a question because there is a right answer, church. And I'm just going to start this morning with a little bit of truth and let you in on the secret. Put my cards on the table. If you are team post-Halloween, I've got a word for you this morning. Keep pressing on. You're doing it right. If you're team post-Thanksgiving, I still love you. We're going to respect your incorrect opinion. I'm just going to take a moment to update your number in my phone to Scrooge or Grinch. And I'm going to add you to my prayer list that maybe next Thanksgiving you will see the light. But in all seriousness, I've been spending a lot of time thinking about Thanksgiving leading up to today. Excited to dive into it from our text this morning. Because I think that we as Christians, as a church, have an incredible opportunity to point people to the cross in the midst of this crazy culture by the way that we live. What do I

mean this crazy culture? Well, if you look around and just observe what takes place, you probably have an idea of what I mean. But there's certainly not a heart posture of thankfulness as the default. Instead it's fear and outrage and anger and anxiety and isolation. And sadly, it's not just the culture where we see a lack of thankfulness. Oftentimes we see that in the church as well. And if you're like me, maybe every now and then you find your heart trending towards that place of grumbling, complaining. It's a, maybe, a heart level issue. I'm sure there's some of you sitting out there this morning thinking like, man, this guest preacher this morning is a little dull. It's like he still think he's in his yell leader days walking back and forth. I miss Pastor Phillip. Or maybe you're here and you see a guest that's in your spot and you're saying like, "Don't they know this is my spot? How dare they take that spot." Or maybe you're like me throughout the football season. You've seen people and you find yourself thinking, he couldn't catch a cold much less a football. They're 18 to 22 year old kids playing a game. It's OK. It shouldn't ruin our weekend. Now if they win, that can fire us up. But don't let it ruin your weekend. You see, there's a tendency when we find ourselves in that place of grumbling and complaining towards a hardened heart. Towards being hypocritical, towards being cynical. That might lead us, not to a spot of rejoicing, but a spot of being miserable. I reminded of what Charles Spurgeon said on this topic. And I want to read it for y'all this morning. He said this, if I could find where in my notes I put this, it would be something I would give thanks for. OK. Maybe I deleted that note. But all that to say, he said in essence that Christians are allowed to be happy. We can show joy. That's not something that we should be afraid to do. But maybe it is not something that is a heart level issue. Maybe you actually do have something serious going on in your life. I mean if you look around a place this size, a room this big, there are going to be people battling some hard things. Walking through divorce, job loss, that terminal illness, maybe anxiety, depression, rejection, addiction, chronic pain. The list could go on and on. We live in the midst of a broken world. This should not surprise us. When we look at our text this morning, we see that Paul gives us three helpful commands, thanksgiving being one of them. That help us understand what it looks like to live as a Christian, to follow the will of God. And if you were to ask me to sum up my message this morning in one sentence, it would be this. God's will is that we rejoice, pray, and give thanks in all circumstances and at all times. It's nothing profound. Pretty straight forward. It comes straight from the text. But I want to say it again. God's will is that we rejoice, pray, and give thanks in all circumstances and at all times. Over 100 years ago, theologian James Denney of Scotland called these the standing orders of the Gospel. I love that language. And one of the reasons why I think it stuck around for so long is because it's helpful in giving us an idea of what Paul means here. They are standing orders because they apply to every believer at every time and in every circumstance. The Greek makes this clear. These imperatives, these commands are in the present tense meaning that they should be followed continuously. Now I'm going to be completely transparent with y'all this morning. That sounds really hard. In fact, it sounds almost impossible at first glance. I've spent a lot of time praying and meditating and spending time with this text over the course of this week. And I'd feel a lot more comfortable if it said, rejoice whenever you're happy. Pray whenever you need something. Give thanks when something good has happened. I could do that. That's not going to be an issue, right? It's these adverbs that make it hard. Always. Without ceasing. In all circumstances. Like, are you serious, Paul? That sounds impossible. Yet you're saying it's the will of God. As a college minister, one of the things I love getting to do is pour into our college students. And oftentimes our college students are wrestling with this idea of, what is God's will for my life? I think it's just something about the age and the stage that they're in where they're uniquely positioned to grapple with this question. And I hear them asking themselves, like, who should I marry? What job should I take? Where should I move? Should I be this major or that

major? Should I join this student organization or that student organization? Should I go on the study abroad or the internship? There's this tendency to over-complicate things trying to search for this Damascus road level clarity that most of the time doesn't come. And there's a tendency to focus on what God wants me to do instead of who God wants me to be and how God wants me to live. If you're looking for God's will in your life this morning, I've got good news. We see it right here in the text. We're to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. These commands are not rocket science. You don't need to be Elon Musk to understand them. You don't need to have that fine Texas A&M education to understand them. Even our Longhorn friends down the road in Austin can understand these commands. They are simple in the sense that they are understandable. They are difficult in the sense, it's hard to live this out. And why is it hard? Well, I mean there's times when we aren't happy, where we don't feel like praying, when we look around and think, "These circumstances are terrible. How can I possibly give thanks right now?" Just think about your own life this morning. There's probably something in your heart that you'd say makes these commands sound impossible. And I'm up here saying they're simple yet difficult. It reminds me of my philosophy at Thanksgiving and Christmas. I try to limit my weight gain, I know there's going to be at least like a buffer of 2 to 3 pounds per holiday. But if I want to limit it to anything more than that, it's a simple process to follow, yet difficult to execute. Simple in the sense that you just need to limit the amount of calories you eat and do a little bit of exercise and you'll be good to go. If you were thinking about getting a personal training in the new year, like I just saved you the time and money. That's the formula. But why do people get a personal trainer? Because it's difficult to execute. Especially when you've got Juju's chocolate pie sitting on the counter. Or you've got grandma's homemade brownies with some Creamy Creation ice cream on top. Sorry Ricky, we love Blue Bell as well. It's another acceptable alternative. Or maybe it's the homemade sweet potato casserole or Nana's homemade rolls. It gets really hard to say, no, when you are facing those delicious food choices. And so these demands from Paul sound impossible. And you might be wondering, "Well, what do we do with it?" And I want to break it down for us this morning, one by one, piece by piece, verse by verse, starting in verse 16. But before we do that, I want to call our attention to an important phrase there at the end of verse 18, in Christ Jesus. I'll say it again, we must be in Christ Jesus. Without that unity in Christ, without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, these commands actually would be impossible. We would not get anywhere close to them. So what does it mean to be in union with Christ? Well, it means that you are trusting in Him as your Lord and Savior. We can trust in Him because He's lived the perfect life free from sin. And He went to the cross, nailed to the cross, dying a painful, humiliating death that I deserved to die. That you deserved to die. And he was placed in a tomb as if death had won. But we know the story doesn't end there, right? He ended up raising from the dead. He conquered the grave making it possible for all who believe not to perish but to experience eternal life. If you're in there this morning, you're not trusting in Jesus. I want to invite you to close your eyes real quick. In fact, I want to ask everyone to close your eyes real quick. If you're here and you are trusting in Jesus as your Savior, I want you to take a moment and just pray, by name, for someone in your life. Either sitting here with you or that you know. I want you to pray for their salvation. If you're in here this morning and you're not trusting in Jesus, I just want you to ask, "Lord, open my eyes to the Gospel this morning. Prepare my heart to receive this message and give me the courage to respond." You can open your eyes.

And let's break this down starting with, rejoice always. Now before we go any further, I feel the need to address the elephant in the room, which is we are not always happy. Here's where my

Charles Spurgeon quote was. I butchered it earlier so I want to say it. Oh, dear friends. You may rejoice. God has laid no embargo upon rejoicing. He puts no restriction upon happiness. Do believe it that you are permitted to be happy. Do believe there is no ordinance of God commanding you to be miserable. That hits hard for me. I'm reminded of a friend of mine at a previous church. We were living in close community and in this community we would often ask each other those deep, heart-level questions to see how we were doing. And he was one of those guys who always was filled with this sense of, things are going great, the Lord has been so kind to me, I'm so blessed, I've got no issues, nothing's wrong. When underneath the surface, he was actually struggling and hurting. His life was heading on a trajectory that was dangerous. Yet he was afraid to admit it. He thought it would be sinful to just acknowledge the fact that he was struggling, that he was going through some trials. And then one day his life was at a crisis point and he opened up about how bad things had become. And what could have been addressed as a minor problem with minimal pain had become a major issue that would alter the course of his life. And if you find yourself here this morning and you are struggling and people don't know about it, I want to tell you in essence the same thing that we told him. But before I do that, I want to invite you to come to Re:gen that meets up here on Sunday nights at 5:00. It's the recovery ministry of this church where we see story after story of God healing and changing lives. But I also want you to know that we are with you, we are for you. Like, Central Church, we say that because we want you to know that here you are loved. I don't care who you are or what you've been, you are loved. And why do we love you? Because he first loved us. I want you to believe that this morning. But I also want to challenge you. Don't go through those struggles, those hardships and isolation and deception, putting on this smile that would make people think everything is OK.

And the second thing I'd do is I'd point you to the Scriptures. We only need to look at the life of Jesus, the life of Paul to realize Paul is not calling us here to never be unhappy, to always have a smile plastered on our face. Think about John chapter 11, verse 35. It says, Jesus wept. Or Hebrews chapter 5, verse 7. Jesus prayed with loud cries and tears. You can think of Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 6, verse 10. Text speaks of being sorrowful yet always rejoicing. Or Romans chapter 12, rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. The text doesn't say, rejoice with those who rejoice and to those who weep say, suck it up, get your act together. This isn't how we Christians are supposed to live. It doesn't say that. Like, think about how hurtful, unloving, cold-hearted, disingenuous that would be. So if Paul doesn't mean that we are supposed to be happy at all times, what exactly does he mean here? I think it's important for us to consider the context. Remember that Paul is writing to a group of relatively new believers who are facing persecution. He had just finished exhorting them not to repay evil with evil. And I'm reminded of James chapter 1, verses 2 to 4. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. So I think Paul is helping them understand in a way that applies to all of us today that when we encounter these difficulties of life, these trials, this persecution, we can respond either by slipping into self-pity and despair and sadness. Or we can respond by fixing our eyes on Jesus and because of Him, rejoice. Paul tells us in Philippians chapter 4 that we are to rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice. Notice that phrase, in the Lord, is key here. That doesn't mean that we should be oblivious to the circumstances we find ourselves in; but it means that regardless of what is going on in our life, we can fix our eyes on Jesus and in Him rejoice. One pastor said it this way. He said, "Rejoicing always is a conscious attitude of contentment, hope, and happiness that comes from deliberately focusing on Christ and the eternal treasures that we have received freely from

Him. OK, that sounds good. How can we do this practically? Well, first and foremost, we've got to saturate our hearts and our minds with Scripture, with God's word. The simple act of spending time in God's word every single day will change your world, will change everything. It's convicting for me to think about how easy it is to scroll through Twitter or social media. How I can spend an hour of my day doing that. And yet when it comes to spending time in God's word, how easy it is for me to be distracted. And how many of us, if we're honest this morning, aren't spending the time in God's word that we should. And just be honest with yourself. As I think about this, I'm reminded of a friend of ours who's a missionary that we supported, just came back from Southeast Asia, and we had supper with a couple of weeks ago. And she described these two women from the rural community that she served in without running water or electricity who got access to God's word in their own language for the first time. And how it lit them up, how they were so excited to be able to read God's word, spend time in God's word. Like it brought them so much joy. And as our friend described what Christianity and church was like in America, they were confused. They asked, "What do you mean you only gather once a week. Is there some sort of regulation that doesn't allow you to gather more? What do you mean you don't spend time studying God's word all day." Like, they just couldn't wrap their heads around the fact that we've got God's word so freely accessible to us. A book about the greatest person who has ever lived that changes everything, and yet we approach it so casually. So if you ask yourself, how can I rejoice always, spending time in God's word, meditating on it. Like, if you're doing that, you can't help but be moved to joy. Just think about what God's word tells us. Perhaps the most popular verse in the Bible, John chapter 3, verse 16. For God so loved the world, right, that He gave His one and only Son. That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Like, if you sit and meditate on the truths of Scripture, you can't help but be moved to joy.

A second idea, we've got to completely surrender our lives, our plans, to the Lord. I was having lunch about a week and a half ago with a football player on the Texas A&M team and he said to me, "Patrick, I am living my dream right now." I wanted to say, and the dreams of a bunch of other people as well. As he plays college football at Texas A&M. He's been working hard for this his entire life. And he said, "What God's taught me is I realized that if I was finding my identity, my value, my purpose in the fact that I'm on the Texas A&M football team, I'd be the most depressed person alive." I thought, that's an incredible amount of maturity for a young man to have. And he went further and said, "I've been praying, I want the Lord to use my life in a way that has an eternal impact." He said, "I want to be proud about Texas A&M my whole life. But that's not what I want my identity to be." And as he started praying, he sensed the Lord putting the mission field on his heart an unreached people group that would cause him to move away from many of the things that we all take comfort in. Our families, our lifestyles, his work. Yet he's got open arms and open hands and says, "Lord, I will go wherever You want me to go." So when you are saturating your heart and mind with God's word, when you have surrendered your plans to the Lord, you can rejoice always.

And the third thing is really a two for one because it leads us to our second point. That we are to pray without ceasing. Again, a little bit of explanation is needed here. Most people get to this and they think it's hyperbole, it's unrealistic. So, I want to start by addressing what Paul means. Is he asking us to spend every second of every minute of every day with hands clasped, eyes closed, head bowed in prayer? No, he's not. Again, all we need to do is look at the life of Jesus as an example for this. And so as we process this, I think it's helpful to consider the Greek and the phrase that is translated. Without ceasing was the same phrase that was used to describe a hacking

cough. You know the type of cough I'm talking about. Many of our kids have these right now. There's just been this frequent persistent cough that isn't going away. And even though nothing seems to be wrong, you might be thinking, "I don't know why these people brought their kid to church whose coughing like this this morning." It's that frequent persistent cough that isn't going away. I heard one pastor describe it as the idea of a dripping faucet versus a running faucet. So, we aren't to be praying non-stop, but we should be in this frequent, consistent communication with God throughout the day. And you might be thinking, like, that sounds good. But there's just no way I've got the time throughout the day to keep going to the Lord in prayer. I've got too much to do. And I can relate to you. I'm in the trenches. I've got a beautiful wife and four wonderful kids. I've got work and volunteering and family stuff, trying to work off the Thanksgiving meal or read. Everything that falls into those buckets takes up a lot of time. It's easy for me to slip into a heart posture of saying, "I don't have time for this." And I've got to remind myself of what Martin Luther once said. He said, "I've got so much to do today. I've got to spend my first 3 hours in prayer so that I can get it all done. Like, that's a quote that just hits hard. Gets me every time. And you might be thinking, "That's easy for you to say as someone who is working in full time ministry but it wouldn't work for me in my context." And prior to coming to Central, I worked in the secular world. I understand the stress and the deadlines and the dynamics of a secular workplace. And if that's where God has called you to serve, like, praise the Lord. You have an incredible opportunity to point people to the cross by the way that you live in the workplace. And here's the deal. When we're in this constant communication with God through prayer, you don't need to do this long elaborate, drawn out prayer session. Like, if you were waiting for the perfect time to pray where you're free from distraction, free from demands on your schedule, we would never get there. You can pray short prayers throughout the day. You're heading into a stressful meeting, you can pray. You're heading to lunch with your non-believing co-worker, you can pray. You're on your commute to work in the morning, you can pray. You're working a stressful deal, you can pray. Like, we can go to the Lord in prayer throughout the day. It might be helpful to visualize this idea of constant communication through the lens of marriage. My wife, Katherine, and I just celebrated our first year of marriage. So, it's safe to say we've got it all figured out at this point. In all seriousness, we've got a lot to learn. But it's been an incredible year. A ten out of ten the first year of marriage. And one of the reasons why is because of communication. But if communication was just waiting until we were free from distractions and sitting down formerly and there were no kids interrupting us, it's like we would never have that communication. But it's constant throughout the day. It's the words that we use, our body language, our facial expressions, our silence. We just are communicating with one another throughout the day. Have you ever been around one of those married couples that's been together for a long time? And it's as if they know what the other person is going to say. They can finish each other's sentences. It can be maddening at times, especially if you're playing a game like Catch Phrase where you've got to describe one word without saying that word. And so they've got some inside joke from a trip like 10 years ago where they know the word and they just start dominating like one after another. Because after years of marriage, they've started to think alike. Now I want you to imagine what would it be like if we could have that type of relationship with the Lord. Here's the great news. You can. We can have that constant relationship with the Lord. But many people will say, "Well, what would I talk about with the Lord all day? Like, I'd run out of things to say. I'd run out of things to ask for." And if that's you, I submit to you this morning that prayer is more than simply bringing requests before God. Like, yes, there is a time for that. But I challenge you to think about it as having a conversation with the Lord. This past week I got to see an example of this when our daughter was having a really difficult time falling to sleep one

night. You know, the thing I'm talking about where you can't fall asleep and so then you start thinking about how tired you're going to be the next day. And so then you're trying to fall asleep even harder and you just get in your head and you're not able to fall asleep. And so the next night, when it came to be bed time, she was worried that that might happen again. And so as she prayed, she just talked to the Lord in the sweetest, most conversational way, sharing what was on her heart, asking for help. And you could just see this peace come over her. She was able to fall asleep quickly. And it was this reminder of what conversational prayer looks like.

And so, practically, how can we pray without ceasing? Well, first and foremost, we're to start our day in prayer. Again, it doesn't have to be a long, drawn out prayer. But I challenge you, start every single day in prayer. It can be 15/30 seconds. But let that be the foundation upon which you build your day. Just talking to the Lord in prayer. The other thing I'd encourage you to do as your start your day is spend time in God's word. And one of the best ways to interact with God's word is just by praying God's word back to Him. You're never going to run out of things to pray if you're praying God's word. And in doing so, you hide it in your heart and in your mind in a way that helps you rejoice always throughout the day. So start your day in prayer. Pray the word. And then pray short prayers throughout the day. Like, if someone comes to mind, thank the Lord for them. Pray for them. If you've got a busy meeting or schedule or day, like, pray. Ask the Lord for help. One of the things the Lord convicted me of, I used to tell people, "I'll pray for you often." And I had every intention to do so and then I'd see them a week later and realize, "I forgot to pray for this person." And so I started putting reminders in my phone that would go off throughout the day so that I can stop and thank the Lord for whoever He has brought to my mind, into my life. I challenge you to do the same.

And then the fourth thing here, I would challenge you to learn more about prayer. We spend time studying the Bible and learning theology and learning about Christian ethics, but how often do we spend learning about prayer. One of the things I'm so grateful for about this church is we actually took the time to go through a friend of mine, Jed Coppinger, called 21 Days to Childlike Prayer. As we went through that prayer focus, we saw the Lord moving in incredible ways. I'd recommend as you head into the new year, like, pick that up. Form, cultivate, that habit of going to the Lord in prayer. Another great resource would be a book called, A Praying Life by Paul Miller. This can change your life. We're to rejoice always. We're to pray without ceasing.

Then we're to give thanks in all circumstance. So, again, need to qualify this. Paul is not saying to give thanks for all circumstances. It's like, obviously I'm not going to go and give thanks for the tragedy of war, injustice, poverty that's taking place in this world. But he's saying, if you find yourself in those circumstances, you can give thanks. This is similar to joy. We don't find our ability to give thanks based on the circumstances around us because of who Jesus is, because of what Jesus has done, and because of our relationship with Him. And thanksgiving has been front of mind this week for me. And as I've thought about it, one of the things that I've noticed is it's one of the holidays that hasn't been overrun by politics. It hasn't been renamed, Happy Holidays. There seems to be this broad consensus across our country that it's a day to stop, give thanks, spend time with family and friends. Businesses are closed. Schools are out. We're generally moving a little slower after that feast and we're just stopping to give thanks for the things in our life. But it gets really interesting to me when we ask ourselves, "Well, who are people thanking?" G. K. Chesterton once said that the worst moment for an atheist is one where he's really thankful and yet has no one to thank. Look, it'd be really easy for me to stand up here and blast atheists on

this topic, to point out the flawed and faulty logic. But I'm not going to do that because I wonder how many of us as Christians aren't thinking about thanksgiving in the way the Bible thinks about thanksgiving. I mean, we as believers know to whom we should give thanks. We know that if we look at our lives and at the things that we have, we have them because the Lord has allowed it. We can give thanks to that. Yet, oftentimes, our pride tends to look at our circumstances and say, "I've got this success because of my hard work, because of my effort, because of my intellect." I would say that a Christian living with a misunderstanding of Gospel thanksgiving is a far greater problem than an atheist who doesn't understand the Gospel at all. Look, it's easy for us to give thanks when things are going well, right? You just got that promotion, you just got that positive pregnancy test after years of infertility. You just got that clean bill of health from the doctor. It's easy to give thanks in those moments. But what about when things are not going well? Because it's not a matter of if but a matter of when the hardship's going to come. When the struggle is going to come.

So, practically, what does it look like? How can we give thanks in those circumstances? And first and foremost, we must be focused on Jesus. Remembering that He is with us. He's for us. And He knows what it's like to be hurt, betrayed, lied to, slandered about, beaten, mocked, scorned. He knows what it's like to weep. Church, we don't serve a distant God who's unable to empathize with our grief and pain and tragedy. We serve a God who is near, who loves you. He might take you out of the circumstance that you're in, but if He doesn't, you can rest on the fact that He is never going to leave you. He is never going to forsake you. And when we grasp that reality, that the Savior of the world, that King Jesus has saved us, that He's with us, that He's for us, that He's not going to leave us. It doesn't matter what circumstances we're in. If we are focused on that, we will be able to give thanks. And secondly, it's really important for us to grow in our understanding of God's sovereignty. This idea that He's got the right and the power to do as He pleases. I'm currently on this journey with Gunner, our 13-year-old. A five year journey of what it's like to walk from boyhood to manhood. We are going to the Scripture most school mornings and we're currently looking at circumstances from the book of Genesis in the life of Joseph. If you'll remember, Joseph had some pretty tough circumstances that he found himself in, right? His brothers wanted to kill him until he ended up being sold into slavery. He ends up in prison where he is ending up facing temptation from Potiphar's wife. And he obeys God and resists that temptation. He asks the cupbearer to go to Pharaoh and mention him so that he might be released. But the cupbearer forgets. And then there's one day where he interprets one of Pharaoh's dreams and gets elevated to this position of influence and authority and power. Ultimately ends up getting reconnected with his father, reconciling with his brothers. But after Jacob dies, his brothers are understandably concerned about what Joseph's going to do. What sort of retaliation he might take to make up for what they'd done for him. And as he weeps, he says, "Am I in God's place." And he gives us a glimpse of how he was able to push on in the midst of such difficult circumstances. In Genesis chapter 50, verse 20, he says, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. To bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today." Joseph saw God as sovereign. He knew God was good in the midst of his circumstances. And look, I know it is easier said than done. It can be really difficult in the midst of pain and suffering and hurt and tragedy to remember that. Which is why we've got to build this foundation in our hearts now. If all we're doing in the midst of those trials is focusing on our circumstances, it will be really hard to give thanks. But if we can focus on Jesus, we'll be in a position where we can give thanks. We know the Christian life is going to be difficult. Jesus said, "In this world you will face tribulation." But He also said, "I have overcome the world." Let us be a church with that type of

eternal perspective so that when things get difficult, our response, our heart posture points people to Jesus as the only explanation for why we can give thanks and keep pressing on in the midst of hardship.

So that's it. It's simple. God's will is that we rejoice, pray, and give thanks in all circumstances and at all times. As we close, I want to call our attention back to the end of verse 18. In Christ Jesus. I want to close here. If you are with us this morning and you've never put your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, let me invite you to do that. In just a moment we're going to have a time of response. It'll be the best decision that you've ever made. It will make it possible for you to rejoice always and pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all circumstances because of what He has done on the cross for us. If you're here this morning as a believer, I want to just encourage you as you head back into your week leading up to Christmas to keep pressing on, to rejoicing always, to pray without ceasing, to giving thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, I thank You this morning for Your word for this church and for these commands that You've given us through Paul. Father, I pray that You would help us be a church, a people that can rejoice always, that can pray without ceasing, that can give thanks in all circumstances. Not because of our own efforts or strengths, but because we are completely dependent on You. We are in Christ Jesus and we are leaning on Him for the strength. Father, I pray for those in our midst who are wrestling through God's will for their life. Will this be an encouragement to them and I also pray for those who are in the midst of difficult circumstances. Lord, would You just bring them a sense of peace that surpasses all understanding from the comfort knowing that You are with them and for them. Father, we love You and we're grateful for You. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.