

*November 7, 2021 sermon: "Standing Orders of the Church"*

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Sermon Text

1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:12-18

**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; **13** esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. **14** And we urge you, beloved to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. **15** See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. **16** Rejoice always, **17** pray without ceasing, **18** give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

"Standing Orders of the Church"

On Monday of this past week in the Christian Church Calendar we recognized All Saint's Day. Often in worship services during a time of intercessory prayer or perhaps in Moravian congregations that decide to pray the liturgy for All Saints those names of the people who have entered the Church Triumphant since the previous year are shared aloud. It is a time for us to pause and reflect upon their lives and to give God thanks for their lives among us.

The month of November is often very busy in the church year as we look towards Thanksgiving and the Advent season. In thinking of Thanksgiving, a young man one told the story about his father who was a minister. His father had announced ten sermons that he was going to preach in the coming weeks. Among them was one he never forgot. His father announced the sermon title, which was, "The Worst Sin." He said it captured his imagination and that of the congregation. They speculated on what it might be. Some said it was unbelief. Others said it was greed. Still others said it might be something more serious like murder. But they were all wrong. When the day came to give that sermon, his father announced that the worst sin was "ingratitude."

Paul was someone who throughout his ministry always gave thanks to God. Paul tells us three important things to do in our Scripture passage this morning from 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians:

1. Be joyful always
2. Pray continually
3. Give thanks in all circumstances

I have found these verses from the fifth chapter of 1 Thessalonians to be helpful as they provide simple directions for living. These verses have often been called the "standing orders of the church." We can see these verses are imperative in mood, some might say they are forceful commands directing our attitudes and actions. This use of the imperative almost forces us to regard rejoicing, praying and giving thanks as things other than just feelings. I would like to offer some suggestions on how we can apply these instructions in our lives.

First, Paul writes for us to rejoice always. One of the most difficult things for us to do is rejoice always. There are some days when we don't feel like rejoicing especially when certain things happen to us. When a loved one is suffering or has passed away, where do we find the happiness? When a decision is made that we do not like, it's tough to find that silver lining in the dark clouds. When someone hurts us deliberately, how easy is it for us to rejoice when we have been wronged? I think for us to rejoice always there must be a willingness to look at the bright side of things to look at our glasses as half full rather than half empty. Our attitudes dictate how we will respond to everything in our lives. A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather a person with a certain set of attitudes. Rejoicing always means looking at the good things in our lives and celebrating them rather than bemoaning what we don't have. Throughout Scripture we are called to joy and to rejoice in our sufferings. Years ago I accepted the fact that we cannot be happy at all times. Despite this fact I find comfort that there can always be a basic joy in life and this joy is found through our relationship with Jesus Christ.

The second thing Paul instructs is to pray without ceasing. When I think of praying without ceasing, I think of the analogy of being in love with someone. When someone is in love with another, there is an unceasing awareness of the other. This does not mean that one is constantly engaged in thinking of the other person, but the presence of the other person is constant. All decisions are made with that loved one in mind. We can pray to God no matter what the circumstance. The late author and Biblical scholar J.B. Lightfoot emphasized this point by saying, "It is not in the moving of the lips, but in the elevation of the heart to God, that the essence of prayer consists." We always can find comfort and strength in prayer. A German proverb says the following: "When in prayer you clasp your hands, God opens his."

The third and final instruction Paul brings to our attention is that we are to give thanks in all circumstances. This command grows out of the first two. Joy and unceasing prayer will bring us a constant stream of gratitude. One of the themes that we find throughout Scripture centers upon the belief that God is at work for good in the lives of people. Paul writes for us in Romans:

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)*

Sometimes when thinking about that passage, we make the subject in those words, "all things" rather than God himself. We must never forget that God is at work in and through, and often in

spite of all the things that happen to us both good and bad. Only when we choose to continue our praise for God even in these rough spots in life that we will begin to see how these events can give strength and meaning to our lives.

We can give thanks during difficult times because we know that God is always present and is always at work in our lives. When John Wesley was at Oxford University, he met a porter on the campus who did not own very much. Yet he amazed Wesley by his profound gratitude for what he did have. Noticing the poor condition of the man's winter coat, Wesley asked about it. "This is the only coat I have," the man said, "and I thank God for it." John Wesley learned that the man rarely ate very much during a day because he had so little money. He was startled to hear him say that he was grateful to God for what he was able to eat. One day Wesley approached this man and asked him what else he was grateful that God had provided him in his life. The man replied, "I thank God for life, for a heart to love, and a desire to serve." His answer stayed with Wesley for the rest of his life.

If I can suggest anything for us this morning, it would be to take time to express our love and thanks to God. Take a moment to tell God how much life means to us, how appreciative we are for our families and friends. Thank God for the freedoms we enjoy in our country. Finally let God know how grateful we are for our faith that keeps reminding us of God's love. Together let us continue to find opportunities to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ.