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I Thessalonians 5: 16, 18

### **“HOW TO STAY IN TOP SHAPE SPIRITUALLY” #3**

“Keeping in shape” is very important to modern Americans. We jog, exercise, do aerobic work out, take vitamins, and try to eat properly, in an effort to keep in top shape. We know that the conditions of our bodies can affect everything that we do.

As Christians, we are even more concerned about “Keeping in top shape spiritually;” for, as God says in I Timothy 4:8 “bodily exercise is profitable...but spiritual exercise is much more important and is a tonic for all that you do” (Living Bible).

In I Thessalonians 5, God gives us some “spiritual fitness exercise...” or a set of disciplines for the inner man...which will keep us strong, where it counts the most. They are guaranteed to keep us from sagging or going-to-pot spiritually (which we call “backsliding”).

The first three were:

Join a group (church) and work together-Vs. 11, 14.

Get help from your instructors (pastors), without letting them come between you and Jesus-Vs. 12-13.

Relax your reactionary reflexes-Vs. 15.

Today we will take the fourth, from verses 16 and 18: “Always be cheerful. Under all circumstances give thanks, for such is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” I call this one:

#### **“DEVELOP THE POSITIVE MENTAL ATTITUDE OF PRAISE.”**

In all physical development programs, there is a lot of positive mental reinforcement. Someone is always saying: “Come on. You can do it!”

There is sometimes even an atmosphere of hype. I noticed in the exercise classes on TV that the instruction was always going: “Woo!” I thought that it was a little bit much, until I realized that the instructor was using it to give her class positive mental reinforcement.

We have all seen this, in our high school days, with pep-rallies.

“Victory, victory, is our cry,

V-I-C-T-O-R-Y

Can we do it? Yes, you bet!

Victory, victory, we’ll win yet!”

This is positive reinforcement.

Our Lord knew that we need this positive reinforcement in our spiritual lives, also, and in all the struggles which we face from day to day. That's why he tells us to “Rejoice evermore!” “In everything give thanks; for this is the desire of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”

Notice: God wants us to rejoice, to give thanks, to praise Him—in every situation. God never says: “rejoice when everything is going great,” nor “rejoice when you are feeling great.” No. You check out the Scriptures. He says, again and again, that we are to rejoice “in everything” that happens. We are to do it as a discipline because it helps us to maintain a positive mental attitude on life, which will eventually bring us through whatever it is that we are facing.

I’ll never forget the first time that this truth dawned on me. I was travelling home from college with my best friend, John Scott. We were in my ten year old, 150,000 mile 1940 Chevy, literally praying ourselves home on the 500 mile trip.

Now “Scottie” used to say “Praise the Lord” about everything. It even got on my nerves. At the most irrelevant times, he would blurt out: “Praise the Lord”.

Now I had met a number of phonies, who said “praise the Lord,” almost as a cover-up; and I had learned to be wary of such people. Yet I knew that Scottie was very genuine. So I just listened to his PTL’s with a quiet tolerance.

Well, we had driven 400 miles. So far, so good (praise the Lord!) we were entering the hilly city of Petersburg, Virginia.

Now, as you enter this city, you have to cross a long and busy bridge. And just as we got in the middle of the bridge, the old Chevy’s accelerator linkage broke. You could put the “pedal to the metal,” but the car would only idle.

I pushed in the clutch, stuck her in first gear, and chugged forward at a snail’s pace, while the cars behind us honked (and not because they loved Jesus!) Angry drivers scowled and shouted unmentionables. (That was before people had discovered their middle fingers!) I’ll tell you, it was awful!

And all of a sudden, in the middle of all this, Scott says: “Praise the Lord!” I could have slugged him!

But then I thought: It’s better than griping. And it beats running scared.

The Lord said: “...all things will work together for good....” so why not? “Yeah, praise the Lord,” I said—a little less than enthusiastically.

Since that day, I have paid particular interest to all that God says about praising Him, in the good times and in the bad. I have noticed how He tells us to cheer-each-other-on with positive praise, “speaking to yourselves in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs; singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God....” (Ephesians 5:19-20).

In fact, I don’t believe that God is against a little “hype” in the house of God, if it is genuine. I believe that it is inspiring to sing God’s praises with enthusiasm and to speak of his greatness with excitement.

Psalm 106:48 reminds us to “let all the people say Amen.” I know it gives me positive reinforcement, as I preach, if someone says “Amen” now and then. (Compare I Corinthians 14:16.)

Psalm 47:1 says: “Oh clap your hands, all you peoples; shout unto God with the voice of triumph, for the Lord most high is awe-inspiring...” I’m not afraid of some enthusiastic build-up in our worship, if it comes from the heart and is not just manipulated by group dynamics.

I’ll even go so far as to say that a man, who rejoices in the Lord, will never have to worry about backsliding! But someone who does not practice rejoicing will eventually go down spiritually.

Now that may sound like a pretty broad statement, but I believe it. I have met so many people, who have lost the victory and fallen away from Christ for nothing bigger than the fact that they became ungrateful and started to feel that God had given them a “raw deal.” And that attitude can certainly lead to disbelief and rebellion.

One ship sails East, another West  
By the self-same wind that blows.  
It’s not the gale, but the set of the sail  
That determines the way she goes!  
Praise sets the sail for victory! Complaining sets the sail for defeat!

Any Bible student can vouch for the fact that ingratitude is behind all of man’s falling – away from God. Romans 1:21 says that all false religions and sinful practices, which have swept across the world, originated because men “did not honor God, neither were they thankful...” Is it any wonder that an ungrateful, negative, faithless attitude can still lead Christians away from God and in to this thing called “backsliding” and “apostasy?”

That’s why I believe Paul’s inspired words, to “rejoice ever more,” are much more than a passing remark. They are a vital and necessary spiritual exercise in helping us to develop a positive attitude, which is needed to succeed in our Christian lives!

To further prove my point, let me give you some reasons why we must practice rejoicing in everything...

## I. REJOICING PROVIDES A TRUE PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT IS HAPPENING.

Now everybody has to work at being positive—even the men who preach “the power of positive thinking.” One such minister was trying real hard one day, when his wife left him an affectionate note on his desk. It contained this poem:

“As you ramble through life, honey,  
Whatever may be your goal;  
Keep your eye upon the doughnut  
And not upon the hole!”

I suppose there are times when we all have looked at the hole and not at the doughnut. We see only shortcomings and faults and miss the excitement of greater things.

In church, you can meet those who see the doughnut and those who only see the hole. Ask people: “How are things at church?” Some will say: “Oh, we have problems. I’m afraid we are in trouble. I don’t like what is going on.” These are the ones who see the hole.

Others say: “Great! We have definite challenges, for which we are seeking a solution. But we have so much for which to be thankful. God has blessed! God is able! And God has promised to do even more!” These are the ones who see the doughnut!

Now God wants us to see things in perspective. We can’t help but notice the problems of life. They are almost shoved in our faces. But when we practice rejoicing, it balances our perspective. We begin to focus on the real situation. There is good news, and there is bad news. But the good gives you hope that you can overcome the bad!

How we need a true perspective on our lives. I’ve often thought of the Poem:

“I was cryin’ the blues, ‘cause I had no shoes;  
Until upon the street, I met a man who had no feet.”

I think that’s part of the reason why they walk you down the hall at the hospital, so soon after you have had surgery, is so that you will see someone wore off than yourself. That helps us to get our perspective.

In Philippians 4, Paul gives us a formula for overcoming worry. He tells us to “make known your requests to God WITH THANKSGIVING.” There it is: a balanced perspective. The good news and the bad news.

The next time that you are “down,” try taking a pencil and paper and forcing yourself to list all of you blessings. It may not improve the situation drastically, but it will help you to see things as they really are. You will be reminded that God has not given you a “raw deal,” after all. You may even find yourself saying: “Praise the Lord, anyway!”

Secondly I find that.....

## II. REJOICING BUILDS ENTHUSIASM FOR ACTION.

When all we can see is the problems, it saps the energy right out of us. But God has promised that life is more than problems. These “problems” can become possibilities and “projects.”

Jesus Promised: “In this world you will have troubles. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). I will help you to be an overcomer, too.

James tells us to “Count it all joy, when you fall into various testings.... For they develop patience”....and will make you “complete and entire, lacking nothing” (James 1:2-4).

According to God, these problems are just ‘projects,’ in which He will help us to overcome. They are challenges, which He has allowed, in His wisdom. He knows that they will make us stronger. And He has promised that He will “not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able.”

So rejoice in these trials. Give thanks in everything. The best is yet ahead—if we keep rejoicing.

A third practical outcome of a positive mental attitude is that.....

## III. REJOICING ELIMINATES CONTAGIOUS COMPLAINING.

Have you ever noticed that God never tells us to complain to one another? Instead, He tells us to “rejoice” and to “encourage one another.”

Now I really searched that one out in the Concordance. (That’s a big book, which has all the Bible verses in it, according to subjects.) I thought: certainly there must be some Scripture for complaining, because I’ve met so many church people, who feel that it is their God-given responsibility to do so!

And have you ever noticed how contagious a negative complaint can be? It spreads worse than the measles or chicken-pox. And it does a lot more harm.

Maybe that is why God has always been so hard on it.

Do you remember the Old Testament story of the Jews, who were miraculously escaping from Egypt and journeying through the desert to a land, which God had promised to give them—a land “flowing with milk and honey”?

Well, things were going just fine. They had so much about which to rejoice. God had miraculously pushed back the Red Sea and had brought them through on dry ground.

He provided them with “manna” to eat. It was like seeds, which appeared on top of the ground every morning, like the dew. They would only have to gather it, grind it up, and make bread. It was truly “bread from heaven.”

God led them through the unmapped wilderness with a cloud, by day, and column of fire, by night, it was awesome!

Why He even provided water for all million and a half of them, from rocks. Man, they should have been saying: “Praise the Lord!”

But one day someone complained: “I surely do miss the wonderful onions we had back in Egypt.” (Certainly, I didn’t hear that right, did I? Onions? You gotta’ be kidding!) “Oh no. I said ‘onions.’ I haven’t had a good cry since I ate the last one!”

And, believe it or not, the next fellow agreed with him. And the next, and the next, until eventually Moses had a bunch of ungrateful “belly-archers” on his hands, instead of “God’s specially blessed and chosen people.”

Well, God decided that this negative complaining must be stopped, before it contaminated everyone. So He allowed snakes to enter the camp and to bite the grippers. And thousands died!

“Why?” Moses asked God. “Because they griped and complained and would have infected the entire nation with their faithless negativism,” God answered.

In our day and age, this story sounds unreal, because complaining has almost become an American way of life. Every group complains that they have been “victimized” by everyone else. We almost think that complaining creates progress. If no one gripes, things will go down hill!

Some carry this over into their religion and their work for God in the local church. They complain, and it spreads. And before long, you have a church which is unhappy, defeated, and failing at the task, which God has given it to do.

Sometimes God removes these complainers. I used to worry, when someone got upset and left church. I try to not to worry as much anymore. If they are unhappy, it is better to let them go. “If they are not for us, they are against us,” Jesus said. But as long as they stay in the camp and complain, they will only tear other people’s faith down with them.

But, oh, if we could only learn to rejoice and spend our time in encouraging one another and giving thanks to our gracious God. We could build each other up, and we could meet every challenge victoriously.

So “rejoice in everything. This is the desire of God concerning you.”

But a positive mental attitude of praise has another benefit...

#### IV. REJOICING LIFTS OUR EYES FROM OURSELVES TO GOD

(from the problem to the problem-Solver.)

It's very easy to get discouraged, when we look at ourselves. We see so many weaknesses.

Paul says: “In myself there dwells no good thing. For what I would do, I cannot do. And what I allow not, I end up doing.” I feel so wretched, when I look at myself. But thank God for the victory that is through Jesus Christ (Romans 7:15-25).

Praise helps to lift our eyes from our weaknesses to God's strength...from our inability to His ability.

One of the great Christian writers of our time is Catherine Marshall. She was the wife of one of the most famous preachers in America: Peter Marshall, the Chaplain of the United States Senate.

In her early 30's, Catherine was stricken with Tuberculosis and was bed-fast for a long period of time. This grew to be very trying to the once-busy mother and pastor's wife. As the long days wore on, her faith and hope began to sag.

All she could see was her weakness. She just couldn't seem to get better. Deeper and deeper she went into the valley of despair and defeat. She even stopped trying to pray. She became bitter toward God for allowing it.

One day her closest friend visited her and said: “I'll be darned if I'm going to feel sorry for you anymore. You have enough self-pity for both of us. You have God's help, and He is able. But you won't let Him”

It shocked Catherine. And she was determined to do something about it.

She decided to stop focusing on her weakness and to start focusing on God's strength. Turning her situation completely over to Him and giving Him full control of her life, to do whatever He saw fit, she began to concentrate on God's greatness.

Within days she began to make a rapid improvement. It was amazing. What a difference it made, when she lifted her eyes from her weakness to His greatness.

Later, when Peter died of a heart attack in the prime of life, she again was faced with her weakness. She had been a mother and a housewife. She had not had to earn a living for years. What would she do?

Well, she had learned one thing. She would not again turn her attention to her weaknesses. In thanks, she would lift her eyes to the God who promised to supply.

Her first attempt was inspired. She collected some of her husband's sermons in a book, called Mr. Jones, Meet the Master. It became a national best-seller. She was on her way to a new career. Instead of looking at her weakness, she had learned to look to God's strength and to rejoice in it.

This book was the beginning of a writing career, with several best-sellers. God was able, when she concentrated on His power.

Lift up your eyes to Him, my friend. Rejoice in His greatness. Thank Him in everything. See how strong He is. Then only can His strength be released in you!

“In all things give thanks!” This is the positive mental discipline of praise. And it is an important part of staying in top shape spiritually!

And is this not what takes place, when a person is saved? When someone becomes a Christian, he must look above his own sins and shortcomings to the mercy and power of God. Then only can God give him the gift of a new life, as a child of God.

Today, if you concentrate on your own sins and shortcomings, you will feel unworthy and guilty, and you will never believe that you can live a new kind of a life. Look above yourself. Concentrate on Jesus’ love, as He died on the cross to pay for your sins.

Listen as He says: “I stand at the door and knock, if ANY MAN will hear my voice and open, I will come into HIM”

Thank Him for His love. Rejoice in His promised offer, to say anyone who calls on Him. Lift your eyes from your unworthiness to His saving power—and become a child of God today!

The Christian life, from it’s new birth to maturity, is a matter of looking above your weakness to His strength. So put into practice His instructions to “rejoice evermore!”