

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last week and this week we heard Scriptures about John the Baptist. We are reminded that he was the fulfillment of the prophecies that one like Elijah who would come and prepare the way for the Messiah. His message was a call to repentance, a call to review God's will and to see how your life compares to his will.

In our Old Testament reading for today, we heard God saying, **remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb, Mt. Sinai.** Those decrees and laws summarized God's will for his people.

In our Epistle lesson we hear Paul tell us **this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** As we look at what God tells us through Paul we will see what God's will is for us regarding our attitude, and what God's will is for us regarding Scripture, and how the fact that God is faithful helps us be in tune with God's will.

Usually when we think of God's will, his commandments, we think of actions that he forbids—Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false testimony. In fact, this becomes very clear when you ask people why they think God should let them into heaven. The answer you hear most often is something like this, "well, I haven't killed anyone or robbed any banks, so I guess I'm OK." That's when they need to hear what Paul tells us today. God's will doesn't just have to do with our actions. It has to do with the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. In fact, remember how Jesus summarized God's will—**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.**

Paul says that God's will for us in Christ Jesus is that we are **always joyful, that we pray continually and that we give thanks in all circumstances.** Obviously, when we realize that God judges the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts we immediately realize that we aren't OK. We don't measure up to God's will for us in Christ Jesus. We don't always love God above all things and there are some neighbors we not only fail to love, but we actually hate. We don't always go about our daily schedules with a joyful attitude. Sometimes we just forget to pray; we certainly aren't constantly talking to God in prayer. And there are many circumstances in life in which we find it hard to give thanks. When we hear that these things are God's will for us in Christ Jesus we hear John's call to repent. We have to confess that we don't have the attitude that God wants us to have.

Neither Paul nor the Thessalonian Christians to whom he was writing were any better than we are. When they heard these words they also realized that their attitude didn't measure up to the requirements of God's will. That's why Paul reminded them of God's faithfulness. That's why he prayed, **may God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God was faithful. He kept his promise and sent his Son as a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David, to be the savior of the world. In spite of our unfaithfulness, our failure to measure up to what God requires in his will, he continues to be faithful to his promises to us. He continues to point us to the perfect faithfulness of Jesus who was always joyful, always in prayer, always giving thanks. He reminds us that Jesus was faithful in our place. He reminds us that Jesus went to the cross to pay for all the times when our attitude stinks, when we are joyless, prayerless and unthankful. He reminds us that in Jesus, covered in his righteousness, we are considered blameless. He reminds us that He is the one

who must and who does work in us to will and to do his pleasure. He is the one who is working to sanctify us through and through so that not just our actions but our attitudes are in tune with his will.

It is because God is faithful that we can have a joyful attitude even when our circumstances are not happy ones. When we trust that God will keep his promise to turn everything that happens into good for us and finally take us to live in the perfection of heaven with him, we have joy in our hearts no matter what is happening to us or around us.

It is because God is faithful that we can pray continually. He has promised that, because of what Jesus has done, we can talk to him anytime, anywhere about anything and he will hear and answer in the way that is best for us. Even though we may not be speaking a formal prayer, we are constantly thinking, “what would you have me do in this situation, Lord? Or “help me do this job to the best of my ability” or “watch over my loved ones,” or “give guidance to those who govern.” Whatever is on our minds we share it with our faithful God.

It is because God is faithful that we can give him thanks no matter what; not only for good things that happen in our lives, not only for answered prayers, but, since we know that he is in charge and that he was willing to sacrifice his Son to save us, we realize that, even in the worst of times, there is always something for which we can give him thanks.

People often ask, “how do you know what God’s will is? How can you be sure about what is true and what is false?” Sometimes such questions lead people to just give up on trying to figure out what God’s will is and what is truth. Sometimes they abandon God and his word and do whatever feels right or comes naturally. That’s why Paul warns, **do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt.**

The Holy Spirit works through the word; through prophecies that he has given to people, prophets and evangelists. Yes, it is hard work at times to try to determine what is true and what is false; who is a true prophet through whom the Holy Spirit is speaking and who is a false prophet through whom Satan is trying to lead us astray. But if we decide that we aren’t going to listen to anything that claims to be God’s word and just do what we think is right, we are going to be in big trouble. That would be like blowing out every match that God is trying to light. That would be like pouring water on the fire that is your only source of heat in the middle of winter.

Yes it’s difficult to cut wood and to keep stoking a fire in the middle of winter, but consider the alternative—freezing to death. Yes it’s difficult at times to do the hard work of testing the spirits to see whether or not they are from God, but consider the alternative. If you put out the Spirit’s fire you will experience another fire, the fire of Hell.

Paul encourages the Thessalonians and us to **test everything**. Now in order to test something you have to have a standard against which to test it. That standard is what we know to be God’s will, God’s truth. Paul holds up for us the example of the Bereans. When he came to them with the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus, they didn’t just accept what he told them. They got out their Bibles and tested what he said to make sure it matched what God had promised. Of course, it did match and they were filled with joy and thanks that Paul brought them the good news of salvation in Jesus. But they tested everything, even what the great Apostle Paul told them.

That’s what we need to continue to do today. We need to continue to test everything, not just what other churches teach, or what someone who claims to be a prophet says, or

someone's claim that they have seen heaven, but we need to continue to test our own doctrines and the statements of faith that come from our own church body. If we begin to take for granted that what our own church says and just assume it's correct, we will be easily misled if some false teaching slips in.

Again, Paul reminds us that God is faithful. He is working through his word to sanctify us through and through and to keep us blameless for the day of judgment. As we strive to do what he asks and to test everything, asking for his help and guidance, he will give us that guidance. He is faithful.

When you test things you will find that some things pass the test and other things don't. When something passes the test of Scripture, Paul reminds us what we are to do. We are to **hold to that which is good**. We are to keep those teachings that have passed the test close to us at all times, to review them often and keep them in mind at all times. But those things which do not pass the test? Those things Paul reminds us we are to avoid. He says, **avoid every kind of evil**. That means if we find a false teaching and those who are promoting it will not correct what they are teaching, we are to **mark and avoid them**. Paul reminds us that **a little leaven works through the whole batch of dough**. Contrary to what so many say today, God has always taught the principle of separation, starting way back with Cain and continuing through making Israel his chosen people. We need to consider false teaching of any kind, temptation of any kind, bad company, anyone or anything that does not pass the test of God's will to be like arsenic. How much arsenic is safe? I don't want to find out. I want to avoid it completely. That's the way God wants us to look at anything that is false teaching and anything that we know is sin. **Avoid every kind of evil**.

As we consider what God's will is for us we can't help but realize that we don't measure up. We are unfaithful every day. But God is faithful. Jesus was faithful in our place. The fact that he has paid for our unfaithfulness is not an excuse to sin, but a reason to be joyful, prayerful and thankful. It's a reason to test everything by his prophetic word so that we can avoid everything that is evil and contrary to the word and keep that which is good close to us.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.