

Ten Great Things to Do This Summer

I Thessalonians 5: 12-28

**First Presbyterian Church
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I've so enjoyed our eight weeks lingering over Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian Christians. As perhaps the earliest writing in the New Testament, Thessalonians gives us a window onto the earliest church community. We saw that from the beginning the church was devoted to Jesus as to God. They found their lives transformed by the gospel, finding the meaning and forgiveness they never had in their paganism. They became a community of ardent love for each other, and Paul's tender, pastoral affection permeates this letter. They became a people living in expectation of the return of the Lord Jesus. Christ's mission became their mission, and they lived full of hope in spite of all opposition.

Having affirmed their faith and love, Paul closes the letter with some final instructions. Some simple, important things to do as believers to keep growing. I've organized the list into ten points. Ten great things to do as a Christian this summer. Now I know you can't possibly remember ten things I rattle off in the next twenty minutes, but you can find them all in this chapter as you reread it all week long. And of course, you can grab a copy of this sermon on the way out. Here we go.

1) Esteem your leaders very highly in love. That's a very interesting way to start a list of final instructions. But actually very important for the flourishing of a community. We need leaders who set a tone and chart a path. We're so blessed with great leadership in this congregation. Every year the nominating committee realizes we have an embarrassment of riches in leadership. So many great people willing to serve. Consecrated leadership has meant an atmosphere of peace and harmony that has allowed us to focus on ministry and mission. But we cannot be complacent. We have to stay focused and on point. So, this summer, pray for your elders. Take a look at the posters that have all their names and pictures. Pick one or two to encourage and up hold up before the Lord.

2) Be at peace among yourselves. Ours is a uniquely peaceful congregation. In fact, some people have come to First specifically because we don't fight. Church turmoil destroys mission. It makes cynics out of the searching. It saps the life out of Christians. By contrast, an accepting, peaceful church gives people a taste of heaven. There may be backstabbing at work, but not here. There may be turmoil at

home, but not here. This house of God is a safe place to bring the broken and the weary, the embattled and fatigued. Come find peace, because we are committed to pursuing it.

3) Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak and be patient with them all. Paul knew that some of the Thessalonians had taken the news of Christ's return so seriously that they figured there was no need to go to work anymore. If Jesus is coming back anytime, why go to work? Why cut the lawn and keep up the house? Why finish school? Now it's true that Jesus could return suddenly anytime, so we are always to be ready. But being ready means doing what is good. It means doing the next right thing. We take responsibility to work. Some of the Thessalonians had gotten frightened by persecution. They worried if they could take the heat and hold on. The community was called to encourage them. We're in this together. Yet we all grow at different rates. We have different strengths and different weaknesses. Let's prod the sluggish, cheer up the hard pressed, lend a hand to the weak and trust that God is at work in all.

4) See that no one repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another. Revenge has made a comeback in our culture. Saving face is a high value. Particularly if people have nothing inside them to prop them up, they have to get even, have to get back or they feel like they will be nothing. We know better. And one of the strongest witnesses to the truth of Christ is when his people imitate his willingness to take insults and blows without revenge.

Rather, we are to seek out ways to bless others. We are to be creative, not in dreaming up the right words with which to put people down in their place, but to build people up in the love of God. We are to look for creative ways to do good.

I've learned so much about this from watching you. In particular, this verse reminds me of Barry and Becky Phillips. They always come up with the perfect way to encourage someone. It means they think about people and then creatively determine what might be a good way to bless them.

5) Rejoice always. Joy is a theme that runs throughout Paul's writings. We note that rejoicing is not a feeling but an activity. He doesn't say, "When you feel joyful, smile and be glad." No, he commands us to rejoice. And joy is not dependent on circumstances. Joy is coordinated to the person and work of Jesus. Joy arises from what Jesus has accomplished and knowing we are joined to him. Look for joy in yourself, by yourself, for yourself and it will always elude you. Happiness comes and goes, often simply by the change in our biorhythms. I'm

very happy when the pizza goes down, not so happy when it expands in my stomach. Rejoicing cannot be as tenuous as our physical or mental feeling of well-being.

Jesus said to his disciples, “In a little while, you will see me no longer, and you will have sorrow. But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn. 16). Their lives were joined to Jesus. Their fate, and their joy, was hitched to Christ. He died and their world ended. Jesus rose, and their joy returned. Their joy was now connected to Jesus’ victory. The same is true for us:

As long as Jesus remains risen from the dead, we rejoice.

As long as Jesus stands at the right hand of the Father praying for us, we rejoice.

As long as Jesus has a resurrection body that is promised for us, we rejoice.

As long as Jesus is returning to set all things right, we rejoice.

Life in this world can and will turn hard. But we will rejoice because our joy is founded only and always in the victory of Christ. The act of rejoicing gets us out of ourselves and into Jesus.

6) Pray without ceasing. This encouragement coordinates with rejoicing. Prayer is essentially a movement out of ourselves towards God. I stop praying when I want to live for myself and not for what God has for me. I stop praying when I think God is mad at me and disappointed. I stop praying when I am tired and distracted away from my God and Father. But when I stop, I am stuck in myself.

Paul urges us to move out of ourselves and claim the story of Jesus: he died to take away our sin and he rose to overcome death. I take my place in Christ. I remain where he has put me, in Christ, in forgiveness, in loving trust.

Now praying without ceasing does not mean that you never do anything else but pray. Sometimes we have to concentrate. When my surgeon is operating on me, I really want him to focus. I hope he prays before he opens me up. I hope he sends up a quick prayer if he hits a snag. But I don’t want him to be working theology during my operation. Same with my accountant and carpenter and hair stylist. Focus, baby, focus.

We all have to concentrate on what we are called to do and that means sometimes thinking of nothing else but what is right before us. Praying without ceasing is as simple as having a running conversation with our Lord. Noticing people and linking them to God, even in passing. Checking in with Christ as we can during the day. Not hiding, but constantly referring life to him.

7) Give thanks in all circumstances. I recently had a visit with my old college roommate, now a psychiatrist on staff at Vanderbilt Medical School. His automatic signature on an email has a list of titles about half a page long. He's a big deal. Now I knew him back when and figure that one of my jobs in his life is to keep him humble. After all, every king needs a court jester. As he dropped me off at the airport, I said, "Keith, in your whole exalted life, who disrespects you more than I do?" Of course the truth is that precisely because I know the heart of him, my respect runs way deeper than any title could convey. I say all this to tell you that once again Keith reminded me of how important gratitude is to a healthy life. It's a theme than runs through his conversations. Keith has seen a lot of life and death, a lot of mental illness, and a lot of family dynamics. And if there is one underlying theme for health and flourishing that he would give it is simply, "Give thanks in all circumstances." In the midst of it all, we give thanks.

Now in the moment, you may not be able to give thanks for the circumstance itself. Some things are truly horrible and remain unrelievedly hard. But we give thanks to God for being God even, even, even in the midst of the ruin. This only works for Christianity. Only a religion which has a God who suffered in our flesh and blood, who entered the agony and forsakenness of life on earth could ever possibly say this. But because we have a God who knows, in his very being, what it's like to be here, a God who is with us even now, we give thanks.

8) Do not quench the Spirit. There is perhaps a bit of irony in this command. Do not quench the Spirit. As if. As if I had the ability to douse the flame of the everlasting light of God. As if I had the power to stop the mighty flow of living water through the world. As if I could squelch the work of the Spirit who brought the world into being. That's funny. Do not quench the Spirit. But how it speaks to the great humility of our God. He has the power to overwhelm us anytime. In fact, he shows the greatness of his power in his restraint. God is constantly softening his might so that we are not blown away.

Even to the point that he allows our choices to matter. Our choices matter so much that we can quench his Spirit. We can muffle his voice among us. We can turn away his power. We can obscure his Word. Trivialize his truth. Thin out his worship with our anemic attention spans and our fear to sing or speak. We can make the worship in which the Almighty Triune God is present seem like an origami class.

Don't quench the Spirit. Stoke the flame. Open yourself so that you burn brightly and flow freely in the Spirit's power.

9) Do not despise prophecies, but test everything and hold fast to what is good. God continues to speak. Not independently of his Word. Never. But his leaders speak the truth out of his Word as it relates to the present time. And if their message jibes with Scripture, we are to listen. Compare what your teachers say to the Scripture. If it squares, then take hold of it, apply it and run with it.

10) Abstain from every form of evil. This last is the other side of holding fast to what is good. Drop what seems evil like you drop a hot skillet. Jump back from what appears to be harmful just like you jump back ten feet when you see a snake in the grass. Don't pick up dead things to see if there might be some life in them for you. That temptation to gossip or backbite. That temptation to shade the truth. That urge to lust. That indulgence, that turning aside from one in pain, that participation in cruelty, that connection to crooked schemes. You don't need it spelled out. You have a conscience. You have the Spirit. If it smells bad, looks suspect, sounds off pitch, don't flirt with it. Drop it.

So there we have ten very practical steps for flourishing as a community of Christ's people bringing his Gospel to the world. Encouraging, energizing, practical and powerful. But, to be honest, pretty daunting. Just in case his beloved church was feeling overwhelmed, Paul leaves them with a benediction and then an assurance:

Now may the God of peace sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it.

These ten steps are meaningful ways you cooperate and participate in what God wants to do in your life. But in the end, this is more God's work than our work. I pray that he will keep on with the process of making you like Christ. That's sanctification, the holy-making of his people. I pray that God will work the gospel through you thoroughly. You have lots to do to work with him in this. But ultimately, this is God's deal. He has undertaken to save you. He has undertaken to bring you to himself. He has undertaken to use you in his mission to the world. He has undertaken to make you like Christ, a son or daughter formed in his beloved Son.

So here's the final word. You get to work doing all you can. But trust this: he who called you is faithful. God will bring it to pass. He will work it out. He will set the world right. Get to work and relax. Get after it and don't worry about. Give it your all and give it to God. Do all you can but know the truth: God is faithful and he will do it. He'll get you there. Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit!