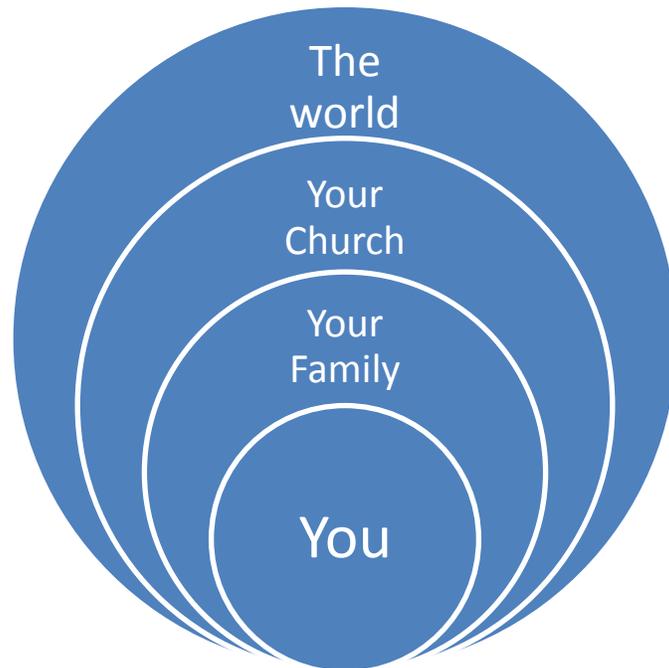


1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

In All Things Pray

This is the last sermon in our worship series on our mission, though I should tell you that mission is so important that we'll be referring to it over and over again. Two weeks ago we started a worship series on mission by focusing on being one in mission as a church (and I said that it's not essential that we agree on everything but that Christian love in itself will draw us together), then last week I said that mission begins with family (people usually come to faith because of the faith they see in their parents, and that foundation of faith is what prepares you for mission within the church). Today we're focusing on prayer, which means we're really talking about how you prepare yourself for mission as an individual. To graphically show you how these three weeks have played out:



Christ has commissioned every Christian to be an agent of change in this world, to help take what is broken and fix it. But if the church is broken, it's not going to be equipped to do much good in the world. If your family is broken, it's going to be hard to be fully engaged in a church

and not very effective at making changes in the world, and if YOU are not in a good place spiritually, you won't be much good to your family, or to the church, or to the rest of the world; you will be preoccupied with your own issues. If neither you nor your family nor your church are spiritually grounded in Jesus Christ, then all the bad stuff in the world can start to impact the church, and your family, and yourself. I like to bring up the point that the Ku Klux Klan grew out of a church that was not grounded in Jesus Christ. There were white "Christians" who felt that they were getting the short end of the stick and conveniently blamed their struggle on blacks and Jews and basically anyone who was not like them. The evil of bigotry found fertile ground in the church, in the families of those attending the church, and in the individuals who made up a family or a church. So it became a sad reality that people were intimidating and murdering in the name of Jesus Christ. And if you asked "good Christians" what their mission was, they would have answered something that in no way reflected the teachings of Jesus. So to be strong and effective in the TRUE mission as a church – bringing hope, ending suffering, working for justice, and declaring Christ's kingdom on earth – the church and the families that comprise the church and the individuals who comprise the families, must be firmly grounded in Christ's teachings.

Now take this diagram with some grain of salt; it shouldn't be taken too literally. If everything is not copasetic with your family it doesn't mean that you cannot be a leader in the church or an effective witness to Christ's love in the world. Even if your church is generally speaking dysfunctional and weak it doesn't mean that there can't be some people in that church who are doing some good in the world. But I would say that weakness in any of these circles outside of YOU serves as a hurdle to your mission to the world. You may be a Mother Theresa or a Saint Francis, but if your brother is struggling with addiction and your sister is consumed by vanity, those sorts of things are going to require some of your attention. Indeed for many individuals who have dysfunctional families, the family BECOMES their primary mission. The individual may join a church despite the fact that the family is not at all supportive of their decision to follow Jesus Christ, and so that person is going to need some encouragement and consoling from their friends at church in order to help them engage in mission to the world; and if there are a lot of people from troubled families coming to the church, then the church's priority becomes attending to the needs of those individuals so that at some point in time the church CAN start working on transforming the world outside the church. I think you get the picture.

And I think you recognize how important it is for YOU to be well-grounded in your faith and to invest in your spiritual formation. Disciples don't just grow on trees, or pop out of the ground. Discipleship involves a lot of discipline; you have to resist your natural urges to verbally attack someone who verbally attacks you. You have to resist the tendency to do nothing when you see someone begging. You have to resist the temptation to start drinking heavily when something

reminds you of a painful past event in your life. Yes, the church can help you to change your behaviors, but it all starts with you, because you can lead a horse to water...

And so our scripture lesson is very short and to the point; rejoice always, pray continuously, and be thankful in all circumstances. Now you may say that this is just psyching yourself out, it's just a "don't worry; be happy" sort of prescription. But it's a "don't worry; be happy" mentality that has a foundation in God, in faith in Jesus. To summarize the Christian worldview, there are certainly a lot of problems in the world, but God is changing all that. Jesus came to declare that; Jesus said that the Kingdom of GOD has landed and it's going to take over the world someday. People who didn't buy into his message killed Jesus, but guess what? He rose in effect to demonstrate that he was right, that God's kingdom is coming and that all the hatred and suffering and injustice in this world are going to end someday when God reigns supreme. The day is coming when everything that's wrong with the world, and the church, and our families, and ourselves, will be made right. That's the reason we can sing "don't worry; be happy." God will bring peace and justice and love to this world, and we will be there to enjoy the new reality.

And that is the faith that empowers us to rejoice always; God raised Jesus from the dead, and he can certainly turn any defeat into a victory. That's the faith that empowers us to give thanks in all circumstances; so you just failed a job interview. Maybe that job was not right for you. Maybe you would have been miserable your first week there. "Thank you, God, for NOT getting me hired with that agency; I trust that you have a better plan for me." I can't count how many times I didn't get what I wanted as far as a job, and I ended up pretty happy here in Staten Island where I've lived for seven years. Eight years ago I would have had no idea that this is where I'd be at age 57. Thank you, Lord, for bringing me here DESPITE my resistance to your will.

But now let's consider Paul's third admonition; pray without ceasing. Prayer is not something we do to psych ourselves out, to make us "not worry; be happy." Prayer is something we often do because we ARE worried and unhappy. For some people, that's the ONLY time they pray, and it's hardly a prayer as much as it is an ultimatum to God; "God, stop this crap from happening or I won't believe in you anymore." It takes a lot of prayer to get us that "don't worry; be happy" state of mind. If we relegate prayer to something we do a few times on a Sunday morning you'll never attain what Paul's calls "the peace that transcends all understanding." Paul admonishes us to pray without ceasing. That means being conscious of God's living and active presence with you every moment of your life. Converse with God. Ask him questions. Seek his guidance. And by all means give him thanks in all circumstances.

Praying without ceasing may start out for you like a real chore, something that involves some work on your part. But eventually it just becomes a normal state of being for you. Because God

becomes real to you. God becomes present to you. You don't see him with your eyes or hear him with your ears, but you know that he's there and that he does speak to you.

And when you have that kind of intimacy with God, the prayers flow naturally. The thanksgiving flows naturally. The rejoicing flows naturally. And God's love flows from you naturally. William Loader writes that some Christians look at our response to God as a kind of vacuum cleaner, "where the goal is withdrawal and oneness with the divine - away from it all. Paul usually has the hose on the other end: God's love is poured out and the intimacy of the Spirit births an expansiveness." God could have filled up every space in the universe, but he left space for us and for love to flow from us. And our true joy comes from being the recipients and the channels of that love.

This flow of love is in an outward direction. We can't just be loving some of the time, in our fellowship hall for an hour a week, or when we're in the presence of a pastor, or when others are observing. We can't love our friends and hate our enemies, because that is not the way the Spirit of God works.

And this is how mission happens. Simply speaking, mission work is God's love flowing out from us in every direction – it flows to family, it flows to your church community, and it flows to the world.

So as I wrap up this mission series I pray that you pray. I pray that you pray without ceasing. Keep a Bible near you, so you can turn to the Psalms when you don't know what else to pray. Pray until you can rejoice always. Pray until you can give thanks in all circumstances. Then you can be pretty confident that God's love is flowing in and through you, into the world that will someday radiate with God's love.