

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil.

²³ 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. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. **This is God's Word.**

Dear Friends,

Today is a special day. It is confirmation Sunday. Our confirmand, Makayla, has been studying God's Word for the past two years and later in our service she will publicly confess her faith in Jesus and her desire to be part of our church family. As Makayla is confirmed she is moving onto the next steps in her spiritual training and, Lord willing, will put what she has learned into practice. Our second lesson this morning told us how God gives the gift of faith through his Word so that we can serve him but how do we do that? How do we stay strong in our faith and live a Christian life? Today, as we gather around God's Word, the Apostle Paul encourages us by using this section of scripture to answer the question, **"God has called me to faith and saved me. What's next?"**

I. Paul lays it out for us in three sections. He starts by giving us some advice on how to, **"Live as a Child of God."** He begins by telling us, **"Be joyful always."** This might be easy to do when things are going well but what about when life takes a turn for the worse. When a loved one is sick and maybe dies, it is hard to rejoice. When you are feeling all alone, it's hard to rejoice. When the doctor tells you that you have cancer or some other serious disease, it's hard to rejoice. When you get laid off from your job, it's hard to rejoice.

You might be thinking that this is something easy for Paul to tell us. That's what the preacher is suppose to do. Too bad he hasn't experienced some of the things that I have. Paul was a missionary, called by God himself but life wasn't always so good for Paul. He was thrown into jail a number of times, beaten and flogged, and run out of town more than once. He was persecuted for sharing the good news about Jesus – that we are saved by God's grace through faith and the resurrection assures us that Christ did everything for our salvation. And yet, even from prison, Paul was able to write, **"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"** (Philippians 4:4).

He experienced troubles and trials beyond what we might experience but he was always joyful because he was thankful that God had called him to faith. He wasn't worried about the troubles of this world because he looked forward to heaven and he trusted God's promise, that everyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. (Mark 16:16).

And so it is for us. We can be joyful always because we have Christ in our hearts and as we trust in him and we know that he will help us to be a Christian optimist – looking for the good in

every situation and being joyful. But Paul doesn't stop there. As we live as a child of God Paul reminds us to, **"Pray continually."**

When you first hear that command, you might think that this is impossible but the point Paul is trying to make is that we can take everything to the Lord in prayer and that prayer should be a regular part of our lives.

Sometimes our prayers are more formal – like when we are in church but at other times we talk to God in a more informal way or our prayer might be pretty short – depending on what is happening at the moment.

Many times when I am alone, like driving down the road by myself or walking for exercise, I will pray. At night, when I lay down in bed, just before I go to sleep I will pray. Before meals, I pray and thank God for the food. God wants us to come to him in prayer – he promises to hear our prayers and to answer them. The answer may not always be what we were hoping for but God knows exactly what we need and what his plans are for our life. So make prayer a regular part of your life and then listen as God speaks to you through his Word, for many times the answer to our prayers will come through God's Word. That's why we call prayer a conversation with God. we speak to him and then listen as he speaks to us.

Paul concludes this 1st part of our sermon text by telling us, **"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."** These words remind me of some other words he wrote to the Colossians, **"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."** (Colossians 3:17). We can give thanks in a lot of different ways. It might be the mother caring for her children or the farmer milking or tilling the fields or the police officer and firefighter helping people or the secretary typing or whatever your station in life – giving thanks to God by doing it to the best of your ability.

It's not always easy to live as a child of God – to be joyful and pray and keep God at the center of our lives so that we live a life of thanksgiving to him. We can only do it if Christ is in us and that takes us to the next section of direction that Paul gives us as he encourages us to, **"Look to the Word to Guide Us."**

II. As we look to the Word, Paul directs us to, **"Not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil."** It is so easy for us to forget that the Holy Spirit works through the Word and sacraments. If we get tired of hearing the Word or think we don't need it, we aren't giving the Holy Spirit a chance to work. When the Holy Spirit isn't active in our hearts, we start to pick and chose the parts of God's Word we want to believe and may reject the Word all together. Before we know it, we are living by the world's standards instead of by God's standards and believe me – there is quite a difference.

That is why Paul says to test everything and to hold onto those things that are good and avoid every kind of evil. The litmus test for everything is God's Word. It is the absolute truth and as we look at something through the eyes of faith (focused on scripture) we can start to determine

what is good and what is bad. Since we aren't perfect, we might get that wrong at times but that is why Jesus went to the cross. To pay for all the times we sin – all the times we mess up – and as we come confessing our sins, he assures us of his love and forgiveness and that is important for us to remember as well. For God is faithful even when we are not and so we want to trust in his faithfulness because he will never let us down.

III. That is why Paul ends this portion of scripture with a blessing, **“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.”** Only God can bring us true peace and only God can sanctify us – make us holy. He does it by giving us the gift of faith which brings us forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. That is how we appear holy before a righteous judge – because we have been forgiven. Jesus covers over all our sins.

Finally, Paul reminds us, **“The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”** God will help us as we look to live for him. Matter of fact, we can't live for him without his help.

Today we celebrate that God has called us to faith and saved us. That brings joy to our hearts and helps us to understand that the answer to the question, **“What's next,”** is to live my life for my Savior, guided by God's Word – not to earn my way to heaven but because Christ has already earned it for me. Today as we celebrate Makayla's confirmation, may we also make a renewed commitment to listen to the Lord, to talk to him and to let him guide our lives. Amen.