

## INTRODUCTION

If you're familiar with world religions, you've probably heard of the eightfold path of Buddhism. The two most famous Buddhists in the world are the Dalai Lama and Tiger Woods. A couple of years ago, Tiger was guilty of some bad conduct that cost him his marriage and some key endorsements. On February 19, 2010, he made a public apology where he made reference to his Buddhist faith. He said, "People probably don't realize it, but I was raised a Buddhist, and I actively practiced my faith from childhood until I drifted away from it in recent years. Buddhism teaches that a craving for things outside ourselves causes an unhappy and pointless search for security. It teaches me to stop following every impulse and to learn restraint."

After Tiger made that statement, there was an increase in interest in Buddhism in the U.S. Buddhism is a religion founded by Siddhartha Gautama, who lived about 500 years before Jesus. It is really more like a philosophy on how to avoid human suffering. The eightfold path is often pictured as a wheel with eight spokes. According to Buddhists, if you want to avoid suffering you should practice these eight disciplines:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech; (If you've ever heard Tiger curse after missing a shot, you know he's still working on that one)
4. Right action
5. Right vocation
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

According to Buddhism, if you follow these faithfully you will arrive at Nirvana, which is a state of being one with the universe and where you have no desires. That explains the joke about the Buddhist monk who ordered a hotdog in New York City. He said to the vendor, "Make me one with everything." (think about it). The monk gave him a ten-dollar bill and the vendor kept it. The Buddhist said, "Where's my change?" The vendor said, "Change comes from within."

Buddhism won't get you to heaven. There isn't even any doctrine of heaven in Buddhism. Nirvana is reaching a state of blissful nothingness, whatever that means. Buddha couldn't even explain it. That explains one more Buddhism joke. "Someone gave a Buddhist monk a birthday present." He opened it and it was empty. He said, "Thanks. That's just what I've always wanted."

With that introduction, I want to expose you to a much better eightfold path. This path won't take you heaven. Jesus is the only way, or path, to heaven. He's the one-way path to heaven. But once you're on that path, this eightfold path of attitudes and actions will lead to a blessed life.

As Paul comes to the end of this letter, he adds these eight attitudes and actions.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22. "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all

circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."

This is a short list of eight attitudes and actions. It's a short, brief list. Someone suggested that Paul might have been running out of space on the parchment, and he had to shorten his sentences to get in all his writing. Have you ever been writing on a card and you run out of space, so you start writing smaller, and then you write up one side and then down the other? Or to use a modern analogy, if Paul was alive today, these might be tweets. Until about ten years ago, the only creatures that tweeted were birds. And the most famous tweeter was Tweety Bird who said, "I tot I taw a puddy tat."

Twitter is a social network where people post messages with a limit of 140 characters, forcing people to get right to the point. No fluff. Today, there are 500 million Twitter users. You can elect to "follow" someone on Twitter, which means you can read his or her posts. Want to guess who has the top number of Twitter followers? Number one, Justin Bieber, with over 40 million followers. They're called "Beliebers." Number two, Katy Perry; Number three, Lady Gaga. And coming in at number four is President Obama, who has 34 million followers. Does that give you some idea why he appealed to almost all the younger voters?

So, let's consider these last eight, brief messages by Paul as first century tweets. We're going to look at three of the eight in this message and in the next message we'll examine the last five.

### **1. BE JOYFUL: Make the choice to rejoice**

Paul wrote, "Be joyful always." It's Bible trivia time. What is the shortest verse in the Bible? Most people say, "Jesus wept," which is found in John 11:35. In English, that verse has nine letters, but in Greek, "Jesus wept" has three words with sixteen letters. But in the original language, 1 Thessalonians 5:16 is shorter. It has two words with only fourteen Greek letters in that verse. So the shortest verse in the Bible says, "Rejoice evermore."

Some misguided people believe it is the role of our federal government to make us happy and keep us happy. Our Declaration of Independence does mention three inalienable rights given to us. But these are given to us by our Creator, NOT by our government. And these three rights are not life, liberty, and happiness. They are life, liberty, and the PURSUIT of happiness.

And pursue it we do! Americans devote much of their time and energy trying to find happiness. Many surveys have asked Americans, "What is it that you most want in life?" And an overwhelming majority of Americans answer: "I want to be happy." Then the survey often follows up with this question, "What would it take to make you happy?" The #1 answer to that question is "I don't know."

What people need is JOY not happiness. Happiness comes from the word "hap," which means "luck" or "happenings." Happiness rises and falls with what happens in your life, but joy remains constant regardless of what happens. Joy is an inner attitude of cheer that manifests itself through outward celebration.

Joy is an important word in the Bible. Joy appears 158 times and "rejoice" appears another 198 times. In the Old Testament there are 27 different colorful words to describe joy. Some of the basic meanings are to "run around with delight;" "to shine like the brightness of the sun."

When missionaries to the Eskimos in Northern Alaska were trying to translate the Bible into their language, they discovered there was no Eskimo word for "joy." So the missionaries looked to see what the most delightful experience in the village was. They discovered the happiest, most joyful moments were in the evenings when they fed their sled dogs. The dogs would leap and wag their tails and yelp for joy—this made the Eskimos smile as well. They used that experience to translate the word joy. In Luke, where it says, "After the resurrection, the disciples saw Jesus and were full of joy." In the Eskimo translation it reads, "When the disciples saw Jesus, they wagged their tails with delight."

Are you rejoicing in the Lord? Here's a test. Sometime this afternoon or this week, find someone who is close to you, your spouse or a good friend. Ask them, "When was the last time you saw me really rejoice?"

It's easy to be elated when something great happens to you. When the Miami Heat came back and beat the San Antonio Spurs, the players were running around and jumping for joy. They were hugging each other and LeBron James was rolling around on the floor. But the thing that makes Christian joy unique is that we can maintain this joy even when things are going wrong. We can rejoice even in the midst of our suffering. Paul wrote, "We have also obtained access through Him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope." (Romans 5:2-4 HCSB)

Let me repeat one of my strong beliefs: "In life, suffering is inevitable, but misery is optional." You don't have to go looking for suffering; it will always find you. But you have the choice about whether or not you will rejoice.

I'm convinced the reason so many Christians look miserable today is because they ARE miserable. The old Methodist evangelist, Sam Jones, used to say, "There are too many dill-pickle-Christians who look like they've been dipped in vinegar and left to sour." A joyless Christian is a contradiction. There are some believers who think the more miserable you look, the holier you are. They act like smiling is a sin and laughing is an abomination. They've perfected what I call the "Baptist holy-look." It's a facial expression somewhere between acid indigestion and a migraine headache. But the Bible says we have "inexpressible and glorious joy." (1 Peter 1:8)

You may be wondering how you can find joy. If you have Jesus, you already have joy. In John 15:11 Jesus said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The joy is there, you just have to make the choice to rejoice.

Joy is really not a feeling; it's an attitude. But when you experience real joy, you'll rejoice, which is the expression of a feeling. At any time, you can choose to rejoice. You may say, "I

don't feel like rejoicing." That's okay; rejoice anyway. Paul was in prison when he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord. I'll say it again, rejoice." He didn't write, "Rejoice in the prison." He said, "Rejoice in the Lord." The Bible never says, "Rejoice in your bank account." We rejoice in the Lord. The Bible never says, "Rejoice in your health, or your circumstances. We rejoice in the Lord.

You can't feel your way into a confession, but you can confess your way into a feeling. Don't believe it? Let's say, "Hallelujah, praise the Lord" five times. And each time, let's get louder, and more excited as we say it. It works.

The next Tweet from Paul reads:

## **2. BE PRAYERFUL: Connect with God continually**

The Bible says, "Pray continually." This doesn't mean you have to constantly be praying an audible prayer, that would be impossible. It means you should maintain a constant connection with your Father. There are two dimensions of prayer. First, every believer should have regular times of prayer when you are only focusing on God. In Daniel 6, Daniel was in the habit of entering his chambers three times a day, facing Jerusalem and getting on his knees to pray. That's what got him thrown into the lion's den.

The other dimension of prayer is to live every moment with the attitude of knowing you are in the presence of God. That's what Daniel was doing the entire night he was in the lion's den, praying continually!

Several years ago I was visiting my in-laws in Alabama, and I needed to send in some work by email. I drove to a McDonald's near Wetumpka, Alabama. I went to the counter and asked, "Do you have wifi here?" The girl thought for a minute and said, "No, I don't think we serve that here."

Think about your divine connection in terms of a wifi connection. Sometimes you're connected to the network, and sometimes you aren't. Today, wifi networks are limited. In a few years, there will be free broadband service offered in every city in America, just like your cellular network. You'll always be connected. We'll all be talking about the old days where you could only get an internet connection in certain places. In the same way, praying continually means you always have a sense of being connected with God: There are no dead zones.

The Bible describes it this way, "How happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path of sinners or join a group of mockers! Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night." (Psalm 1:1-2 HCSB)

Here are three ways to better understand what it means to pray continually.

### **A. Praying continually involves constant awareness**

You don't have to be speaking the word of a prayer to have an awareness that God is with you.

It's like riding in a car with someone and not speaking for a while. I've been on golf trips with some of my buddies, and when I get back Cindy will ask me, "What did you talk about?" And my answer is, "Nothing." And that's the truth. That probably doesn't happen much with women, but it is possible to ride with someone and not fill every moment with conversation. In fact, the closer you are to someone, the more you feel comfortable with silence. But you can launch into a conversation at any moment. That's what it means to pray continually.

### **B. Praying continually involves complete dependence**

If you are aware of the presence of God in your life, you'll find yourself often breathing a prayer, "Help me, Lord." Or "Give me wisdom, Lord." Or "Thank you, Lord."

The one thing the disciples of Jesus asked Him to teach them to do was to pray. They didn't say, "Teach us to preach" or "teach us how to heal." They said, "Teach us to pray." Jesus had set times when He would get alone and seek communion with His Father. Mark 1:35 states that Jesus got up before daylight and went out to a solitary place to pray.

But Jesus also demonstrated a constant sense of contact with His Father, and He would sometimes break out in spontaneous prayer. In Matthew 11, He was teaching, and right in the middle of His remarks He prayed, "Father, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." (Matthew 11:25)

In John 15 Jesus said He is the vine and we are the branches. He said, "Without me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5) Just as a branch is completely dependent on the vine for life, we are dependent on Jesus for every breath we take.

### **C. Praying continually involves continual conversation**

You don't have to speak to God with an audible voice, but you can carry on an ongoing mental conversation with God. You can control your thoughts or your thoughts will control you.

Jeff Palmer is a faithful member of our church who has worked with our RAs ministry for years. A few weeks ago he said to me he was really excited about me getting to these verses because they are his life-verses. I asked him to tell me what they meant to him. Here's what he wrote me: "When I was 18 I was going through a very tough time, having to make hard decisions in my life. I was reading through the Bible and it was through 1 Thessalonians 5:11-24 that God gave me great peace. Verse 17 seemed puzzling to me though; how could I pray continually? I spent several days praying over that one verse. It finally came to me that every day when I went through that day, I talked to myself. "That's a cool car; it's hot today; I'm hungry." I needed to be talking to God instead of myself. It was clear that I could pray continually talking to God all through the day. This started a closer walk with The Lord. It was hard to think unclean thoughts when your thoughts were on the Lord."

Paul's first Tweet was "rejoice always." His second one was "Pray continually." The third is:

### 3. BE THANKFUL: This is God's will for your life

The Bible says, "give thanks in all circumstances." In all my years as a pastor, I think the question I've been asked more than any other is, "How can I find God's will for my life?" They want to know God's will about college, career, or a mate. There are some simple things the Bible clearly identifies as God's will for you. It says plainly that giving thanks in all circumstances is God's will for your life. What makes you think God will reveal MORE details about His will for your life until you start obeying these simple instructions?

That's the attitude of some people. They go through life never thanking God for their blessings. They are like a pig eating acorns beneath a tree, never looking up once to acknowledge the source of the food.

Do you have an attitude of gratitude? I've discovered people tend to fall into two broad categories. Some people are humbly grateful and others are grumbly hateful. Which are you? There are some negative people who only want to talk about their problems. It's so bad that you're afraid to ask, "How are you doing?"

The Bible doesn't say "Give thanks FOR everything." It says, "Give thanks IN every circumstance." Of course you shouldn't say, "God, thank you for this cancer." But you can say, "God, I thank you that you are sovereign, and I thank you that your grace is sufficient."

Are you the kind of person who always looks for something for which you can give thanks? Alexander Whyte was a famous Scottish pastor famous for beginning every prayer with a word of thanksgiving to God. There was a particular Sunday when the weather was awful. It was cold and gray with the temperature hovering near freezing. A howling wind was driving the rain sideways. There were only a few parishioners who showed up for church. And they were waiting to see what their pastor could thank God for on such a miserable day. Alexander Whyte prayed, "Lord we thank thee..." he paused, then continued, "We thank thee that the weather isn't like this every day."

An attitude of gratitude means you focus on the blessings in your life instead of your problems. Everything good in your life is a gift from God. The Bible says, "Every generous act and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights; with Him there is no variation or shadow cast by turning." (James 1:17 HCSB)

A couple received an email from their daughter at college that read: "Dear Mom and Dad, Thought I'd drop you a note to let you know what's been happening. We had a fire at the dorm the other night and it was destroyed—but don't worry because I moved in with a nice guy I've been seeing named Jim. He quit high school after the 11th grade to get married—but don't worry because he's divorced now. I think I may be expecting a child—but don't worry, we're talking about getting married." The parents were reeling with shock when they scrolled down a little farther and read: "Don't worry—everything I've written is false. There was no fire and there's no Jim, but I did get a C- in French and I flunked Calculus. I just wanted you to put everything in its proper perspective."

It's all about your perspective. If you're looking for something to complain about you can always find it. But if you're looking for a reason to give thanks you can find that too.

## CONCLUSION

There are eight of these short commands Paul adds at the end of this letter. We've looked at the first three. In the next message we're going to talk about the next five: 4. Be sensitive; 5. Be attentive; 6. Be curious; 7. Be tenacious; and 8. Be wise.

One of the first biographies I ever read was about Thomas Alva Edison. As a boy, I was fascinated with all of his inventions. Edison held over 1,000 U.S. patents in name. He had a positive mindset and an irrepressible energy.

In 1914 when Edison was 67 years old, his lab and factory burst into flames and burned to the ground. Much of his work was lost in the fire. The building was worth \$2 million at the time, but he had it insured for only \$250,000, so he lost much of his fortune. In today's dollars, the loss would have been about \$100 million. Edison's son, Charles, was 24 at the time. Later he wrote about finding his father standing out in the chilly night, watching the fire with fascination. He wrote, "My heart ached for him—67 years old and everything going up in flames. Then I heard my dad shout, 'Charles, where's your mother? Go get her. She'll never see another fire like this one again.'" The next day, as Thomas Edison walked through the smoldering debris he said, "Son, there's great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burnt up." Thank God we can start all over again." Three weeks later Edison unveiled the first phonograph.

Life is tough. There really is no secret pathway to avoid suffering. But we don't have to avoid suffering, because God has promised to give us the strength to endure. Chuck Swindoll says, "Life is 10% about what happens to you and 90% about how you respond to it." Jesus said, "In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) If you want to overcome adversity you need to have a joyful, prayerful, thankful attitude.

## OUTLINE

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"We have also obtained access through Him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope." *Romans 5:2-4 HCSB*

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Praying continually involves:

- A. Constant awareness
- B. Complete dependence
- C. Continual conversation

### 3. BE THANKFUL: This is God's will for your life

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Next week: A Better Eightfold Path, part 2

- 4. Be sensitive
- 5. Be attentive
- 6. Be curious
- 7. Be tenacious
- 8. Be wise

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes