

“God’s RPG”

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Series: Essentials for Frontline Workers

Week 2: Love God - Prayer

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The Woodside Church

February 28, 2021

Some children say there are monsters hiding in their closets. I literally have monsters in my closet. All my monsters hide in a plain brown paper bag. Yes, brothers and sisters, I once played Dungeons and Dragons. I’ve got the D N D books, the dice and, of course, the painted figures. I’m not hiding this because I’m afraid you will think I’m into witchcraft (I’m not!). I just don’t want to give any more evidence of my inner nerd. Maybe it’s already too late for that.

Dungeons and Dragons was one of the original RPGs – Role Playing Games. Today, with computers, the internet and multiple game systems, there are countless RPGs. You can play a role in an infinite number of stunningly realistic universes: medieval fortresses, football stadiums, underground caves, dark spy mysteries and military battles. I learned that RPG also stands for Rocket Propelled Grenade – something you might need in a combat role playing game.

Let me tell you about a different RPG – God’s RPG. It’s not violent or destructive. It’s not magic, not a fantasy, not a game. Yet it is essential for those on the frontline. God’s RPG is Prayer and it’s the second tool Jesus gives His disciples. He tells us to Love God, Grow in Grace and Share with Others. Each essential includes two actions. Last week we saw how Loving God involves Worship: Loving our Father Everyday in Everyway. We gather on Sunday – in person and online – to reset, refresh, refocus on our relationship with the One True God so we can worship Him the rest of the week. Today we look at a second way to love God: Prayer. Prayer is Seeking First the Father’s Will. We often think of prayer as telling God our needs and concerns, our hopes and fears. Those are certainly part of prayer but they are not primary. As we saw last week with Worship, the main purpose of Prayer is not to get God to go along with our will but to align ourselves with His will. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said a lot about prayer including the Lord’s Prayer in which He prayed

Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt. 6:10).

He then added,

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33).

At the end of His ministry, on the night He was arrested, Jesus prayed,

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done. (Luke 22:42).

According to Jesus the ultimate purpose of prayer is to seek the Father’s Will First.

Many ask me, “How do I know what God’s will is? If I knew it then I would do it.” The Apostle Paul gives us three clear actions for uncovering God’s will.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (I Thessalonians 5:16-18).

If you were looking for an answer to the question, “Should I take that job in Cleveland” or “Should I marry Horatio?” you might be disappointed. God’s will is not a crystal ball. Neither is prayer. Rejoice, Pray, Give Thanks – RPG. The more you use God’s RPG the more you will know and follow God’s will for your life.

Rejoice Always. Prayer begins with joy. The Bible is a book of joy. *Joy* and *rejoice* appear nearly 400 times in the Bible. Yet to tell someone to “Rejoice always” sounds unrealistic. How can anyone be joyful all the time? It’s like telling someone to “Put on a Happy Face.” Many times in life you don’t feel happy. To force someone to smile when their heart is breaking is crazy and sometimes cruel. God does not want us to fake it when we pray.

To clear this up, I’d like to remind you of the difference between human happiness and God’s joy. *Happiness* comes from the word “hap” which means good luck, chance or fortune. Winning the lottery is an example of the original meaning of happiness. I am happy when the circumstances go my way, when ‘my will be done.’ Sometimes happiness happens, sometimes it doesn’t. It’s haphazard. You can pursue happiness. Sometimes you catch it. Sometimes you don’t. That’s why it’s hard to be happy all the time. Unhappy feelings – anger, resentment, self-pity, depression - mostly happen when circumstances do not go my way, when my will is not done. That’s the reality of life.

Joy is entirely different. According to the Bible, joy is a gift from God. Jesus said,

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:11).

Jesus wants to fill you with joy, not occasionally, sporadically or haphazardly but constantly. Joy is not dependent on circumstances or on you. It comes from Him. In the Bible the words *joy*, *grace* and *gift* all come from the same root. Joy is His gift to you always, anytime, anywhere. You can have joy even when you don’t feel happy.

How do you receive joy? Open yourself to God’s Glory. I did a study of over 200 times the Bible uses the word joy. A few refer to circumstances going your way: a good harvest, a victory over an enemy army, a healing from disease. These are similar to happiness. Yet several verses talk about joy in the middle of suffering. The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk says,

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. Habakkuk 3:17-18

On the night before He suffered, Jesus said,

Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. John 16:20, 22

What is the key to receiving this joy? Living in God's glorious presence 24/7.

You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. Psalm 16:11 and Acts 2:28

The Apostle Peter says,

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, I Peter 1:8

Glory is the word we use to describe God's presence. His glorious presence is everywhere all the time. A person born blind cannot see the shapes and colors of objects though they are there all the time. If, by a miracle or a surgical procedure, she receives her sight a whole new world is suddenly revealed to her. You and I are spiritually blind to the glory of God that shines around us all the time. When the Lord opens the eyes of our hearts and spirits, we begin to glimpse His glory that's been there the whole time. Let's begin prayer not with a list of requests but with a glimpse of God's glory. That is the best way to receive His joy. Why? When we take in God's glory we realize He is greater, stronger and more powerful than all the circumstances making us unhappy. We also discover He is kind, compassionate and protective. Then, as Nehemiah said, "The Joy of the Lord is your strength" Nehemiah 8:10.

I want to give you a moment to bask in God's glory. Listen to Jesus tell you who He is. I will read a statement of Jesus. Meditate on what Jesus is saying to you.

I am the Bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty

I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep

I am the Gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.

I am the Resurrection and the Life whoever believes in me will live, even though they die

I am with you always

When we are constantly aware of God's glory we know He is in charge in spite of the circumstance we see. We know He cares for us and that gives us joy.

Pray Continually. The word "continually" means ceaselessly, without stopping, without a break. How can anyone pray that way? There is a group of nuns in La Crosse, Wisconsin, who have been praying non-stop in shifts since 1878.

Praying Continually is something different. Specific, dedicated times of prayer alone with God are very important – especially at the beginning and end of the day. When Paul tells us to pray continually he encourages us to carry on a constant conversation with God. For all of you who say that’s impossible I ask: Why are you carrying around those cell phones? Isn’t it so you can be available and in contact with others anytime, anywhere? You can be in touch with God continually anytime, anywhere without a phone.

We like to ask what God’s will is in the big life-changing situations. God wants to help us with those, but He also invites us to seek His guidance for the little things everyday. Invite God into your thoughts about your errands, your work tasks, your family joys and concerns, your hopes and fears about today and tomorrow. Better yet, as each thought and task, trouble and triumph comes up, why not turn it over to God? I was amazed when a friend showed me this prayer from, of all places, the book Alcoholics Anonymous. It says,

As we go through the day we pause, when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action. We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day, “Thy will be done.” We are then in much less danger of excitement, fear, anger, worry, self-pity or foolish decisions. We become more efficient. We do not tire so easily, for we are not burning up energy foolishly as we did when we were trying to arrange life to suit ourselves. It works – it really does.¹

As each circumstance comes up during the day, offer it up to God, ask for the right thought or action and say, “Thy will, not mine, be done.”

Let’s try that. Close your eyes. Think about a situation with your family – it could be a joy or a concern. Offer it up to God, ask for the right thought or action, pray for God’s will to be done. Now do the same with work: school work, job work, house work. Now do the same with something coming up tomorrow or this week.

Rejoice, Pray Continually. The final one is **Give Thanks in all Circumstances**. It seems easy for many to give thanks to God. If you truly count your blessings on a regular basis you will soon be surprised by the number of ways God touches your life. And those are just the gifts you are aware of. There are many more hidden ways He is working in and around you. Giving thanks for my all my blessings is the best antidote I know to heal one from the crippling diseases of resentment and self-pity. When you are stuck in those prisons, the voice in your head is usually focused solely on you. “Why did they do that to me? Why did they say that to me? Why did they hurt me? Why does it seem like everyone is against me? Why don’t things go my way?” The more you indulge these attitudes the larger the problems become.

¹ Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 87-88.

When you switch to an attitude of gratitude, you discover that all circumstances are not against you and there are many wonderful blessings in your life. It also helps me to see how I contributed to my problems and what I need to change.

But what about giving thanks in *all* circumstances? Isn't the Bible being unrealistic? Remember, the Bible was written in a time when there were plagues with no vaccines, tremendous human suffering and constant persecution from the authorities. It does not say give thanks *for* all circumstances but *in* all circumstances. In our trial and suffering, we give thanks that God is greater and stronger than all my problems, that God can use our suffering to strengthen us, that God is the ultimate victor over sin and death. Giving thanks in all circumstances takes my eyes off the circumstances and puts them where they belong: on Jesus. He said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33).

Let's finish with prayers of gratitude. But instead of saying thanks for the blessings of your family, work, home, school, community or church let's do something different. A moment ago, we basked in God's glory, we let Jesus tell us who He is. Now I invite you to hear what Jesus says about you, how He sees you. As you hear how Scripture describes you, give thanks to God for what He has done for you.

You are a child of God (John 1:12)

You are a friend of Jesus (John 15:15)

You are a Temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16, 6:19)

You are a member of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27)

You are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)

You are redeemed and forgiven of all your sins. The debt against you has been canceled (Colossians 1:14; 2:14).

You are forever free of condemnation (Romans 8:1)

You have the right to come boldly before the throne of God to find mercy and grace in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Lord God, help us to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances so we may follow Your will for us in Christ Jesus. We pray this in His Strong Name. Amen.