

## INTRODUCTION

Those who practice the religion of Buddhism learn there is an eightfold path that should take a person to place where they no longer experience suffering. There's still suffering in the world, they are just no longer attached to it. Their idea of Nirvana is arriving at a state of blissful nothingness. That explains the joke about the Buddhist monk who got a wrapped birthday present from one of his friends. He unwrapped the box and opened and it was empty. The monk said, "Thanks! That's what I've always wanted!"

As Paul completed his first letter to the believers in Thessalonica, Greece, he gives them eight short, succinct directives. I call this the better eightfold path. These eight admonitions will put you on the pathway to peace and blessing.

I started this message last week. I divided it into two messages because it has eight points. Now if you're a deer hunter, an eight-point buck is okay. But for one message, that's a little too many points, so I divided it, which reminds me of the preacher who had a twenty-six-point sermon one Sunday morning, one for every letter of the alphabet. It was a loooooong sermon. He had so many complaints during the week that the next Sunday he stood up and said, "Due to so many complaints about my 26 point sermon last Sunday, this morning my sermon will be pointless!"

Hopefully, you'll get the point of this message. Let's read Paul's inspired words again found in 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."

Let's do a quick review of the first three directives. First, we are to BE JOYFUL. We can make the choice to rejoice. After last week's message Ann Powell wrote me and reminded me that when the artist was designing the stained glass window over our baptistery, he was asked us for one word that described the personality of Green Acres. We chose the word "rejoice" and although it's hard to see from the congregation, the word "rejoice" appears in the window.

Second, we should BE PRAYERFUL. We can connect to God continually. You can't pray aloud 24/7, but you can maintain a divine connection with God every moment of every day. Third, we are told to BE THANKFUL. And we learned this is God's will for your life. Some people are humbly grateful, and others are grumbly hateful. Which are you?

I mentioned last week that these short commands are similar to someone tweeting a message today. So let's look at Paul's last five tweets.

### **4. BE SENSITIVE: Obey the Holy Spirit quickly**

Six of eight of these admonitions are positive commands, but the next two are negative. Instead of two donuts, Paul serves up two "do-nots." He wrote, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire."

All sin is against God, but the New Testament teaches there are three specific sins we can commit against the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 12 Jesus talked about the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If you want more information on that sin, I have an entire message about it in our message archive on our website ("Take Out the Trash Talk!" Parables & Miracles series, Matthew 12:33-37, April 18, 2010.). But to summarize, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the total and irrevocable rejection of Jesus Christ. It is the sin of unbelief, so only an unbeliever commits this sin.

The second sin against the Holy Spirit is grieving the Spirit. Believers can commit this sin. Paul wrote, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." (Ephesians 4:30) We commit this sin when we act or speak in a way that is displeasing to God. Just as parents grieve over the misbehavior of their children, the Holy Spirit grieves when we live in an unholy way.

The third sin against the Holy Spirit is the one Paul mentions here. In the King James Version it says, "Don't quench the Spirit." Here, the Holy Spirit is symbolized by fire.

In Revelation 4, when John has a vision of the throne of God in heaven, he reported seven torches of fire around the throne. Seven is the number of perfection, and these torches were seven Spirits of God. There's only one Holy Spirit, but He is the third person of the Trinity, so He is perfect like the Father and Son are perfect.

When God called Moses, He spoke through a burning bush. And there was a pillar of fire that led them through the wilderness. The prophet Jeremiah wrote that he tried to quit preaching, but God's Word was like fire in his bones.

Fire speaks of warmth, purity, and energy. Jesus said in Luke 12 that He came to bring fire on the earth. He meant that He came so we could experience the warmth, purity, and energy of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. But sometimes we quench the Spirit. Sometimes when the flame of the Holy Spirit ignites our spirit, we throw a wet blanket over the fire.

Have you ever had a sense that you need to do something good for someone? Perhaps God brought someone to your mind, and you had a thought, "You know, I should call or email that person and just let them know I love them, or I appreciate them." That was the Holy Spirit prompting you to encourage that person. If you ignore that prompting, you are quenching the Spirit. Have you ever had a prompting to help someone financially, or take someone a meal, or perform some other act of kindness? But then you think, "Nah. Never mind." You just quenched the Holy Spirit. Have you ever felt a prompting to share your faith with someone? And you ignored that impulse? That was quenching the Holy Spirit.

Are you on fire for Jesus, or has the fire gone out? Some people are so afraid of spiritual wildfire that they settle for no fire. Vance Havner wrote: "Just because some have gone into a wildfire with rolling in the hay and foaming at the mouth, that doesn't mean that the rest of us have to live in a deep freeze! God never intended His church to be a refrigerator to preserve perishable piety—it must be a place where God's fire falls and His people are ignited for service."

So the next time the Holy Spirit prompts you to do something good; don't ignore it. Don't smother it. Obey Him. It will be like pouring gasoline on a fire, and your life will be a testimony of the warmth, purity and energy.

## **5. BE ATTENTIVE: Respect the preaching of God's Word**

The second do-not says, "Do not treat prophecies with contempt." In the Old Testament, prophets were servants of God who had a ministry of both foretelling the future, and forth telling the truth. Most of their messages were not about the future. They delivered God's message for the people to repent. In the New Testament, the gift and act of prophecy was not predicting the future. It was forth telling the Word of God. We would call it inspired preaching.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul compared and contrasted the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues with the gift of prophecy. He wrote when a person was speaking in tongues, they were speaking to God and they were the only ones edified. So speaking in tongues was praying – talking to God. But he wrote, "The one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." (1 Corinthians 14:3)

That's what I hope to do every time I stand up to share God's Word. I hope you are strengthened, encouraged and comforted. The gift of prophecy was important during the early church because they didn't have the New Testament. The Holy Spirit moved the preachers to share God's truth from the Old Testament and they interpreted it in light of the coming of Christ.

Apparently, some of the believers were ignoring the inspired preaching of the leaders, or they were holding them in contempt. What does it mean to hold preaching in contempt? Think about what we mean when a judge holds someone in contempt of court. Here's the legal definition of contempt of court. "Individuals may be cited for contempt when they disobey an order, fail to comply with a request, tamper with documents, withhold evidence, interrupt proceedings through their actions or words, or otherwise defy a public authority or hold it up to ridicule and disrespect."

You may be holding the preaching of God's Word in contempt if you ignore it, or hold it in ridicule or disrespect. But let me turn it around and put it in a positive form. You should show up and hear and respect the preaching of God's Word. I've said it before, but thousands of church members hold the preaching of God's Word in such contempt that they don't even show up on Sundays to hear it.

Do you respect the preaching of God's Word? I heard a story about a strange woman who showed up for church. She told the usher she wanted to sit down front. He said, "Ma'am. I wouldn't suggest that. Our preacher is really boring. Maybe you want to sit in the back." The lady got upset and said, "Do you know who I am?" The usher said, "No." She said, "I'm the pastor's mother." The usher said, "Do you know who I am?" She said, "No." He said, "Good!" and walked off.

## **6. BE DISCERNING: Filter every teaching through God's Word**

Paul wrote, "Test everything." He meant that you are to test every message from another Christian. The Apostle John wrote the same warning, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

Sadly, Christians can be some of the most gullible folks around. We tend to believe and forward every email rumor we get without checking it out. May I correct the record for you? Madelyn Murray O'Hair isn't trying to ban all religious broadcasting. She's dead. But that hasn't stopped Christians from sending over 40 million letters to the FCC.

Procter & Gamble's logo does not contain a satanic symbol. That was a rumor started by Amway distributors. President Obama isn't a Muslim. He was baptized as a Christian in 1988, and he most often attends church at Camp David, where the military chaplain there is a Southern Baptist.

Don't believe everything you read on the internet. And don't believe everything you heard some television preacher say. These hucksters have preyed on the naïve and the gullible, and they have received millions of dollars from people who sent them money with the expectation that they would become rich if they sent money in. And the people who send them the most money are the poorest who can least afford it. And every year, the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons claim thousands of naïve, gullible Christians who don't know their Bibles.

But I'm not just talking about gullible Christians. There are intelligent people who read a book like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and they believe it is truth. They actually believe there is some kind of conspiracy to cover up that Jesus was married and that the church has been corrupt from the very first. And Dan Brown is laughing all the way to the bank.

You can't believe everything you hear. Luke, writing in Acts, made a good observation about the Christians in Berea. He wrote, "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11)

When the Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in New Zealand in the 1840s there were already thousands of Maori Christians there. Protestant missionaries had led them to Christ and left them Bibles. The Catholic missionaries tried to convince the Maori believers that they must pray to the saints and the Virgin Mary; and the ultimate source of authority was with the Pope in Rome, and that Roman Catholic communion was the only Holy Communion. The Maoris responded with a simple but elegant response. They said, "It cannot be true, because it is not in the book."

That's a good practice for us to follow. And I encourage you to do that with everything I say. When I came as pastor almost 23 years ago, I promised I would preach the full gospel of the Word of God. At that time I said if I ever say anything contrary to the Word of God, please do me the favor of coming to me and pointing it out. That invitation still stands. Don't believe a word I say if it isn't confirmed in the Bible.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of Americans believed there was intelligent life on Mars. Why? Because Percival Lowell, a wealthy astronomer, claimed he saw manmade canals on the surface of Mars. On August 27, 1911, the New York Times ran an article with the headline Martians Build Two Immense Canals in Two Years.

Of course, today we know there are no canals on Mars. Now it is believed Percival Lowell had an eye disease that makes a person see bulging blood vessels in their own eyeballs. So, Lowell didn't see canals on Mars, he was seeing a reflection of the veins in his own retina! Even so, we tend to believe anything we hear an "expert" say. Someone once said the word "expert" comes from two words: "Ex," meaning has been; and "spurt," a drip under pressure. Here's a better idea than believing what the so-called experts say. Filter everything you hear through the Word of God.

## **7. BE FAITHFUL: Don't stop doing what is right**

Paul continued by writing, "Hold onto the good." Now, these next two admonitions grow out of the one before. We are to test everything. And if it's good, we are to hold onto it. If it is bad, we are to avoid it.

Have you ever heard the word Catechism? It is a teaching style of questions and answers. Our English word "catechism" comes from the word Paul used when he wrote, "hold onto." It is the word *katecho* that means to "grip firmly."

In terms of doctrine, once you have heard the truth and determined that it is the truth, don't let go of it. Keep a firm grip on it. In golf, the grip is very important. The mistake many duffers make is that they hold the club too tightly. When there's tension in the hands and arms, it's difficult to have a smooth swing. Most golfers have heard the tip that you should grip the club like you're holding a baby bird. You want to keep it from flying away, but you don't want to crush it. That's the correct grip pressure. But when it comes to believing the truth, we should grip it tightly, and don't let go.

But this goes beyond good belief. It also involves good behavior. Good behavior won't get you into heaven. But if Jesus is in your heart, there will be the evidence of good behavior. And there will be consistent, faithful good behavior.

Paul wrote, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)

Sometimes we think that as long as we don't do anything wrong, we're a good person. You'll hear someone say, "I don't smoke, cuss, drink, or chew, and I don't hang out with people who do."

Goodness isn't defined by what you refrain from doing. It only happens when you do good deeds. Have you ever entertained the idea that the devil doesn't necessarily want you to be bad; he just wants you to be indifferent? The first book I read by C. S. Lewis was *The Screwtape Letters*. It contains a fictitious correspondence between a demon named Screwtape, and his nephew,

Wormwood. Wormwood has been assigned to a Christian. The devil gives this bit of advice to Screwtape: "I, the devil, will always see to it that there are bad people. Your job, my dear Wormwood, is to provide me with people who do not care."

The reason we hold onto the good isn't because we're good. It's because God is good. We can't do good deeds on our own. In fact the Bible says there is none good, no not one.

One of the first nursery rhymes we learned was, "Little Jack Horner; Sat in a corner; Eating a Christmas pie; He put in his thumb; and pulled out a plum, and said, 'What a good boy am I.'" We can't say, "Look what a good person I am. But we can say, "Look at what a good God I serve." We don't hang onto good works because we're good; we do it because God is good.

Once you find the good belief, hang on to it tightly. And then let it lead you to good behavior. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds...and brag what a good person you are?" Nope. "...That they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16-17)

## **8. BE WISE: Run from anything that appears to be evil**

Paul completed his list with the words, "Avoid every kind of evil." In the KJV it says, "Avoid even the appearance of evil."

We should avoid evil activities and evil people for two reasons. First, once you say you are a Christian, people are watching you. If they see you involved in evil, you lose your witness. Second, if you hang out with people doing bad things, you can become like them. Sam Jones used to say, "If you lie down with dogs, you're going to get up with fleas."

Of course, we know of the big evils we should avoid, things like sexual immorality, drunkenness, and stealing. But there are things we call "lesser evils" which aren't lesser at all. I'm referring to the sins of gossip, slander, and pride. We are to run away from every kind of evil.

Paul gave this bit of advice to Timothy, "Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." (2 Timothy 2:22) Joseph was a great example of someone who held onto the good and ran away from evil. Even though his brothers sold him into slavery, he still worshipped and served God. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, Joseph literally ran away, leaving his tunic in her hands. It's better to run away naked with your reputation intact, than it is to give in to sin.

## **CONCLUSION**

That's the eightfold path to blessing and peace. Be joyful; be prayerful; be thankful; be sensitive; be attentive; be discerning; be faithful; and be wise. To me, the key to these eight admonitions is the one in the middle that says, "Don't put out the Spirit's fire." If you are on fire for Jesus, then you'll be joyful, prayerful, and thankful. You'll honor God's Word, test everything, and hold on to good, and reject wrong.

It's a sad thing for a Christian to lose his fire for God. Has the fire gone out in your heart? We need to pray the prayer Keith Green put in one of his songs, "Lord, You're Beautiful." The first stanza says, "Oh, Lord, You're beautiful; Your face is all I seek; For when Your eyes are on this child; Your grace abounds to me." There's another verse that says, "Oh Lord, please light the fire; That once burned bright and clear; Replace the lamp of my first love; That burns with holy fire."

Do you need to pray that prayer? Lord, please light the fire in my heart. On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to fill the believers, there were two physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The first was the sound of a mighty rushing wind and the word for wind and spirit, are the same, *pneuma*. The second manifestation was fire. Small flames of fire appeared above the heads of each of the believers. As Jim Cymbala says in his great book, what we need in our lives and what we need in our churches is a fresh wind and fresh fire. Will you pray for that?

## OUTLINE

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  2. BE PRAYERFUL: Connect with God continually
  3. BE THANKFUL: This is God's will for your life
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### 4. BE SENSITIVE: Obey the Holy Spirit quickly

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."  
*Ephesians 4:30*

### 5. BE ATTENTIVE: Respect the preaching of God's Word

"The one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." 1  
*Corinthians 14:3*

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes