

I love this text from Paul because it is so upbeat and positive. Depending on when you read these words, you might even feel as though Paul is being rather idealistic- “Rejoice always!”- Yeah, right! How can I possibly rejoice when I am in physical or emotional pain, or the news just keeps getting more and more troublesome, or someone else I know is struggling through something, or the thought of life is darker because it is not what it used to be for you- maybe a loved one has passed or a coworker has moved jobs or you feel forced out of daily rhythm by new technologies? How can I rejoice with all of that going on? It would be great to rejoice, but how can I as Paul says, “with thanksgiving... keep on” in life?

These words from Paul remind us to focus on the good in life and to dwell on things that are worthy of our attention. As I said a minute ago, the actual words Paul uses are what many of us might deem the improbable, “Rejoice always!... Do not worry about anything, **but** in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” When we're feeling overwhelmed or discouraged, these words from Paul can help us to refocus and remember that there is goodness in the world because God is in the world and God is good. It's a reminder to lean on our faith in God and keep our eyes on what matters most. Namely and more specifically, our focus is to settle on that which is “true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable.” And not what we might tend to justify on our own as these things but what God says and sources each of these to be. It is in God that we are to rejoice and not worry and be filled with thanksgiving. In doing so with God, we will be empowered to keep on in what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable to God throughout life.

Within this theme of thanksgiving and keeping on throughout our life in the spirit of thanksgiving, I want to zero in on the power of perspective as it pertains to focusing on what we do have and who is present, and not on what we don't have or who may be missing.

A couple quick stories help underline what our perspective may tend to be.

Let's say you have a picture in front of you. It is a colored picture of a star that is outlined with a strand of lights. The strand of lights is on as to illumine and draw attention to the eye and help express the image of the star. That is all the lights on the strand are illumined except for one light that is tucked a bit in the background of the outline. As you are asked to look at this picture, what would you see? Would you see a star full of lights? Or would you see the one light that is not illumined? If you are someone whose focus settles on the one light that is not working, according to research you are apparently in the majority of people. If this is you, do you see any of the other lights at all, or do you miss out on all the other lights?

I get that there is a balance here and some of us might even be able to claim that it depends on the situation. Someone might even say, “What about the parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son?” Jesus teaches us to care for the one light that is out and try to save it, doesn’t he? And to this I would say simply, true, Jesus does teach us this. However, Jesus does not tell us to miss out on or not care for or ignore all the other lights in the process.

Recently a friend told me a story about taking her seven-year-old to the circus. It was a wonderful mother-daughter outing. Just the two of them, no pesky brothers or dad tagging along and getting in the way. They had the best time. They watched acrobats and clowns and all manner of brand new delights, gasping at one another gleefully at every new feat. They bathed in each other’s company without interruption, laughing and having fun. Literally all the things. After this magical afternoon, as the two of them were leaving, my friend’s daughter spied the merchandise stand and wanted her mum to buy her a plastic fairy wand. My friend gently but firmly said no. In the car on the way home, her daughter was quiet. “What did you like the most? What was your favorite thing today?” my friend asked her. The daughter was sulking. “I’m just thinking about the wand I didn’t get.”

I’m just thinking about the wand I didn’t get. How many of us fixate on the wands we didn’t get, even amidst the most wonderful experiences? How often do we home in on the one negative comment, or the thing that isn’t right instead of what is positive or right? How can we just see what is rather than disproportionately focusing on what isn’t?

I was preparing to lead a youth group one Sunday night in Burlington. On any given Sunday we could have upwards of 40 youth attend both Middle and High School. We always met in the fellowship hall for dinner first and then we would break off into our different age groups. As one of the adult youth leaders came in for dinner, they must have felt things being quiet or slow or sluggish, because the next thing they said really got to me. They said, “Where is everyone?” I would guess there were 20 youth there at the time and another 6 adults. “Where is everyone?” I thought. “They are right here. Don’t you see them?” I will admit this wasn’t the first time this adult leader had made this comment, so I asked them what the implication of their question was. To my surprise, maybe it shouldn’t have been though, the response was that because a certain group of youth they wanted to be there wasn’t there, they were afraid those who were there weren’t going to be enough or get enough out of it.

Our perspective tends to be one of focusing on that which isn’t, those who aren’t present, paralyzed by the one thing we feel may be wrong. And when this perspective is our perspective, the power it has over our emotions and approach to life can be paralyzing. It can

leave us dissatisfied and defeated and in a state of judgment or evaluation without the belief that we can “keep on” in life until these things change. At the core, I think focusing on that which isn’t or those who aren’t present, is actively (perhaps simultaneously) an act of not being grateful or thankful for that which is and those who are present. We can become so fixed on the negative at times, even over one small comment or fear, that all the positive swirling around us and happening to us, is missed. We can even actively dismiss others (others who are valuable too, talented too, worth it too, helpful too) when doing this. We don’t mean to do this to others, do we? We don’t want to miss out on the positive, do we? Of course not. So, what then? What can we do?

As I answer this, I will start by saying God doesn’t want us to miss out on the positive either. God wants nothing more than for all of us to be filled with love, and joy, and hope, and peace. God wants nothing more than for all of us to know and experience compassion and comfort and strength. God wants nothing more than for all of us to be guided by and live accordingly with what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable to God.

So, what can we do? We can shift our perspective and reassign the power of our perspective to thanksgiving/gratitude- “with thanksgiving... keep on”.

“When we focus on our gratitude, the tide of disappointment goes out and the tide of love rushes in.” Kristin Armstrong

“No duty is more urgent than giving thanks.” James Allen

“I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” GK Chesterton

"Everything we do should be a result of our gratitude for what God has done for us."
Lauren Hill

The next time we might feel the urge to get critical and get caught in the spider web of negativity, and hopefully before words are spoken to impact others around us, let us stop for a moment and soak up the positive rays around us and assess all that which we have the opportunity of being thankful for. Just think of all God has given us. Just think of the lights around the star, the laughter and adventure, and the presence of those who are here. The air we breathe. The healing we have experienced. The words of affirmation shared in joy. The opportunity to explore, discover, and grow. The small and random acts of kindness by the server at the restaurant or the cook on the line or the nurse who cleans up. We have so much to rejoice and so much to be thankful for. Let us do what Annette Bridges does and ask gratitude to help us by saying, “Gratitude, help us to see what is there instead of what isn't.” For with this new power of perspective with thanksgiving, our minds will be renewed, our attitudes affected, and our joy will begin to fill and overflow. Today, I pray we can all keep on with thanksgiving and with thanksgiving, keep on.