

“Seven Steps to Spontaneity”
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (NRSV)

At least once a year and for at least one day in October or November, depending upon whether you live in Canada or the United States, most North Americans will observe **Thanksgiving Day**. For many it will be nothing more than a routine ritual. After all, it's marked on our calendars. And, oh yes, there is, the traditional Thanksgiving meal. For many, this meal will include at least a brief prayer of thanks. After all, it's the right thing to do. But is that all there is to it? Is there nothing more that can happen and come out of the season of Thanksgiving?

Here's another question for you: What **one word** would personify **the kind of person you long to become**?

When I became serious about my Christian faith in my late teens, a **personality transformation** began. My experience of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling Christ, began to liberate me to be an increasingly free person – free to love God, others and myself. I was, and still am, all too aware that I need to surrender my tendencies to caution, reserve and defensiveness. The Lord's gift to me, however, is to help me to be able to give myself away, to fall in love with people and to involve myself with spendthrift abandon in meeting other people's needs. And although I find I still have some hang-ups and some resistance to change, I find I am still keen to be an open, ready-for-anything kind of person. If I've made any progress towards this goal, it is because of the moment-by-moment renewal of the Lord's Spirit in me.

Therefore, the word I'd select for myself is “spontaneous.” **I want to be a spontaneous person.** I'm convinced that an authentic sign that we've become the residence of the Holy Spirit is that we are **spontaneous**. My working definition of **spontaneity** is openness, freedom, expectancy, and a willingness to be surprised. It's an enjoyment and an affirmation of life. The basic meaning of the word is, “that which is done freely, arising from some inherent qualities.” True spontaneity is the result of surrendering our wills to the indwelling Spirit so the inherent qualities by which we respond to life are his: qualities like “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23a). There's an uncalculating, unaffected, unbounded excitement in us when the Spirit of Christ is allowed freedom to express himself through us. I believe we're meant to be **spontaneous people**.

God has so much more to reveal to us. So often we miss the beauty around us and the serendipities offered to us, all because of our fearful efforts to defend, protect and preserve ourselves. As someone has said, “I’ve spent all of my life saving myself for something – I don’t know what – yet, I’ve missed the wonderful delight of living while I’m still alive.” I’m determined to do just the opposite. What about you?

One of the most remarkable persons I’ve read about is **Garland Ingraham**, the retail vice-president of Sears Roebuck. When people call him on the phone, he answers, “Hello, this is Gar Ingraham. **What can I do for you?**” In the highly competitive world of marketing, in which he’d be tempted to become jaundiced, fearful of manipulation and on guard against being used or misused, **he’s remained spontaneous.** He punctuates a conversation with the oft-repeated question, “**Why not?**” Mind you, he’s no pushover or easy mark. His goals are clearly set. But in all the pressures of his job he’s never lost the contagious quality of being open to fresh ideas and new ways of doing the tried and true. What a great way to be a leader!

The opposite of spontaneity is stagnation. Who, you may ask, wants that? Apparently, quite a number of people do. Stagnation reveals itself in such negative statements as these: “We’ve never done it that way before.” “We’re not ready for that.” “We’re doing all right without this or that.” “We tried it before and it didn’t work.” “It costs too much.” “It’s not our responsibility.” And, “It just won’t work.” Even Christians have been known to use phrases like these. Unfortunately, some of the very people on whom we depend to model life as a great adventure have also made these statements the charter of their stagnation.

How can we escape from such stagnation? How can we find and live a more spontaneous, yet not a reckless or an irresponsible, life? The apostle Paul gives us a list in his conclusion to his First Letter to the Thessalonians. Let’s call this list “**seven steps to spontaneity**” (Lloyd Ogilvie). Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets. Test everything; hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

I want to begin with the fourth admonition: “**Do not quench the Spirit**” because I believe it’s the key to the others. The Holy Spirit of God in Christ working within us enables us to carry out each of the others.

1. **Don't quench the Spirit: accept the gift of enthusiasm** (1 Thess. 5:19).

Spontaneity is the result of the fire of the Holy Spirit within us. The first step to spontaneous living is to feed that fire with **trust in God**. When the fires of the Holy Spirit are fuelled by our **willingness to trust in God**, there is an **uncontainable enthusiasm** for the gospel, life in Christ, people and the wonder of life. Enthusiasm is a key to great living. Authentic enthusiasm is a gift. It is not the result of human effort. Many of us have tried on our own strength to become enthusiastic people, only to find we run out of steam. When enthusiasm is motivated by others, circumstances or possibilities, we are easily disappointed and can become negative. It's not always easy to be sunny, on top of things, all the time.

What then is the secret of a consistent flow of enthusiasm? The fire of the Holy Spirit! Genuine enthusiasm has its unquestionable origin in the indwelling blaze of the Spirit's living in us. This is what John the Baptist predicted would come with Jesus: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3:11). This also fired up the early church at Pentecost.

The Greek word for **enthusiasm** ("enthusiasmos") means "in God" or "inspired by God." When we become Spirit-filled people, **the fire of the Spirit** burns out anything that would keep us cold, cautious or constricted. That's why I say enthusiasm is a gift. It is God's own **life-affirming, creative, positive Spirit**, who cleanses us and then charges us with **uncontainable excitement for living**. The identifiable, outward manifestation of the fire of Pentecost burning in us is **warmth and willingness**. Resistance to and within life will be replaced by **receptivity**. Then we're ready for the second step to spontaneous living.

2. **Rejoice always: welcome life expectantly** (1 Thess. 5:16).

We can tackle all that life offers if we can **praise God** for what happens to and around us. The key to unlocking both the challenge and the concern in life is to "**rejoice always.**" This isn't simplistic sentimentalism. It's rooted in a profound trust that God can and will use every situation for his glory. With this attitude we will be able to discover new truths about life, others, and ourselves and advance through life's pleasant and painful experiences. When setbacks or disappointments hit us we will realize that they may contain **new opportunities or unexpected, hidden joys**.

We can wade into seeming impossibilities with enthusiasm because we have learned that our most pressing problems in the past have forced us to learn two essential lessons from life: 1) **God is in charge**, and 2) **we have grown the most when we have trusted him** in spite of what seemed to be impossible odds. Rejoicing always enables us to embrace life's ups and downs without reservation. When we expect to discover **truth and growth** from each person or circumstance, we'll never be disappointed.

Each one of us faces trivial and momentous difficulties, which will either destroy our effectiveness or enable us to let go of frustration and pick up the broken pieces and start again. That can only happen if we rejoice that God can use everything for our growth and his glory.

Apparently **Bill Village** kept a special book with some of his days' special memories or discoveries. I like that.

Why don't we do that? Watch for and write down what God teaches you. As someone has said, "It's not the number of breaths that we take but the breath-taking moments and experiences each day offers." Don't forget any one of them. Thank God for them. **Why not do this daily** -- along with your "quiet time" of Bible study and prayer -- to fortify yourself to begin the each day with spontaneity. **Resolve to rejoice!** Not regardless of what comes your way, but because of it. There's a blessing waiting, wrapped up in each questionable eventuality. Expect it. Look for it. Thank God for it in advance. You will note the change that happens in your attitudes.

This second step is inseparably related to the third.

3. **Pray without ceasing: dare to be an open person** (1 Thess. 5:17).

We can rejoice because we're ready to learn what God is saying to us in life. Paul's secret of power in all circumstances is to "**pray without ceasing.**" Prayer is **cumulative friendship with the Lord**. Because it includes meditation on whatever we face and whatever the Scriptures say, prayer gives us perspective on what life brings. **Spontaneous prayer is moment-by-moment "checking in" with the Lord for his direction.** When we are open to life and to God we can ask, "Okay, Lord, what are you going to do with this problem or potential?" "I believe you work all things together for good" (Rom. 8:28). "What's next on your agenda for me, for us, in this?"

The great thing about praying **“without ceasing”** – i.e., **whenever we think of it** – is that **it keeps open channels** for what the Lord may want to accomplish in and through us or each particular situation. Instead of being thrown by changes, we can throw ourselves into making changes according to his guidance. Authentic spontaneity comes from this **consistent companionship of prayer**.

We can **pray quietly in every situation**: when we are alone or with others, when we are reflective or deeply involved in pressure or action. We are never alone! The American poet, essayist, and naturalist, **Henry Thoreau**, said, “Most [people] lead lives of quiet desperation.” Not so for the constantly praying Christian. We are surrounded with a host of witnesses” who are always encouraging us on (Heb. 12:1).

A positive advantage of this continual prayer is always **living in the now**. **Life moves swiftly**. It’s easy to collect debilitating memories, hurts and resentments. Our spontaneity can be blocked by the collection of garbage in our souls. When we are in constant conversation with God we can deal with these feelings immediately. The next hour, the next day, doesn’t need to be polluted by the unresolved attitudes of the past. We can get rid of the past before it becomes the present.

Another positive aspect of praying constantly is the birth of **creative anticipation**. Before and during an encounter or opportunity, we can pray for the Lord’s guidance or peace. He has promised to replace our way-too-smart cleverness with his wisdom, our over-analysis with his discernment, our superficial insight with his eternal inspiration. Life in the Spirit is like stepping into the fast-moving currents of a river. We are carried along by supernatural power. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God” (Ps. 46:4a).

Prayer without ceasing means **becoming a recipient of God’s power**. Truth be told, we are all over our heads in water with problems we can’t solve and people’s needs we can’t meet. But the Lord has promised to give us what we need. I find that as I imagine my mind, emotions and will as **a channel through which the Holy Spirit can move freely**, God Spirit infuses thoughts into my head beyond my understanding and love in my heart beyond my capability. But I also know God’s Spirit will not flow through us unless we open the floodgates.

The poet, **Alfred Tennyson**, described the meaning of praying constantly when he said, “Prayer is like opening a sluice between a great ocean and our little channels, when the sea gathers itself together and flows at full tide.”

The next step, to thank God, is given special emphasis by Paul.

4. Give thanks in all circumstances: thank God for what he will do

Giving “thanks **in** all circumstances” is “the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:18). **Thankful prayer is not an option; it’s God’s will.** God knows no difficult situation or problem person is released to him until we find something in that circumstance or relationship for which to give him thanks. The great bishop, **Ambrose of Milan**, who taught Augustine, a notoriously unruly, yet intelligent, man, to become the greatest theologian of the church, said, “No duty is more urgent than that of returning thanks.” Certainly, some circumstances are very difficult. We may not want to thank God **for** them. But what we are learning about ourselves, about others and about life **in** these circumstances may well be a blessing in disguise. We become open to further blessings when we thank God.

The other day, someone approached me with what he thought was a disappointing report on an important project. He said, “**I have bad news.**” My usual response in these situations is “fear and trembling.” But, this time, I tried to breathe a silent prayer, “**Thank God!**” If I’d blurted this prayer out loud, the man might have asked me, astounded, “What did you say?” “Well,” I might have replied, “I want what God wants. If the report is less than what I’d hoped then I’m thankful because to have something God hasn’t willed wouldn’t be the best for the church. To have what God wills is joy; to have something he’s not willed is spiritual suicide. So, let’s have the report and let’s move on from here.”

Thanksgiving also engenders **spontaneity in other ways.** We all need to know that everything we have and are is a gift. Success can cripple spontaneity just as quickly as roadblocks or failure. All too often, we begin to think we’ve accomplished it all by ourselves. Too soon we cling to life tightly to assure a continuous series of successes. When we take the credit because of our cleverness or hard work we can get tense trying to stay on top. Only gratitude can break the bind. As a preacher, **John Henry Jowett**, once wisely said, “Every virtue divorced from thankfulness is maimed and limps along the spiritual road.”

The truly spontaneous people I know **live thankful lives**. Like one out of ten healed lepers who returned to Jesus to express gratitude (Lk. 17:15-19), they're ready for fresh blessings or challenge from the Lord because they're always thankful. As **John Baillie** said, "Gratitude is not only the dominant note in Christian piety, but equally the dominant motive of Christian action. ... A true Christian is a person who never for a moment forgets what God has done for him [or her] in Christ, and whose whole comportment and whole activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude."

This moves us to the next step in spontaneous living.

5. Don't despise the words of the prophets: accept the future as friend.

A spontaneous person knows God gives the day and shows us the way. As I've said earlier, there is still undiscovered truth for us to learn and experience. Each new phase of life will show us more of the Lord and more of ourselves.

Paul says, "**Do not despise the words of the prophets**" (1 Thess. 5:20). Elsewhere, he singles out prophecy as one of the chief spiritual gifts which build up the church (1 Cor. 14:1-5). Prophetic utterance had great authority in the early church. It is worth noting that the word in Greek for "prophecies" means "**forth-telling**" more than foretelling. Often they blend together. A forth-telling of truth is a foretelling of how we must act in the future to live out a truth. In that sense it is like preaching – explaining what the Bible means. We only know as much as we have enacted in our daily lives. Truth is known when it's done and done when it's known.

The thing the Lord seems to be asking us is, "Are you open and ready for new truth? Are you willing to keep on learning? There is so much you and I have not yet discovered. Keep open to the future. It is filled with revelations from Me that will astound you with how little you know!" What can we say to this except, "We're ready, Lord, pour it on!" The reliable test we're not quenching the Holy Spirit is that we are more excited about the future than the past. Great churches are made up of people who long to press on: in Bible study, in prayer, in evangelism and in social action and justice ministries. The future is not an enemy to be feared; it's a friend which greets us with new possibilities in a world filled with impossibilities.

The next step in Paul's delineation seems a bit negative.

6. Test everything; hold fast to what is good: set goals (1 Thess. 5:21).

But there is an appropriate caution here. Spontaneous living is not being open to do whatever the whim of the moment dictates. Spontaneity is freedom to respond to what God has guided. For me, Paul's exhortation means to discern "what is good" according to God's plan and to move forward with prayerfully established goals to accomplish it. Clearly defined goals are to the spontaneous person what sails are to a boat. They catch and concentrate the wind of the Spirit. They also help us to know what are priorities. With clearly defined, courageous goals, we can quickly decide between alternatives and be positive in moving forward. True freedom is always expressed within carefully defined limits. No great literature of art was ever produced by a person who worked when he or she felt like it. No profound things have ever been accomplished without making choices.

Now we are ready to consider the positive action of step seven.

7. Abstain from evil: over come the negative each day (1 Thess.5:22).

How can we consistently "abstain from every evil"? Paul articulates the secret in Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Spontaneous people are free to overcome the negative all around us by actually performing specific, random acts of kindness.

Well, there you have it: **seven steps to spontaneous living** under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Of course, you will have discovered that they are all intertwined, and they all include thanksgiving for "every perfect gift" (Jas. 1:17) that God has given us. Dare to be authentically spontaneous this Thanksgiving season and always.

Amen

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