

LIVE LIFE *to the* MAX!



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TIME OF
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MINISTRY

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Direct quotations from the
Bible (NIV) are printed in **bold**.

A little while ago somebody was criticizing President George W. Bush and said, “Wherever you go you always seem to swagger. Why is that?” George said, “Well, you know, I’m from West Texas, and in Texas we call that walking.”

Have you ever been to Texas? If so, you know a little bit about it. Texans are a proud bunch in that mighty big state. They don’t acknowledge the existence of Alaska, and they still think they are the biggest state geographically. They have a great big mentality in Texas – if you think that something can be done, then you just go and do it. Texas has big ranches and big cities. It has people with great big ideas and great big attitudes.

In Texas you don’t just walk, you swagger – because if you’re from Texas, you’re from the only state that once was an independent nation. And the lone star in that Lone Star State is not only a type of beer, but it is a state of mind to encourage people to believe in being a Texan. So if you’re a Texan, you think big.

I’d like you to have a Texas sort of attitude toward your God. One of the problems that you and I have is that we think very

small. I’ll admit to it, too. I talk myself down and think of myself as being worthless and low-down and not ever amounting to much. Too often I drag around my own heart, feeling pretty small and worthless and insignificant; too often I give up early with the words, “I can’t.” I think you probably struggle with those very same things, too. The worst part is when you take those low-down, belittling thoughts and apply them to your God and say, “I guess my God is a little God, too.”

I want to challenge you to live your life to the max and to treat God as big as he really is, to lift him up to the place where he really belongs in the middle of your life, not off on the periphery. I want you to have no fear whatsoever about entrusting your hopes, dreams, body, soul, and spirit into his mighty big hands. I want you to experience the life-changing attitude that will result.

I’ve got some encouragement for you. These are not my ideas. They come straight to you from your God, who is going to give you three challenges about living your life to the max and about treating him the way that he deserves to be treated – as big, as loving, as powerful, and as wise as he is.

Go get your Bible and turn to the fifth chapter of I Thessalonians. Paul was writing to a fearful little band of Christians. In fact, it's a miracle that congregation existed at all because Paul was driven out of it prematurely after trying to stay there and help get a congregation started. His ministry there lasted only three weeks. He was persecuted and driven out of Thessalonica, yet he got it done. In only *three weeks* he planted enough seeds that began to sprout and grow up into a congregation.

And he really loved the Thessalonians. There were a lot of praiseworthy features about that congregation. But one real problem it had was that the members were messed up in their thinking about the return of Jesus. When they were told that "Jesus is coming soon," they thought it meant in a day or two. Some of them were afraid they'd miss it. Some were figuring, "Well, you said he was coming in a day or two, and now it's been years and he still isn't here, so maybe he's not coming at all." Their lower lips began to curl out. Some people had quit their jobs and were kind of lazing and scrounging. They said, "Why should we bother working? If Jesus will be

here any day now, why should I bother stacking bricks? For what? It's all going to be destroyed." They saw no point in working if life on earth was irrelevant, unimportant, and about to end anyway.

Some Thessalonians had problems trusting that God's Word could be kept, and they had trouble knowing how to live a ready life, realizing that Jesus *could* be there at any minute. This whole letter was written with that in mind, and way at the end there are just a couple little sentences to challenge all of you small-time thinkers to think more like Texans about your God and to live life to the max for your big God.

These challenges – three of them – are geared toward people who whine and complain a lot and who only feel like being happy on their birthdays and Christmas – and then only if they get lots of presents. These challenges are geared toward people who only pray when they want something or when they're in deep, deep doo-doo; toward people who give thanks only when they have something to give thanks for – which actually turns out to be hardly ever because they think their lives are crummy, especially in comparison with their friends.

Take a look in I Thessalonians 5, v.16 at the three mighty challenges God gives to people so that they can live life to the max.

Here's challenge number one: **“Be joyful.”** When? **“Be joyful *always*.”** I want to examine with you why you can be happy all the time. When you've got a migraine headache – be joyful. When you've been laid off from your job – be joyful. When your children have given you hours of trouble and you're ready to scream – be joyful. When your mother, now for the 37th year in a row, still makes you earn her affection and keeps you doubting whether she approves of you or not – be joyful. When someone you love has received a cancer diagnosis – be joyful. Be joyful *all* the time, and live life to the max.

How on earth can these situations leave you with joy in your heart when there's so much to complain about? Let's ponder these things. First of all, what is God's goal for your life? Is it to have you as rich as possible? In other words, God's love for you can be measured by your balance sheet, by the assets you have, and by how much money you have. Is that true? No. God does not evaluate the success of your life on the basis of how much money you have. From God's point of view, the more

he gives you, the more risk he's taking. The more comfortable God makes you, too often the less you think you need him. You don't think that you need him anymore because you're doing just fine all by yourself.

God is not interested in bulking up your cash. He may choose to do it – or he may choose the opposite and keep you lean, mean, and hungry so that you are aware of how much you need him; so that you don't get arrogant and so full of yourself that you don't think you need anybody anymore.

God is not interested in having you live to be 120. In fact, the length of your days on this earth is not very important from God's point of view, because from his point of view your life is like a blip. The Bible compares you to cut flowers. Flowers look pretty right after they're cut, but a week later they'll be in the trash. Once something's been cut, it may still look beautiful, but its life is drizzling away. God looks at all of us in that way. The amount of time you have on this earth is not of paramount interest. He's interested in what's in your heart. It's for that reason that he spent extravagantly to give you what you and I *really* need. He chose to embrace his enemies, the rebels, the

sinners, the fools, the disobedient, the naughty boys and naughty girls of this world – which is pretty much all of us. And then he gave us a great big hug and told us the gospel news, which is “I love you anyway.”

If you have that, then regardless of how much money you have; regardless of the state of your health; regardless of whether your arms are full of babies or empty; regardless of whether you will be single your whole life; regardless of all of your problems and struggles – you are *rich*. You are rich in God’s mercy and favor, for he has given you forgiveness. He’s given you his grace in this, *your* time of grace, and that’s a reason to smile.

That means your future is guaranteed. It means you have some meaning to your life now, and it means the failures of your past can no longer rise up to haunt you in God’s court. It’s not that he forgets or has no way to access that information. It’s not that you can tap dance or blame somebody else or make excuses to get away from it. He knows. But he chooses to put away that knowledge when he looks at you, and he no longer sees your failures, your foolishness, your breakdowns, your stupid acts of rebellion, or all the different ways

in which you have acted like an idiot. He puts those away and looks at you with a smile, through his rose-colored Jesus glasses, not part of the time, not even most of the time – but *all* the time. So be joyful always. Be joyful all the time because your God likes you. Be joyful because he knows what you really need.

Actually, if you and I examined the ways in which we’ve used the word *need* in the last six months, we’d all be ashamed. God will take care of your needs because his power is unlimited. He also has the brains to know how to use that power, and he’ll see to it that you get what you need to fulfill *his* mission for your life – which is to get you in one piece to the finish line with your faith intact so that you can inherit his everlasting riches. And what he puts you through right now – he’ll make that all work for your good so you can be joyful always, even when you’re getting squeezed. God is just conditioning you to have some stamina to be tough enough to make it to the finish line.

Ever been part of an athletic team for which you have had to go into training? One thing that coaches *don’t* bring to practice is a great big box of donuts. When you go to practice, you don’t go

down to the weight room and find a place where you can chill, lounge around, read magazines, listen to tunes, and pound down some more donuts. That's not what the coaches expect you to do at practice. They are going to work you out so that you can make it to the finish line in the race you've got to run.

God's view for you is not to pamper you along the way but to ration out the treats and the hardships in order to toughen you up for the long haul. If he's managing this – and he says he is – then our panic goes away. Then these nasty bits of bad news that keep coming at us are not reasons to panic or think everything's unraveling: “My life's going down the drain.” Instead we can say, “Well, I guess this is part of the training program, God – isn't it? I don't like it, but if you're in charge, you're going to make it work for me and it's going to be okay. It's going to be good for me.” We can be joyful always, even when our lives are hard.

Now if you're someone who prays only when you want something from God that isn't happening fast enough or pray only when you're in deep, deep trouble, here's a second challenge for you to live life to the max.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, “**Pray continually.**” Pray all the time – never quit. Sometimes we don't pray, though. I'll tell you why I don't pray continually. I live my faith only partially. I've got to live my faith more like Texas faith and let it get bigger. Sometimes when I feel guilty and I've not been looking at the cross of Jesus, I feel too embarrassed to pray. Is it just me, or do you ever feel like that, too? I say, “God, you don't owe me anything. I just can't lift my head up high enough today to talk to you because I think I've embarrassed you.”

And if you're feeling guilty and unworthy, then you feel, “I can't bother him right now because if we were having a conversation, he would tell me to shut up or say he's too angry to talk to me right now.” So why would I put myself through that? If I'm feeling guilty, why would I feel that he owes me anything? I start thinking of prayer as a trade-off, like a business transaction or as something I have to buy. I start feeling as though I can pray only when I feel like God owes me something. That's so bad, isn't it? That's a terrible way to think. Do you ever think like that, or is that just me?

Sometimes we forget to pray because we're so full of ourselves. Maybe you had parents who taught you to be self-reliant. Is that a good thing? Yeah, it's a good thing. I certainly try to teach my own kids to be self-reliant and to take care of themselves. I want them to be able to take care of their own needs. But you can overdo that to the point that you're too proud to say, "Lord, I need your help." Pride can go way beyond the healthy pride of self-reliance. It can go into a sick kind of pride, where you're too proud to ask for help or to pray, and where you think, "God, I guess you like seeing me down here in the ditch. If you wanted to come and help me, I guess you would have done it already. You clearly don't care. I guess I have to take care of myself."

You can either get into pride that way, or you can lapse into depression and despair when you think, "I guess God doesn't care, so I'll just sit here by myself, alone and forgotten. I guess that's the way things are going to be because I'm not one of the lucky ones. I'm not one of the blessed ones. I'm not one of the good boys or good girls, apparently, even though I thought I was doing okay."

"Pray continually" means to remember why it is you pray – because you're one of God's kids. God loves you unconditionally, not conditionally. That's why we keep going to church and keep reading the Bible, because the good news of the gospel is so unbelievable that we have to keep hearing it to reconvince our stubborn hearts. It's *unconditional*, not conditional. God does not love you based on your performance. He loves you because he chooses to love you. It's not because you're nice, but because *he's* nice – isn't that cool? You can go back without having to re-earn your praying rights.

Praying continually makes sense when you realize the lines are always open. God always loves to hear from you even if you're asking for not quite the right thing. You're not annoying him; you're not overloading his circuits; there's never a computer freeze; there's never a server down in heaven. He's always listening to what you have to say, and he loves to hear from you. God promises that he's going to take every prayer you send in, whatever you intend, and he's going to edit it and clean it up if it needs it. He's going to guarantee that it gets full attention and a

good and loving answer – a wise and powerful answer. He’s going to turn it around and bless your life because of it. And here’s his promise every time you pray: something changes.

God says every time we pray something moves. He puts his hands on the controls of the world and lets you and me put our little hands on his big hands and persuade him to change his course of action. And sometimes those changes have changed something in the future, but we can’t see the future yet. So don’t ever say that when you pray nothing happens. I tell you the contrary. Every time you pray something moves. Maybe something moves inside of you. Maybe he fixes broken wires in your brain. Maybe he adjusts something in the world around you, and you haven’t noticed it yet. But every time you pray, God makes something change.

So what reason do we have to feel sorry for ourselves and think everything’s going wrong? Pray not just when you’re desperately in need of something, and pray not just when you want something, but pray continually. Have a Texas-sized prayer life. Don’t just slink into the throne room of God, but walk in like one of his kids, jump on his lap, and say, “Daddy, I

need you to listen to me because I need your help, and I need it now.” And don’t forget to say thank you, which is the last challenge of living life to the max.

Verse 18 says, **“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** These are the three magic words: **“in Christ Jesus.”** Those three magic words are why you can give thanks not only after a promotion but also when you’ve been fired. Give thanks not only in childbirth but also in infertility. Give thanks not only when you get an A on a test but also when you get an F on a test. Give thanks not only when your parents really praise you and take you out to your favorite restaurant but give thanks also when your parents say “No.”

Now how is that possible? **“In Christ Jesus”** means that everything is being filtered for your good and even your hardships can work for you. When you are plateaued at work and your frustration level is climbing up to the moon, give thanks then, because God is getting his wonderful work done not only through the highs in life but even through the hardships. Give thanks in all circumstances. You and I are all born with the opposite tendency in our hearts.

All of us need Gospel therapy because our natural instinct is to complain; to expect and demand a certain level of things and sulk when we don't get it; to compare ourselves enviously to people who we think really have it going on. That's how we're built by nature; that's how we're wired. Yet God says give thanks in *all* circumstances.

Don't wish yourself into another person's life. That person's got a bag of troubles, too. You know the saying about everything being greener on the other side of the fence? Don't go there. That's an absolutely pointless exercise. Cultivating a thankful heart means looking at your life right now and saying, "I have a great life."

One famous Texan, Willie Nelson, said, "It's amazing how my life changed when I actually began to do what my mother told me to do many times – count my blessings. Not just as a slogan, not just as a throwaway line, not just as a cliché – but I actually did it." After seeing pages and pages of good things in his life, he realized that instead of feeling as though he was a failure and his life wasn't going the way he wanted it to go, he saw how staggeringly wealthy he really was.

Satan tries to keep you beaten down, confused, broken, lonely, lost, and hopeless because his greatest delight, when he grinds his satanic teeth, is to get you to quit and to slump down in depression and hopelessness and say, "Clearly my life is worthless, and clearly God must not love me." Cultivating a thankful heart and looking around you at what you have will help you give thanks not only in good times, not only when your mouth is full of food, but in all circumstances.

I challenge you to think like Texans in the way in which you look at your God – and live life to the max. Instead of being joyful only when it's fun, be joyful *always* and cultivate that spirit of joy – big, Texas-sized joy. Radiate it and share it because it's contagious. Don't just pray when you're in desperate trouble or when you want something more, but pray continually, since the lines of communication with you and your wonderful Jesus are always open. And give thanks and cultivate a thankful heart, not just once in a while but all the time. God is good all the time!

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Originating from St. Marcus Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Time of Grace* broadcasts a half-hour program each week featuring Pastor Mark Jeske. He presents Bible studies in terms that people can relate to and apply to their personal lives.

We hope you will watch *Time of Grace* if it is broadcast in your area. Or – visit our website at www.timeofgrace.org where you will find recent messages of Pastor Jeske. We have a variety of booklets, DVDs, or videos available. You also can contact us at **1-800-661-3311**.

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WTGL, Ch. 45
Sunday at 9:30pm ET

GAINESVILLE
WACX, Ch. 69
Sunday at 11:30am ET
TALLAHASSEE
WACX, Ch. 9
Sunday at 11:30am ET

ILLINOIS

CHICAGO
WJYS-TV, Ch. 62
Saturday at 6:30pm CT

INDIANA

SOUTH BEND
WHME Le Sea, Ch. 46
Sunday at 10:30am

KANSAS

GREAT BEND/HAYS
KBDK FOX, Ch. 14
Sunday at 7:00am CT
SALINA
KAAS FOX, Ch. 18
Sunday at 7:00am CT

WICHITA
KSAS FOX, Ch. 24
Sunday at 7:00am CT

MICHIGAN

FLINT
WSMH FOX, Ch. 66
Sunday at 7:00am ET
MARQUETTE
WBUP ABC, Ch. 5-10
Sunday at 7:30am ET

ST. JOSEPH/BENTON HARBOR
WHME Le Sea, Ch. 46
Sunday at 10:30am

MINNESOTA

MINNEAPOLIS
KMSP FOX, Ch. 9
Sunday at 6:30am CT

NEW ULM
New Ulm Telcom Cable, Ch. 72
Sunday at 10:00am CT
Sunday at 7:00pm CT
Comcast Cable, Ch. 14
Sunday at 7:00pm CT

MISSOURI

ST. LOUIS
KPLR CW, Ch. 11
Sunday at 8:00am CT

BROADCAST SCHEDULE *continued*

MONTANA

MISSOULA

Community Access, Ch. 7
Tuesday at 6:30pm MT
Sunday at 10:30am MT

NORTH CAROLINA

ASHEVILLE

Charter Cable, URTV Ch. 20
Sunday at 8:30am ET

TEXAS

AUSTIN

Austin Community Access, Ch. 11
Sunday at 7:00am CT

VIRGINIA

FAIRFAX

FCAC, Ch. 10
Wednesday at 11:00am ET

WASHINGTON, DC

WJLA ABC Ch. 7
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WISCONSIN

BARABOO

WRPQ, Ch. 43
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WGBA NBC, Ch. 26
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