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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
December 17, 2017
3rd Sunday Advent

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11 John 1:6-8, 19-28

Hymns: 76, 65, 74; 95:7

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies. ²¹Test all things; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.

²³Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it*. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our coming Lord, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Christmas for Christians

Christmastime is a special time for Christians. I know that sounds like I'm stating the obvious. Of course it is! We are celebrating the birth of our Savior! However in the world in which we live that is not obvious. The true meaning of Christmas is made out to be any of a wide variety of self-centered, self-focused meanings that people can possibly come up with. It's the season of hope, not the hope of heaven, but the hope for fixing your life, or fixing a

romantic relationship. It is about the children, not bringing them to Jesus' manger and explaining who this Baby is, but for buying them toys, and watching them go ballistic as they unwrap their newest treasures that will be discarded or broken tomorrow. It is the time of peace, but not peace with God, but rather world peace between nations, some temporary cease fire in hostilities will do.

Now don't get me wrong, while it is very easy to be swept along with all the material and worldly and commercial influences that surround this sacred holiday, I maintain that this makes the holiday all the more important for true Christ believers. Christmas presents us with the golden opportunity to share the joy and peace of the gospel. This is the time for us to reveal who we are as children of God who are the recipients of a very special gift of God's grace. We can send out Christmas cards, and make them more than a newsletter from a friend. We can make them a reminder of Him who is our best and dearest Friend. We can invite and encourage others to join us in our celebration of Jesus' birth, making Jesus the focus as we gather to worship, and then also the focus of Christmas in our homes as we recall the special significance and origins of each our Christmas traditions in our conversation. Why do we have an evergreen Christmas tree? Why do we exchange gifts? What is the focus of our special decorations set out around the house, including the lights that shine on our homes? It is all about Jesus the Gift of God, the Light of the world who came down from heaven to deliver us from sin and death. That focus of Christmas is a great reset for the child of God. Yes, Christmas is a special opportunity for the true Christ believer to refocus on --

THEME: Living a Life that Points to Jesus this Christmas Season.

That is the concluding message of our Old Testament lesson this morning, that others might see our rejoicing **in the Lord**. That is the focus of the life of John the Baptist, and the example in word and life that he set for those who were examining him and who he was and what he was about. **He was about Jesus** and pointing others to Jesus. So also in our text this morning as the Apostle Paul is wrapping up this first epistle to the congregation in Thessalonica with some final instructions, it comes down to the very same thing.

Endeavor to live a life that reveals Jesus' place in your heart and in your life. You start doing this with --

I. A Life of Rejoicing in our Salvation.

Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, and so also us:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Now Paul was not writing what one might suppose to be trite phrases that one might just throughout when one is at a loss for words. He was writing to a church that was under duress from the pressures of the world. It had been almost from day one. The Thessalonian congregation suffered persecution and pressure from the world within days after Paul was first preaching the gospel among them. It is in the face of such duress that the Apostle says, **“Rejoice always!”**

Even in the face of persecution and pressure to forsake the Lord and His truth, Christians have cause to rejoice. We rejoice in our salvation, a blessing the world does not know and cannot appreciate. We comprehend the true and wondrous peace that the Lord sends our way from heaven above. He sent His Son into the world that we might have **peace** with God. He sent His Son into the world that we might have **hope** in the face of the sufferings of this present life. The world has no answer for the troubled conscience, not one that will work for eternal peace. The world has nothing more than trite phrases for the sufferings we endure because of the corruption of sin. The world's “Don't worry, be happy!” doesn't fix anything.

Jesus the Babe of Bethlehem came to fix things. We have a God and Savior who *“demonstrated His own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8) He loved us and saved us from our sin by sacrificing Himself for us. And when the world responds with hostility to our joy in believing, we rejoice as did the apostles when they were beaten for speaking of Jesus in the temple courts. They rejoiced because *“they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”* (Acts 5:41)

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. Prayer, opening our hearts to the Lord, is to be a continual state of mind and heart for us who can and do turn to our Father in heaven as dear children approaching a loving Father. We know He cares for us, for **each** of us in our **individual** lives with our **individual** concerns, and the Lord invites us to approach Him in prayer. When the world sees that, the world sees us pointing to Jesus. In everything, we give thanks to God. We give thanks to God for the bountiful blessings of soul and body. We give thanks to God for His presence when we are distressed. We praise the Lord for “*He is good and His steadfast love endures forever.*”(Psalm 136:1 ESV) We know that, because that is the meaning of Christmas to me and you.

Where does this come from, this state of mind and heart. It comes from --

II. A Life Fired Up by the Spirit.

So the Apostle Paul warns:

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies. ²¹ Test all things; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

Life is complicated, and life is busy. In all the pressures of daily life we can find ourselves conforming to the world, and the world's priorities. They come easily with the world's timetable for life, and it is nearly impossible to avoid the world's timetable for life, isn't it? In spite of that we are encouraged: “**Don't quench the Spirit.**” The Spirit of God has **lit a fire in your heart** so that you are exuberant about the gospel of Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem. The Spirit of God lit that fire and fuels that fire with the Gospel. You neglect the gospel, or hide your love of the gospel and you may be throwing a bucket of cold water on that fire the Holy Spirit lit inside your heart. **Don't do that!** Don't throw a wet blanket on the enthusiasm of faith, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Let people see that fire burning in your heart. Keep that fire burning with faithful use of Word and sacrament.

Then also watch that you don't get swept along by the dismissive attitude of the world toward the Word of God. That is what the

Apostle is referencing when he warns against despising prophecies. He is not endorsing the idea of a continuing revelation so that some self-proclaimed preacher might claim a special Word from God. He is reminding us that when we open the Scriptures these words are written by inspiration. They are prophetic words in that they reveal to us the mind and heart of God. They are true and infallible. Many dismiss the Scriptures as being no more than the ideas of men made fallible by their own flaws and prejudices. Nothing could be further from the truth. *“Every Word of God is pure.”* (Proverbs 30:5) Take it to heart. Use it to feed the fire so that the world may know the **authority** by which you know you have eternal life.

That is a life that is pointing to Jesus this Christmas time. Yes, He was born of a virgin! Yes, He is Immanuel, God with us! Yes, He came to earth to die, not because everybody’s got to go sometime, for He was holy and death had no claim over Him. He came to die for **me**, for **my** sin, in **my** place that **I** might have **life** in His name.

Using the **authority of Scripture** you will be discriminating in life. (By the way discriminating is a good thing when we do it properly, distinguishing between that which is good and that which is evil, between that which is true and that which is false and misleading.) So we proceed through life with the sound judgment of God directing us in life, and shunning false teachings, and every evil, even more than that, properly translated Paul encourages us to avoid even the **appearance of evil**. In that way our lives will point to Jesus, and not the lusts of the flesh and the pleasures of this world.

Where does this lead but to--

II. A Life Confident of God’s Salvation.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 ²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it*. ”

“Sanctify,” another really good word. It means to dedicate something, or in your case and mine, someone, for a holy and pure purpose. This is something we strive to do, but fail, for we cannot do it. Paul extends this word of blessing to Christ believers, “*Now,*

may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely.” He is the God who comes to us in peace. He has sanctified us with the gospel. We are reminded that our lives are to be pure. Well, the trouble is we are still sinful; so how is it that we are to be found pure and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ? You know the answer don’t you? The merits of Christ alone! Isn’t that wondrous that you know that to the very core of your being? That is what it means to be sanctified by the Lord. You know that you were purchased and won from sin, death, and the devil. You were redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and it is His blood and righteousness that covers your sin’s every stain so that you will be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is such a wonder of grace. It isn’t **my** faithfulness that is my assurance of salvation. That could never be. Any faithfulness that is in me is of the Holy Spirit, but sin still clings to me because of sinful flesh. I see in myself **un**faithfulness. And yet my confidence of salvation is secure, because it is based upon **God’s** faithfulness. *“He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.”* It is the Lord Himself who preserves you unto eternal glory.

And that, my friends, is Christmas for me! “Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.)

And that is all there is to Living a Life that Points to Jesus this Christmas and always!

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans 15:13)