

# REJOICE IN THE TRUE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

December 17, 2023  
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Old Testament Lesson; Isaiah 61:1-3  
61:10-11

Psalm of the Day; Psalm 71

Gospel Lesson; John 1:6-8  
1:19-28

Sermon Text; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord  
and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen

God's Word for our consideration is our Epistle Lesson from Paul's  
first letter to the Thessalonians in the last chapter, which is chapter  
five, verses sixteen through twenty-four.

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks.  
For this is God's Will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not extinguish the  
Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt. But test everything.  
Hold on to the good. Keep away from every kind of evil.  
May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may  
your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of  
our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful, and He  
will do it.

These are your words, Heavenly Father. Make us holy by your truth.  
Your Word is truth.

Amen

I would like you to envision in your mind a Christmas Tree. It can be any Christmas Tree you can think of, but underneath that Christmas Tree, I want you to imagine there are four presents under that tree. Each of those four presents represents the major gift God wants to give to us on each of the Sundays in Advent.

-And so, on the first Sunday of Advent, we talked about **the gift of watchfulness**, in the hope of our coming Savior.

-Last Sunday, Pastor Bartels talked about **the gift of repentance**, the contrition and faith that is worked in us through The Word of God.

-Today we are 'unwrapping' that third present in the Season of Advent. The third present which really is **the gift of joy**.

It is important for us to 'unwrap' this gift, as we get closer, and closer to celebrating Christmas, because joy is often misunderstood. When you think about your life, and the expectations that are placed on you, especially this time of year, there is an expectation for us that we are going to be joyful, isn't there? Whether it is the smile you see on the employees in those crowded stores, or the happy sappy music you hear on the radio this time of year. The message of the Season we get is, *"Tis the season to be... jolly."* So, you better be jolly, whether you are going to work, or whether you are going to visit family over the Christmas holidays. *"You better watch out. You better not cry. You better not pout for fear you are going to be the one who ruins Christmas."*

And yet, is that what Christmas spirit is all about? So often that is what passes for Christmas spirit, though, isn't it? And yet, if you listen, really listen to what Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians, chapter five, we hear God bringing us back to really what the true spirit of Christmas is all about, the true joy that is ours, that is really God's

gift to us at this time of the year.

It is a joy we do not have to manufacture for ourselves.

It belongs to us,  
because we belong to God, in Christ.

You and I, in Christ,  
can rejoice in the true Christmas spirit!

We can rejoice in that true Christmas spirit, first of all, with the understanding this is God's Will for us.

Now that is a little counter-intuitive for us to hear, especially when we hear the first couple of verses of our reading, starting at verse sixteen. Paul says,

**“Rejoice always.**

**Pray without ceasing.**

**In everything give thanks.**

**For this is God's Will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

It sounds like Paul is saying, “*Be happy, or else*”. But all of you moms and dads, I have a question for you. All of you moms and dads, what is your will for your children? What do you want for your children, as they grow up, and mature? Hopefully, you want to see your kids in Heaven some day, right? But, aside from that even, what are you looking for? What are hoping for, and want for your kids? To be faithful. To be relatively happy, well-adjusted people. To have a good relationship with you, as their parents. To know they can come to you with every need. And maybe to approach life with a little bit of humility and gratitude.

You know, what you want for your children is the same thing God, our Heavenly Father, wants for us. These are imperative verbs that were given here. But, you do not see a “*Thou shalt...*” attached to them. These are things that God wills for us in Christ, in connection with Christ, in connection with everything Christ has already done for us.

And so, when we think about what Paul is saying here, what would

life be like without Christ?

-Without Christ, there would no joy at all, at any time of the year.

-Without Christ, we would still be God's enemies.

-Without Christ, we would be consigned to eternal sorrow in Hell, because of our sins, because of the sin we are born with, that has been handed down to us from our parents.

But, in Christ, in connection with Christ's coming to us as our Savior, you and I now have grace and every blessing.

-In Christ's coming to us as a little baby born in a lowly manger, you and I have a sinless substitute born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, born to take our place before God, and whose perfect life, and innocent death pays the penalty for all of our sins.

-In Christ's coming to us in the waters of our Baptism to wash our sins away, we now have a heavenly Father who has adopted us as His own children, and now claims us as His own.

-In Christ, and in the promise of His coming on The Last Day, we have an eternal inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

-And so, in Christ, God wants us to have all of these gifts. He wants us to have the gift of pure joy. Not the fake joy we see so often around us, this time of year. Not the fake joy of forced smiles, and people biting their lips to avoid saying stuff that is offensive. Not the fake joy that is over as soon as the decorations come down on December 26<sup>th</sup>, but the real joy that lasts forever, the joy that can really only be found in Christ. Paul says,

**“Rejoice always.”**

What he means by that is not that we are always happy all of the time. We are sad. We still grieve the loss of loved ones. But, as Paul says earlier in 1Thessalonians,

**“We do not grieve as those who have no hope.”**

We have the joy that is able to **“Rejoice always”**.

We have the joy that is able to **“Pray without ceasing”**. Not that we are always, every five minutes stopping to bow our heads in

prayer, but realizes we have a Heavenly Father in Christ. In Christ, we can go to Him with every single need we have.

I talked to a lady last week, an elderly lady, who told me every time she gets up to walk across the room she says, “*God, please don't let me fall.*” That is the kind of prayer, those are the kind of prayers we can pray. We can ask God for anything, and come to Him for anything.

We have the joy of being able to **“In everything give thanks.** Not because we are naive, not because we think everything is good, but because in humility we know we don't deserve anything good from God. And yet, God in His grace, in Christ, has given us all that is good. Even the bad things He allows us to suffer, even the bad things we are allowed to endure, God will ultimately work all of those things for our good.

That is the joy God wants us to have, in Christ. Not just at Christmas, but always.

The thing about God wanting you to have something is, if God wants you to have something, He is also going to give it to you. Since God wants us to rejoice in that true Christmas spirit, He also promises He will do it for you, in Christ.

Verse twenty-three and twenty-four Paul says,

**“May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely,  
and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless  
at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**The One who calls you is faithful,  
and He will do it.”**

You know, God is the One who sanctifies us. We don't have to create our own joy. God is the one who sanctifies us. God is the One who pours out His Holy Spirit on us, and changes our heart. He brings us from death to life, from darkness to light, and He does it through The Gospel Message, through The Good News of Jesus, as our Savior. It is through that same Good News that He gives to us

the joy we find ourselves desperately searching for, sometimes. Think about how powerful The Word of God is for us. Martin Luther, in his Large Catechism, calls the Word of God, "...living, creative words." When you think about the words of God, they are the same words God used to bring the whole universe into existence. Those words also have power to bring things into reality in our own hearts and minds.

Just think for yourself about the Christmas Gospel. How many years you have been alive, and how many years you have heard that same story, over, and over, **and over again**, year in and year out, about the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. From Cesar Augustus all the way to Mary pondering it in her heart, all of those times you have heard that story, and yet, year after year, how often is it that you find the Holy Spirit has kindled a new appreciation for the grace of God in your life? How often do you find there is a new insight you have been given into the depth of God's love for you in Jesus? How often do you find there is fanned into flames a new pleasure that you have never experienced before, as you think about what God has done for you?

**God is able to give you the joy He wants you to have!**

And so, the question for you and me is then, ***"Do you want it? Do you want the joy God freely gives?"***

Frankly, not everybody does. There are a lot of people in this world who are more than happy to go Christmas shopping, bake Christmas goodies. There are all kinds of people in this world who are more than perfectly happy to wrap presents, and go to Christmas parties. They are more than happy to get their entire family dressed up, and even go to church on Christmas Eve for that Candle Light Service, but that is where the joy of Christmas ends for them. When it comes down to it, they see the story of Jesus' birth as the thing you have to get past in order to get to the 'good stuff'. That is what Paul is talking about for us, when he says,

**“Do not extinguish the Spirit.  
Do not treat prophecies with contempt.  
But test everything.  
Hold on to the good.  
Keep away from every kind of evil.”**

If you are a person who takes The Gospel, The Good News of our Savior, Jesus, and you treat it as though it is not that important, or you treat it as though it is the thing you have to get past in order to get to the 'good stuff', that is like throwing a bucket of water on the fire the Holy Spirit has kindled in your heart.

On the other hand, when we realize God's Word is 'the good stuff', when we realize that the story of our Savior's birth is the 'main thing', this is the important thing, then there are joys untold to be had.

And **the one who calls you is faithful**. When we think about the joy of Christmas, so oftentimes we get it in our heads that we have to do it for ourselves. *“I have to create my own joy.” “I have to put on a happy face.” “Fake it 'till we make it.”*

That is what we say, right? But, the God who calls you is faithful. He will do it. We only need to receive it. Just like every other present that is under the tree that has your name on it, receive it in faith. Receive that joy through His Word. Receive the joy, the joy that is freely promised, and given to you in The Good News of everything our Lord and Savior has done for us. That joy, and the assurance of the forgiveness of all of your sins is yours. The joy is yours, when you come to this altar, and receive our Savior's body and blood, given and shed for you.

**In Christ, God will fill your heart with ceaseless joy, and ceaseless gratitude, at Christmas and always! Amen.**

Now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts, and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.