***“The Do’s and Don’ts of Joyful Christian Living” (1 Thes. 5:16-22)***

***The Third Sunday in Advent (Dec. 13, 2020)***

I have chosen as the text for our meditation this morning a portion of our Epistle Reading from the 5th chapter of 1 Thessalonians. These 7 verses alone provide more than enough for us to consider in our brief time together this morning. They read as follows: ***“ Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”***

The context surrounding Paul’s admonition in these verses is that of the *Parousia;* that is, *our Lord’s coming.* Early on in this 5th chapter, Paul warns “*The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night…”* v. 2. He reminds his hearers, therefore, “*But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day.**We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.*”

In the same vein, following our text Paul offers this prayer for his readers: “*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” (vs 23,24).*

Sandwiched between these thoughts of being prepared for Christ’s second coming are these verses before us which contain Paul’s admonition concerning the shape and form of our present lives. He insists that being *children of the light and the day* our lives ought to have a character that is strikingly different than that of those who are not of God but are the sleepy heads of the darkness and night. He spells out this character with eight imperatives, three that are positive admonitions, we’ll call them the *“do’s”,*  and five which are prohibitions, in other words the *“don’ts.”*

At the head of the list of these imperatives, and therefore having the emphasis, is this “do”: *“Rejoice always,”* or more literally, “*be rejoicing at all times.”*  On account of this,I, call these imperatives the “*Do’s and Don’ts of Joyful Christian Living”.*

Joy in our present is our planned focus on this Third Sunday in Advent. Joining St. Paul’s admonition we hear in our *Gradual* the call from the prophet Zechariah, “***Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem”****(Zech. 9:9).*Then also we hear Isaiah proclaim in our Old Testament reading, “***The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted… to grant to those who mourn in Zion – to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.”*** To which the faithful is heard to reply: “*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness.* (Is. 61)

As I already noted, however, this apostolic call to *be rejoicing always* is not alone. It is joined with two other *“do’s;”* ***“pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances…”*** All three imperatives are in the present tense insinuating that these are not just commands to perform but actually characteristics of true Christian living.

D.A. Hayes, in his commentary, writes of these first three positive imperatives: “‘*Unceasing rejoicing, continuous prayer, and uninterrupted thanksgiving’ form a triad of Christian characteristics, unparalleled in any other religion in the world”(Paul and His Epistles; 1922, p. 163).* Indeed they are! Only those in Christ Jesus could even imagine living in this age with such “characteristics.” Can you imagine them for yourselves? You certainly ought!

Now, someone might say, “*this is all well and good, but let’s get real for a moment. Life in this world is hardly a party… a picnic in which one can be joyful all the time.”* Believe me, you’ll get no arguments from me. Just coming off the mandatory isolation of the past two weeks and having *enjoyed,* shall I say,the “*pleasures”* of the Covid 19 virus, I am hardly inclined to rejoice even now.

But this gets at the very heart of what Paul is driving at. Viewed from a purely worldly, physical, perspective, life in this world gives us little to rejoice about. Life might be a bowl of cherries, but as Erma Bombeck is well known to have said, *it’s a bowl full of pits!* Just think about it. Aren’t we all glad to say “good-riddens” to this year of 2020! Did it provide us with anything to rejoice in?

Yet, for the Christian, *a child of the Light,* this past year, as well as all things in it, can always be viewed in the soft, white, comforting light of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. In this light even the pits can see become opportunities for *rejoicing always and in all things, praying unceasingly, and continual thanksgiving.*

And this is, in fact, Paul asserts; *“****…the*** *very* ***will of God in Christ Jesus for you!”*** In the midst of all that has or will transpire in your life, God wills that you *be rejoicing in all things,* that you *be praying without ceasing,* that you *be giving thanks in all circumstances.* All this is because your relationship with Jesus transcends all and every worldly and physical circumstance.

Now, I don’t in any way want to mislead you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. I’m not trying to be one of those positivity preachers who falsely claim that if you truly believe in Jesus everything will just go swimmingly for you! I would then truly be a false prophet! Just as, from a worldly perspective, everything did not go wonderfully for Jesus, who was crucified by His people, nor for Paul, who faced persecution and opposition at almost every turn in his ministry, neither can I in all truthfulness tell you all will be great for you.

I’m afraid I can only assure you of one thing about how your life in this world will be and that is that because we live in the post-fall days, your life will be one of trial and misery. That’s what Adam’s sin, your sin, and my sin, have made certain for all of us.

Nonetheless, as you are believers in Jesus Christ, I can, by God’s grace and promise in Jesus Christ, also assure you with eternal certainty that your joy in the LORD has been secured by the will of God and through the cross of Jesus. Jesus’ own words, proclaimed in the pain of your sin, “***It is finished!***” Those blessed words echo loudly in your ears and across the millennia into eternity. You are assured by those words that your sin has been fully atoned for… your death penalty has already been carried out in Jesus’ flesh. You have been given in Christ the forgiveness of all your sins. No charge this world or anyone in it makes against you will stick in God’s heavenly court! Jesus has made you a coheir with Christ of eternal life. Your inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:4). He purchased you back from death and everlasting punishment with His own precious, divine, blood! Your future is secure no matter what transpires in the meantime. You will win even if you find yourself losing in a worldly sense now!

No one can rob you of this your joy! Not a sickness like Covid… not a loss of job… not a death of a loved one… not the loss of your health or your wealth. You alone can have this joy in all things… at all times… in all ways. Yes, this you can do; *be rejoicing unceasingly*, irrespective of any and all worldly circumstances. Like the Advent candle we light today, pink, not black, not even purple, is your color! It’s the color of joy!

Your Christian joy has also been made more secure in your life by the close relationship that God in His love and grace has established with you. We talk a lot about how dependent we are in having the right access today. Wonderful things can come your way if you have the right key, passcode, connection, or app.

How solely fortunate you are, Believer in Christ. Only to you has been given 24-10 access to God, and not just as a creature but as a very son or daughter of God. Jesus, The Only begotten Son of God, became flesh of your flesh in the womb of Mary. He is your brother. You have been *born from above* in the holy waters of Baptism (John 3:5). Through Jesus God is your Father in heaven.

Accordingly, Jesus has taught you to pray this way: “*Our Father, who Art in Heaven.”* You can have no more security of access than that. As Dr. Luther rightly taught us, “*With these words, God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father*” (Small Catechism).

Earthly fathers have limitations, but you have the Heavenly Father. All things are possible for Him. There are no limits to His care and providence for you. Jesus, your brother, also did your time and paid for your crime. God is well disposed to you. He looks at you and does not see an enemy, and evil sinner, but His very Son. He promises to hear your prayers, answer your petitions with deliverance. He even reiterates that He is honored that you depend so heavily on Him. He says to you, “***…Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.***" (Ps 50:15)

What is your prayer life, dear Christian, but the privilege to lay upon the LORD, your heavenly Father, continuously your heart’s desire? How can your joy be diminished in any way or at any time if you have this kind of privilege and access to God? St. Augustine wrote:  *“Let your desire be before him, and ‘the Father, who sees in secret, shall reward you.’ (Jesus, Mt. 6:6) For it is your heart’s desire that is your prayer. If your desire continues uninterrupted, your prayer continues also” (A.C.C.S. p. 98).*

All this being true for you, it only follows then that you, and you alone, can give thanks in all things! Joy, confidence, and thanksgiving go hand in hand. You have the assurance in Christ and by the LORD’s clear promises that no matter what it is, how bad it appears in an earthly sense, how painful it might be to endure, in Christ Jesus it is at most temporary. It will not rob you of your joy in Christ. Besides, you are privileged to commend it into God’s gracious hands through prayer at all times that He might carry and defeat it for you with the full assurance that your Heavenly Father will always use it to accomplish your ultimate good! St. Paul says in his epistle to the Romans: “***And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”*** *(8:28).*

This means then that even what might be considered negative in worldly sense can be for the Christian something to give God thanks. Paul did the same himself. In the midst of the suffering from what he referred to as his “thorn in the flesh,” he said with joy in his heart, “…***I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong****” (2Cor. 12:9,10).*

Unlike all the children of darkness in this world, you, Dear Christian, can have this character of *rejoicing unceasingly, praying unhindered, and giving thanks to God in all circumstances.* But, and it is a big but, Paul is also warning you today, there is something that can truly rob your life of this joyful character, steal from you your confidence in your relationship with God and remove any and all thanksgiving in your life.

The good news is there is also something you can do about it because God in His grace has provided a remedy for such spiritual malaise. This is where Paul’s remaining *“don’ts”* come in to play. He states: ***“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”***

Now, let me be clear here. Your salvation, your eternal victory, your forgiveness, even your God-given joy, have nothing to do with your doing. You are saved totally by God’s grace through the work and sacrifice of Jesus. That is the clear teaching of all of Holy Scripture. You are saved by grace alone. You receive this salvation through faith alone, which itself is also the gift and working of God in you (Ro. 10:17; Eph. 2:8). You don’t do anything toward your salvation. But there are things you can do to lose that salvation. You can despise the gifts God has given you. You can neglect them. You can push them away.

In the same way you can allow the joy, the confidence, the thanksgiving God graciously extends to you to be taken away from you by what you do or don’t do. It all has to do with what you do with God’s Word.

You see, there is a connection between *prophecies and the Holy Spirit? Prophecies* are the words God has given to His people. The *Holy Spirit* is the *Spirit of Prophesy.* This divine person of the Holy Trinity is the One who puts God’s Word, made flesh in Jesus Christ, into the ears, minds, hearts and mouths of His people. As the apostle Peter wrote in his second epistle: “***For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”*** *(2 Pet. 1:21).*

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the *Paraclete,* the one who comes along side you and brings God’s comforting word to bear in your life. Jesus said to His apostles, whom He was going to send out into all the world, that the Holy Spirit is “*The Spirit of Truth”* Who  *“will guide you into the way of all truth…He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you (Jn. 16:12-15)…He will teach you all things (Jn 14:26) …you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).*

Your present and eternal joy, your constant comfort and thanksgiving, just like your knowledge of the truth in Jesus Christ and your faith in Him as Your Savior, comes from only one place; that is, the Word of God’s prophecy, as The Holy Spirit gave it to His prophets and apostles to prophesy to you and is now written for you in the Holy Scriptures. If you *despise* these *prophecies,* by neglecting His Word, staying away from the reading and preaching of His Word, rarely study or read His Word in your daily lives, you will quench the Holy Spirit’s work in your life. And if you do that, if you give little credence to the *prophecies of the Holy Spirit*, how do you imagine that faith will remain in you? How can the joy of Christ continue to fill your heart? How will you be able to truly *test everything* to know what is true and what is false or what is good and what is evil so that you might *hold on to what is good and abstain from every form of evil?*

So, you want to do something about retaining joy in your life, no matter what happens to you in this here and now? *Don’t* despise God’s prophesies and thereby quench the Holy Spirit’s work in your life. Hold the word of God sacred. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. The Holy Spirit through those prophesies will keep you in the good and away from every evil. He will enable you in this world of trial and tribulation to be *rejoicing always, praying without ceasing and giving thanks in every circumstance* as you await His victorious appearing! Amen.