

Rejoicing in Holiness

3rd Sun. in Advent – 12/13/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 23 **“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.”**

Introduction

- ✘ Today we gather on this Third Sunday in Advent; we light the pink candle on the advent wreath which is the symbolic color of joy; and we hear Paul give us a simple command in verse 16, “Rejoice always”.
 - ➔ Yet when we look around ourselves; even inside of ourselves we often have to look very hard to find anything that might motivate us to truly rejoice.
- ✘ Sure, as Paul directs the focus of our gaze at the end of the text, we do look forward to celebrating the coming of the Son of God at Christmas and even at His final return, but still this joy can so quickly be dampened and quenched by things that are not going well; by all that we face right here and now in this corrupt and sin-contaminated world today.
 - ➔ But that doesn’t make the words that God speaks through the apostle Paul in our Epistle Reading today go away. He calls us all to rejoice, for God is faithful to make and keep you and me holy in Christ.

I. We are unfaithful in living as Christians

- ✘ It’s not hard to see where it is though that we struggle as individual Christians once we take a look at Paul’s words in verses 16-22 of our text. Paul lays out a series of eight commands to summarize the way that God desires us to live in this world as those whom He has called and redeemed and adopted into His family of believers by grace.
 - ➔ Each one of those commands, in the original Greek grammar, is a present tense imperative, which means God expects to see us do these things in an ongoing, continuous manner. You see, he’s laying out the Christian lifestyle here, not just a checklist of characteristics that we strive to do once and then ignore or forget about afterward.
- ✘ Yet as much as you and I try to fulfill these commands, we can’t do it. I mean, even in good times, we are sporadic at best in rejoicing, praying and giving thanks to the Lord. To do it “always”, “without ceasing” and “in all circumstances” as Paul tells us is the “will of God in Christ Jesus” for us (v.18) – that’s the place where we fall woefully short every day.
 - ➔ And not only does this “quench the Spirit” who works in us since our baptism to guide and protect us in the faith; who also provides the gifts of Word and Sacrament in Christ’s Church to strengthen and sustain us in the faith; but our attitude toward God’s Word also is often superficial at best. In a 2017 poll, only 32% of Americans said that they are only somewhat bothered by the fact that the religious elements of Christmas are emphasized much less today than in the past (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/13/us/christmas-less-religious.html>).
 - ➔ In fact a fast-growing number of self-identified Christians, including many of us here today, are neglecting God’s Word on a daily basis and plugging our ears to God’s commands and prohibitions. Why? It’s not rocket science - because we want to do what we want to do. Yet Paul says clearly in verse 20, “Do not despise prophecies”, which includes all of God’s Word.

→ To the contrary, when the world tries to convince us, for example that the world was not created in six 24-hour days less than 10,000 years ago, but instead has evolved over billions of years through a cycle of death and destruction; or when our culture says that it's alright for couples to have intimate relations outside of marriage and live together as "a test" to see if they are compatible before making a life-long commitment to each other; or that God actually made a mistake when He created someone according to a biological gender that is at odds with the gender to which a person now desires to be identified – when our world tries to convince us that these and other things are pleasing in God's eyes, Paul says in verses 21-22, "test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil".

→ And how are we to "test everything"? What is the standard that God has given us to use for what is right and good and pleasing according to His will? It is none other than God's Holy Word – the clear teaching of the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 confirms this for us, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work".

⊗ And still we fall short; woefully short – every one of us!

II. God is faithful to make us holy in Jesus

⊗ But do not lose heart, friends. All is not lost. Our daily failure to live as God desires of us, is the exact reason that we have Christmas; the reason why Jesus' coming was promised throughout the Old Testament and why God came in the flesh; born of a virgin as a human baby who was laid in a manger in Bethlehem – all of which, by the way, Scripture prophesied hundreds of years before it happened.

→ Yes Jesus came as the promised Christ into this world as the Prince of Peace. God is the source of peace. So only God could address the conflict between Himself and us that our sin brought about and continues to encourage of us each day in our disobedience as human beings.

⊗ Those Commands that God gave to people had to be met; had to be fulfilled to perfection. That's the only way there could be true peace between God and man. Enter Jesus, in human flesh.

→ Jesus lived the holy life to perfection. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus, in "every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin". And so, because He was not subject to the judgement of death which all sin requires, He took your sin and mine upon Himself on the cross and He died in our place to appease the Father's righteous wrath against sin and evil.

→ Then in baptism, Galatians 3:27 tells us, that Jesus clothes us in His righteousness. Paul says there that we have "put on Christ" so that when God looks at you and me now, He no longer sees the sinner who can't live up to and fulfill the holy life that He desires of us, but He sees Jesus and His holy life lived in our place.

⊗ This is what Paul is telling us folks in verses 23-24. This is where we receive the ability to "rejoice always" (v.16) in "the coming of our Lord Jesus" (v.23); because, yes, as Paul assures you, Jesus has "sanctified you completely".

→ Remember, the world "sanctify" means "to make holy"; that is to be set apart from what is the norm in our world; to stand out as different in a very, very good way; according to God's way of judging things.

- ✘ And notice that God not only promises to make us holy part of the way, but “completely” – in spirit, soul, and body so that we will “be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.23), **by** our Lord Jesus Christ, as we’ve already discussed.
 - ➔ He makes us blameless because He has taken all of our blame; for all of our sin! And He keeps us blameless until the day of His final coming on Judgment Day. That means that when you and I, as believers in Christ, stand before the judgement seat – even with the endless list of sins that we have committed in our lives, God still proclaims us “innocent”.
 - ➔ This amazing miracle is laid out for us as a promise in Romans 3:23-24, which says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”.
- ✘ I know, it seems too good to be true. It’s only natural to ask, “How can this be since I daily keep on sinning instead of daily living as God has called me to live according to the commands Paul listed out just a few verses ago?”
 - ➔ Well, this is how complete Christ’s work on the cross was. He died to pay for all sin committed and all sin that will be committed ever!
- ✘ Instantly though the devil throws the next question into our heads: “How can we trust that this is really so?”
 - ➔ Paul says in verse 24, “He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it”. Who is it that calls you? 1 Corinthians 1:2 tells us that we are “sanctified”; made holy “in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (i.e. holy people) “with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” in faith. And Ephesians 1:4 assures us that all of this is God’s plan; that “He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.”
 - ➔ The one who has called and chosen you to believe in Christ, Paul says, “is faithful”. Look, this isn’t a hard concept like so many people want to make it out to be. If there is anyone who can be trusted, it is the only One who is perfect – that’s God.
 - ➔ And if you can’t trust God, than you can’t trust anyone – especially yourself, because if you say that you can’t trust God then you just proved your own imperfection and failure, right?
- ✘ But friends, God can be trusted! He promised to send a Savior all the way back in the Garden of Eden when He said that a seed from the women would come to crush the head of the serpent, Satan (Gen. 3:15).
 - ➔ He promised Abraham, as we heard last Wednesday in our Midweek service, that it would be one of his descendants through whom all nations would be blessed (Gen. 15:5).
 - ➔ And He promised through Isaiah that the Savior of the world would be born to a virgin, who would be “Immanuel”, which means “God with us” (Isa. 7:14).
 - ➔ We could be here the rest of the day listing out all of the promises and prophecies that God gave in advance in Scripture. But the deal is folks, He fulfilled them all in the coming of Jesus to earth; in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Savior of the world!

III. God Will Do It

- ✘ So, when Paul finishes our text by saying, “He will surely do it”; that is He will make you holy and keep you blameless until the promised second “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”, you can take those promises to the bank dear Christians.

- Martin Luther closed out his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed with this same assurance. He says, "On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true."
- ✘ When you say and believe that this is all true, it means that none of the stuff that you and I face in this life right now that is hard, heart-wrenching, disturbing, painful or even dark and evil – none of it changes God's love for you. None of it undoes His saving and sanctifying work already promised and completed for you in His Son Jesus.
- That's how you and I are able to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing" and "give thanks in all circumstances" (v. 16-18). Because even in the middle of despair and sorrow and pain and suffering, Christ has made us His by grace; and in love, He is always with us!

Conclusion

- ✘ As Paul taught the believers in Philippi to proclaim and sing, so you and I today and every day, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). Amen.