

<sup>16</sup> **Be joyful always; <sup>17</sup> pray continually; <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

<sup>19</sup> **Do not put out the Spirit's fire; <sup>20</sup> do not treat prophecies with contempt. <sup>21</sup> Test everything. Hold on to the good. <sup>22</sup> Avoid every kind of evil.**

<sup>23</sup> **May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

<sup>24</sup> **The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.** (NIV 84)

Theme: The True Christmas Spirit

1. Is found in the gift of forgiveness
2. Is given by a faithful God.

A week or so ago I read an article online about a couple who “canceled Christmas.” They decided to do so because their three children were acting up and fighting with each other, so they decided to teach them a lesson. And what does it mean that they “canceled Christmas?” Apparently it means that they won't get any Christmas presents this year. Instead they are using the money from their budget designated for Christmas gifts to do service projects and giving to those in need. When a reporter asked the children what they learned the oldest responded, “It's not about getting what you want, it's about giving.” There are some that are criticizing these parents, but many more for applauding them for showing their children, “the true spirit of Christmas.” And for many that is what Christmas is all about. And it's not a bad message to share with others in this entitlement, egocentric, and selfish world. They say Christmas is not about the gifts that other people give you, it's about love, it's about joy, it's about giving to others. That's the message taught in numerous articles, books and movies—The Christmas Spirit is all about being kind to others. Again, it's not a horrible message and it's one the world needs to hear. But it's not the true meaning of Christmas and that is not what the Christmas Spirit is.

But we hear so often that Christmas is about giving and being nice to others. It sounds good to us. It scratch the itch that work-righteous itch that we all have by nature. It makes us feel good about ourselves. So may begin think the same thing. We may get caught up in this

secular spirit of Christmas that we forget to the true meaning of Christmas and a true Christmas Spirit really is. That is what we'll see today—the true Christmas Spirit. First it is found in the gift of forgiveness and secondly it is given by a faithful God.

Our text for today is filled with commands that we are to obey as we wait for the Lord to come. Notice how Paul emphasizes that these laws we are to follow continuously—not at certain times, not just once, but always. Just take a look at the first three verses and see how often we are to obey these commands, **Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances.**

There are eight commands given in verses 16-22. Eight things are to always be doing as we wait for the Lord. Besides the ones already mentioned, we are to never reject the Holy Spirit—or in other words, we are to always listen to the Holy Spirit. We are to never despise preaching and God's Word; but to regard it as holy and gladly hear it and learn it. We are to test everything while holding on to what is good and according to God's Word, and rejecting what isn't. These commands are pretty straight-forward. But there is a problem. There is no way we can ever keep these laws—not once, let alone always. He tells us to be joyful in all things; but we often aren't. More often than not, we're crabby; we like to complain about pretty much everything—your job, your family, the weather, your favorite sports team, and other people. There is often little joy in our hearts because we are more concerned about earthly things instead of the joy of forgiveness. He also tells us to give thanks in all circumstances. But often we are only thankful when God gives us a great blessing. Do we thank him for our house, or clothes, or food that he gives us? What about the trial and hardships, the sicknesses and diseases? Not always; because we fail to trust in God for his care and protection. We often cling to what is evil—going after the things of this world. And we avoid what is good. We often avoid God—worshiping him, studying his Word, volunteering at his house, and obeying his will. Our priorities are on what is evil and not on what is good. We don't obey these eight simple commands for one single day; let alone always, continually, and in all circumstances. So we deserve nothing but punishment—for each and every time we sin. We ought to suffer forever.

Notice what Paul's prayer, or the blessing he gives in verse 23, **May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Paul prays that our entire being—everything, be kept blameless. Note how we are passive—we can't keep ourselves blameless. We sin constantly all the time. Rather it is the God who sanctifies us who keeps us blameless. It is the God who makes us holy who makes sure that we remain that way.

But it is through a gift that we are made holy. The gift of the Son of God, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. The gift of his perfect life which he gave to us—making us holy and blameless in the sight of God. The gift of the forgiveness of sins as he took our sins upon himself—removing them as far as east is from west. The gift of faith, worked in us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, which receives the gifts won for us by Christ. That is where the true Christmas Spirit is found—it is the joy of forgiveness. It is the joy of holiness knowing that our sins have been washed away.

To emphasize that we can't make ourselves holy or keep ourselves blameless, he says in verse 24. **The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.** The one who chose you from the beginning of the world is the one who makes you blameless or holy. The one who brought you to faith is the one who will keep you in the one true faith. You can't do it by yourself; but the Lord can and does. And you know that he will because he is faithful. He is the faithful one because he was faithful to God's Word—not once going against God's commands when we sin against him constantly.

But he is also faithful because he is faithful to his promises—he never breaks a promise, but always keeps what he tells us. Promises as the one Gabriel relayed to Joseph, **he will save his people from their sins.** The fact that the Lord gave up his only son to die for us assures us that more gifts are to follow—including eternal life. **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** It was no small thing for the Lord to bring us to sanctify us, to make us holy. And if the Lord died for us and if he worked hard to bring us to faith, you know that he will complete his work by keeping us in the one true faith. As Paul said to the Philippians, (be) **confident of this, that he**

**who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

Moved by God's grace and compassion, we strive to obey his commands out of love and thanks to him. Look again at that first command in verse 16. **Be joyful always.** You hear about the Christmas Spirit—it is being nice to others, it's not holding grudges but forgiving. It's about love.

There is a difference between the joy of Christmas that the world has and the joy of Christmas that Christians have. Why does the world have joy at Christmas? Because it's expected of them, because they are going to get some gifts, because Santa won't come if they are naughty. Why does the Christian have joy? Because he lives in the joy of forgiveness. He lives in a constantly state of grace—holy and blameless in the eyes of the Lord. And so he goes about all his days with joy. As Paul wrote the Philippians, **Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice!**

Really the Christmas Spirit is no different than the Christian spirit. It is not a spirit of debauchery, that many pass off as the Christmas Spirit. It's not even the Spirit of being nice to others, or it's not about giving instead of getting. Really the Christmas Spirit is about getting—it's about receiving the gift of salvation!

The Christmas Spirit is the joy of holiness because of sin washed away. It is the joy of knowing that God is faithful and will not leave us or forsake us no matter what happens to us in this life. For the Light of the world is on his way and he will not disappoint or fail to keep his Word! It is joy knowing that Jesus was born to save us, to make us holy and to bring us to heaven. It is a joy that the world cannot have because they do not know unless we share with them the true joy of Christmas.

Which leads me to one more point. Notice one more thing that we are always to be doing in every aspect of our lives, **Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.** This doesn't just apply to the Church we attend and those we worship with. We want to look at every aspect of our lives—what we watch and read, who we hang out with, what we say and do; and so on. We want to purge ourselves of evil—of everything that doesn't go along with God's Word; and we want to cling to the good.

How apt is this at this time of year. Test all the customs of Christmas in your heart and home, and hold fast to those that focus on Christ.

Not that you have to get rid of all secular references and thoughts about Christmas. But hold on and treasure what is good and right! Where is your focus—on the present you receive, on the secular aspect of Christmas, or on the birth of your Savior? Anything that doesn't focus on Christ doesn't really give the true Christmas Spirit—the spirit of the joy of forgiveness and eternal life.

There really is no such thing as “canceling Christmas.” Because the joy and Spirit of Christmas will always dwell in your heart as you remember the forgiveness of sins and eternal life given by your faithful Lord. Amen.