

Joy and Peace

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

December 11, 2011

Two of the great themes of the Advent and Christmas seasons are joy and peace. In our fallen world under the influence of sin and death, joy and peace can often be hard to find. Yet, God's people enjoy them because of the coming of Jesus in the manger, and we look forward to perfect joy and peace after His return.

Note that this morning's passage begins with Peter commanding us to be joyful. "*Be joyful always.*" (v.16) Being joyful is not just a wish. It is not an option. It is not just a good idea. It is an instruction in God's word. We are to be joyful. Even in the midst of pain we are to be full of joy. Even when our lives are falling apart we are to be full of joy. Even in our darkest hour we can be full of joy.

We can be full of joy in these times because joy is not something that comes out of us. It is not generated by our hearts. It is not the same as happiness. The Bible never commands us to be happy. God does expect us to be full of joy, which is deeper and better. Joy is not based on the good things that happen to us. Joy is the condition of the **heart** that results from the realization that our God has come to us. Joy comes from outside us and it is meant to fill us and strengthen us.

Those who are in Christ can always be joyful because they have the Holy Spirit and have been made right with God. When the world threatens them they can stand firm because they know that the Holy Spirit in them is greater than the spirit of the world. They can be joyful because they know that they are known and loved

by the Creator of the universe. They can be joyful because they know that their God knows their name, knows how many hairs are on their head, knows everything they think and do, and loves them anyway. Those who are in Christ, the redeemed of the Lord, those who belong to Him through the new birth, can always be joyful because they know that Jesus didn't die on the cross for just anybody's sins, but that He died for theirs, and they are washed clean and made right with God. If you know this, if you know you are in God's presence and the future is secure in Him, how can you not be joyful?

Because God's people can and must always be joyful, they must also always be in an attitude of prayer. Paul instructed the Thessalonian church, "*[P]ray continually.*" (v.17) First, we need to dispel some wrong ideas about prayer. Jesus did say to pray in your closet so that you would not make a show about it in front of other people. We can pray anywhere we are, however. As long as we are not praying for the purpose of those around us watching us pray, we are alright. We can pray at work or school. We can pray while we play. Indeed, in everything we do, and wherever we are, we are to do it with the realization that we are in God's presence and we always have His attention. Prayer is a constant **attitude** as well as a periodic activity.

Because prayer is something to be done at all times and in all places different postures are okay. In the Bible people often prayed laying on the floor face-down. Other times they would pray seated or standing as we do. All of these are fine and are appropriate at one time or another depending on the prayer being offered. We also

teach our children to fold their hands, bow their heads, and close their eyes. While this is a nice, pious, posture, let's be honest, we do it as much to keep them from getting distracted and making noise during the prayer as anything else. It is okay to pray while you are driving. I recommend it. While you do, please to not bow your head or close your eyes, and God will not be angry if you leave both hands on the wheel. Prayer is not about what you do with your body, it is about spending time with God. You need quiet time each day in your closet, but remember that when you leave the closet, you don't leave God there.

Paul is talking about the attitude of our lives here. Look at the next verse with me. “[G]ive thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” (v.18) We are to be full of joy because we belong to God. We are to be in constant communication with the one Who loves us enough to die for us and bought us for Himself. We are to be **grateful** for God’s promises to us and His faithfulness in keeping those promises. Because He has given us joy into which we can tap, and He makes Himself available to us at all times, there is no time in which we cannot be grateful to Him and give thanks.

We are easily distracted by the problems of life, and really bad things really do happen. Some of us have been sick for a long time. Others are dealing with the death of loved ones. For some of us, relationships that should bring us joy cause us pain. There are as many different reasons for suffering as there are people in this room. Like you, I can get caught up feeling sorry for myself or looking down on myself for the bad things that

have happened to me, or even worse, the bad things I have done or caused. And yet, even through all of this we still have a God Who cares, guides, leads, corrects, and even more, who paid the penalty for our sins so that we might have eternal life. If only for this reason we ought always to give thanks.

The other side of being joyful, praying, and giving thanks is to quench the Holy Spirit. Paul not only lists the things we should do. He also lists some of the things we should not do. This list starts with, “*Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.*” (v.19) If we are to have a joyful, prayerful, thankful attitude, then we cannot have an attitude of resistance to God and rejection of His word. When the **Spirit** moves in us we must respond and follow His lead. We must not stop listening to Him. We must not seek to hold down what He brings out in us.

In the same way, we are not to treat His word with contempt. Paul said, “[D]o not treat prophecies with contempt.” (v.20) There are many who want others to think of them as followers of Jesus, but who have no time for His word. They express this in many ways. For some, they say they can’t understand it, and they search for strange teachings to back up what they want to believe. The problem is that what the Bible says is clear and right in front of them. Others say that God speaks, but not directly through the Bible. There are things in it that they believe, but they hold much of it to be in error. “After all,” they reason, “it was written thousands of years ago by men who didn’t know what I know now.” This view denies the Bible’s prophetic nature and makes it merely the words of men. Any position in which we in any way stand in judgement over the Bible is to treat it’s

prophecy, it's declaration, "thus sayeth the Lord," with contempt. To do so puts us at odds with God's command through Paul here.

We are bound to respect and obey God's **word**. What it calls sin is sin. What it commands we must do. What it teaches we must accept as truth. Only God and His word are eternal. God's prophecy will outlast the universe. Our human understanding of the world shifts and changes. God and His word stay firm and sure.

Because only God and His word stand the test of eternity, Paul tell us, "*Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.*" (vv.21,22) Instead of quenching the Holy Spirit and treating God's word with contempt, we are to test everything. We are to test the teaching that we hear and read. Just because it is on TV does not make it right. Just because they are spoken with a smile does not mean the words bring life. Just because it is in a book does not make it right. Just because it is in the margin or notes of your Bible does not make it God's word. Listen carefully, just because it comes from this pulpit does not make it right. Study the word. Learn the word. Know the word. Test everything by what the **Bible** says. Hold tightly to the things that pass the test. Get rid, quickly and completely, of the things that don't pass. It's not just actions that are evil. Thoughts and teaching can be too, and anything that claims to be from God but is not is evil.

Paul assumes that we have followed his instructions so far. He is expecting that we will do the things he has told us to do and will avoid the things he has told us to avoid. If we are in Christ, then the blessings for which Paul prayed are ours as well. "*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." (v.23)

Indeed, Paul's prayer is already being answered. What God begins, He finishes. If He has called you, justified you, cleansed you, redeemed you, and regenerated you, then He is already working to sanctify you. It will be a complete sanctification. There will be no part of your being, nothing in your behavior, nothing in your mind, nothing in your heart, that is not brought under the guidance and control of the Holy Spirit. Those who are in Christ are cleansed and renewed completely, from the inside out, and made blameless before God. God works in them to root out whatever is not pleasing to Him or submitted to His will. He changes and conforms them into the likeness of Jesus Christ. He works in them to clean out all that is not holy and pure so they may be ready to meet Him when He returns.

God does not just sanctify us for His own sake and for the sake of sanctifying us. There is a purpose in making us holy and setting us apart for Himself. He does it both so that He will be glorified and so that we may spend eternity with Him. Evil, anything unclean or marred by sin, cannot enter His presence. If we are to be ready when Jesus returns, we must not be engaged in the things the Bible condemns. We must be living holy and pure lives with which nobody can find fault. Our bodies, minds, and **hearts** must be in submission to our Lord and Savior.

The best news is that all of this is not only up to us. Paul ends by saying, "*The one who calls you is*

faithful and he will do it.” (v.24) Not only must we be ready and watching for Jesus when He returns, but God is working in us to get us ready. God Himself is doing this and no other. He commands our cooperation, but it is His task to make us into the people He created us to be—without sin, spot or blemish—perfect in His sight, holy and righteous, fit for His kingdom. We can fight it or cooperate with it

If you are in Christ then you are already blameless in God’s sight and will be blameless at the coming of the Lord. Indeed Paul points out that the one Who calls us is faithful and He will do it. If we are in Christ then we have access to the joy that flows from being in relationship with Him and we are being prepared for Jesus’ coming by the very God of peace. Joy and peace mark this season. We celebrate them and talk about them. Today we have seen how they are ours through Jesus.