

*Third Sunday in Advent*  
**December 11, 2011**  
**Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke**

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

*“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” “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. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.” (NIV)*

What is the Christmas Spirit? And do you have it? We might get many different explanations to what people think the Christmas Spirit is all about but what it basically boils down to is a mood. Some suggest there is something in the air. Maybe it is something people put in the egg nog. This time of year is said to make people happier, to give them a little bounce in their step, and to put a smile on their face. It is a time for giving and sharing and caring and rejoicing.

So do you have it? Are you happy just because people say you should be? Is your heart filled with joy because it automatically happens this time of year? If you are like many, an honest answer would be “no”. Actually, a holiday season is one of the saddest times for many people. We remember loss. The weight of economic struggle feels even greater. The recognition of torn apart families and fractured homes becomes all the more visible. During this season there is sometimes an even severer struggle with sin and more of a downward descent into depression. Why should we rejoice now just because of where we are in the calendar year? Why should we be happy just cause people think we should be happy at Christmas? We shouldn't. We aren't!

That's why we will keep the world's definition of the Christmas Spirit for famous movies such as the Christmas Carol. For we have a real reason to rejoice. We have more than just something in the air to make us happy. We have a message that prepares us for the real Christmas and for the real joy God wants us to have in Christmas. As we hear this message may we consider that: **Our faithful God grants us a true Christmas Spirit.**

Remember the people Paul is writing to in this letter. He writes to believers who are facing cruel persecution. Most of these believers in Thessalonica also lived in poverty. They were poor and suffering. They lived under circumstances we wouldn't call ideal to put you in the Christmas Spirit. So what would you say to these people? How might we close this first letter Paul writes to them? Or similarly what might you say to those who are not really feeling the Christmas Spirit? I have printed off here a list of do's and don'ts - some suggestions called *How to Get into the Christmas Spirit*. (Read the eleven ideas on how to get into the Christmas Spirit.)

While we might find some good ideas here to get us feeling better, the words before us this morning offer so much more! Paul gives these believers and us something much better than

some man-made ideas. We have some guidelines from God Himself. Listen to God's list of do's and don'ts. ***“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”***

While at first glance these imperatives might seem to be restrictive, or even nonsensical, a more careful look at them will allow us to see the beauty in such commands. This is God's will for those in Christ Jesus. These words are to guide the hearts and lives of those who know the reason Jesus was born as a Babe in Bethlehem. These words make perfect sense to people who understand what the perfect life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection of Christ has done for them. For those of us on the way to heaven we have every reason to be joyful always and give thanks in all circumstances.

But are we to be joyful not just on good but bad days too and thankful even in unfavorable circumstances? Yes, for we know our Savior rules heaven and earth so any sorrow that enters our life is not a matter of blind fate. Any sorrow for us is only something our Savior has permitted to serve our good and draw us closer to Him. Thanksgiving and joy are not a seasonal thing, but a constant for those in Christ Jesus. And so is prayer. Paul is not saying that as Christians we are to spend every moment of every day on our knees in prayer. But when he writes pray continually or without ceasing he is reminding us that either consciously or unconsciously we commit all things at all times to Him who cares for us.

Paul's list has not just some good things to do but also commands of what not to do. These commands center on the Word. God the Holy Spirit has given us the greatest gift of all – the gift of faith in Jesus. We have the warning not to put out the Spirit's fire. Do not ignore God's Word. Do not empty these words as if they came from mere men. Treat them for what they are – the Words of God. Listen to them. Hold onto to them. Obey them. Test everything according to this Word holding onto the good and avoiding every kind of evil. What some wonderful guidelines to follow – guidelines to bring true joy and happiness into our lives. God's Word focuses our hearts and homes on what is good at Christmas time. If we want to get into the true Spirit of Christmas we need the Holy Spirit. If we want a true Christmas Spirit Paul tells us to listen to the Word.

Now comes the most wonderful part of all and what I pray is not just the prayer of Paul but our prayer for one another. ***“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. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”*** The focus here shifts from what to do and not to do to what is done and what God will do. It is God who sanctifies us. God sets us apart and makes us holy. He declares us righteous in Christ and washes all of us clean Jesus' blood. And our God is faithful. He will do it. God is the one who keeps us in the saving faith so we remain blameless until the day we die or the day Jesus comes again. People never fall away because God leaves them. God never fails to do what He promises.

Isn't this what Christmas teaches us once again? God is faithful. His promises never fail. For the virgin was with child and gave birth to a Son. We call Him Immanuel. He is our Mighty God, Wonderful, Counselor, our Prince of Peace. He was truly pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. If we want to find a true Christmas Spirit we need to look no further than the manger, the cross, and the empty grave.

Cherish the message that comes from God's Word. Wrapped in this message are the most beautiful of Christmas presents, bought by Christ and carried to us by the Holy Spirit. I can't guarantee that we will always feel happy this time of year, nor should we just be happy because people say we should be. That kind of Christmas Spirit may come and go. We have something far better. The true Christmas Spirit is the joy of holiness because of sin washed away. It is the joy of knowing that God is faithful and will never leave us or forsake us no matter what happens to us in this life. It is the happiness we get from seeing the true Light of the World, the Light who now guides our lives with His Word. May God grant each one of us this Christmas Spirit all the days of our life! Amen.