

Rejoice In Christmas' Real Joy (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24)

- 1) God will faithfully fulfill his promises
- 2) Be consistently connected to the Holy Spirit's good message

In 7 days Christmas Eve will be here. Can you believe that we're only a week away from this landmark day of 2017? Perhaps it's catching you off guard this year since Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday.ⁱ Maybe you've already been counting down the days for a while now. But one way or another, Christmas and its celebrations will be coming. And what is it you're looking forward to in 7 days? For those who work full-time, I bet you're looking forward to the mini-vacation you get. Christmastime is one of the few times of the year when our country takes a breather from its usual hustle and bustle. Children of all ages are certainly looking forward to ripping open their presents under the tree to see what new blessings they get to play with. Those whose year did not turn out like you were expecting, I imagine you're looking forward to the fresh start we get in the New Year. To learn from our past mistakes so 2018 will be better than 2017.

These are all legitimate things to be excited about. But they are not the real joy we have at Christmas. As the children learned yesterday at Christmas 4 Kids, our real joy is God's gift to us of our Savior Jesus. He is the reason why we have Christmas in the first place because what he offers is far greater than any present under a tree. And as the Apostle Paul shows us in our verses from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, we'll see how the real of joy Christmas leads us to rejoice every day. For God will faithfully fulfill his promises so that we may be consistently connected to the Holy Spirit's good message.

The verses that we're looking at this morning are full of comfort because they tell us of 3 timeless blessings from God. The Apostle Paul writes, **"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."**ⁱⁱ The first one is that God is faithful, that he will follow through on what he says. We know this is possible because our Lord is all-knowing and all-powerful. The second timeless blessing is that God will keep us blameless in spirit, soul, and body till the Last Day. To be blameless means to be forgivenⁱⁱⁱ because it is only through faith in Christ that you and I are not blamed for our sins. This forgiveness we have covers us from head to foot, top to bottom. The last blessing is that God will sanctify, that is, set us apart^{iv} as his dear children. Every human being is a sinner. Yet only those

who believe in Christmas' real joy will be considered blameless. All 3 of these timeless blessings are connected to Christ because God gives them to us through Christ. That's why Christians rejoice at Christmastime – because of Jesus and what his birth means for us.

But is that the reason why you're rejoicing this coming Christmas? It's easy to have other reasons be the real joy of our Christmas celebrations. This past year has not been easy or fair. We've worked hard; we've given far more than we received; we deserve a vacation. As I mentioned earlier, there are many legitimate blessings to be excited about come Christmastime. But are you rejoicing because of the distractions of Christmas or because of God's gift to you at Christmas? Our sinful hearts love to focus on the distractions. But they're just that – distractions, interruptions of our usual routine. Life will resume once the Christmas songs have stopped on the radio. So rather than rejoice in the distractions, which are here today and gone tomorrow, rejoice in God's gift of your Savior! His blessings will never leave you in any station of life.

Because Christmas is the celebration of a promise fulfilled. We said earlier that God is faithful, that he will follow through on his promises. And Christmas is proof of that. All the way back in the Garden of Eden, God said he would send a Savior to save us from ourselves.^v That promise got repeated and enlarged throughout the Old Testament until the appointed hour finally came for Jesus to enter this world in Bethlehem. If God can fulfill that ancient promise over thousands of years, will he not fulfill his promises to you and me today? Christmas is proof that we are at peace with God because we are considered blameless for all the wrongs we have done. Jesus, the real joy of Christmas, came down from heaven for a reason – to receive God's punishment for our sins by dying on the cross. It's Jesus who gets blamed for our sins, not us. And we will be with God when this life is over. That is why we really rejoice at Christmastime. For our Savior has come, just as the Lord promised, and he came for you.

Yesterday at Christmas 4 Kids, the children and their parents were able to learn this real joy in their closing skit. The word "Christmas" was printed out so that each letter had its own piece of paper. One child per letter came up and stood here on the altar steps holding each letter so everyone in the pews could see the word "Christmas." Then we had the children holding the word "Christ" step forward to show that Christ is Christmas' real joy.

It's the person who believes this that the Apostle Paul directs the rest of our verses to – to show how we can show our joy according to God's will. Paul gives a lot of examples of how we are to do this. He says, **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.”**^{vi} These 8 commands are God's will for those who are in Christ Jesus, those who call themselves Christians. There's the first group of commands – rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks – which stress our consistent connection with God. And there's the rest which tell us how to hold on to the Holy Spirit's good message. But the motivation to obey all these commands? That comes from realizing what Christmas' real joy is.

The first group of commands – rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks – may seem like an automatic response for a Christian. And it very well might be for you when things are looking up. But even in hard times we're still to be consistently connected with God by rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. How well do you do that? You may do the prayer part when you ask God for help. But don't we often blame God first when life isn't looking so great? To rejoice and give thanks in times of sorrow doesn't make sense to us. But even in the midst of sorrowful times, we still have the real joy of Christmas to rejoice for. Because joy is not always expressed with a smile on our face. Joy is a hopeful attitude of what is to come. Christians know that no matter what happens in this world, the real joy of Christmas will never be taken away from them.

But we only have this real joy because of the sorrows our Savior suffered. That baby born in Bethlehem was not going to have an easy life. Jesus had his share of sorrowful times. Friends and family in Nazareth not giving him a prophet's honor.^{vii} People deserting him once they no longer got free food.^{viii} The victim of a corrupt justice system^{ix} resulting in his crucifixion. Few people suffered as much as Jesus. But it's in his most sorrowful moment – when he breathed his last on the cross – that we see the real joy we now have. For Jesus' death is our salvation. Proof that God will bring us home to heaven when we pass away from this world. That is the joy you and I have no matter what may happen to us in this world. That is how we can have joy in the midst of sorrow.

And we hold on to that joy by holding on to the Holy Spirit's good message. The Apostle Paul again writes, **“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat**

prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.”^x What does it mean to quench the Holy Spirit? Well, where do we find him? In the Bible where he speaks to us through the words of Holy Scripture. We quench the Holy Spirit when we turn a deaf ear to the Bible. So rather than quench the Holy Spirit, we are to hold on to its good message of Christmas’ real joy by coming to the Word. Will your Christmas celebrations show that your real joy is the babe in Bethlehem? Or will you imply that your Christmas is about something else? It’s easy to give the wrong impression even if we don’t mean it. Test the customs of Christmas in your heart and home. Reject every kind of evil so that you may hold on to the Holy Spirit’s good message and show that your real joy is in Christ.

Because when Christmas comes in 7 days, it will be a joyful time. For it is when God proved he is faithful and will fulfill all his promises. In Christ we have our real joy. The joy that God considers blameless and sanctified – set apart. It is with Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds that we rejoice over Christ who is the focus of our Christmas celebrations as the children learned yesterday at Christmas 4 Kids. With a heart that rejoices over Christ, we in turn live according to God’s will. To be consistently connected to God in joyful and sorrowful times. And to hold on to the Holy Spirit’s good message in all our Christmas customs. May the Lord help us to rightly realize the real joy of Christmas and rejoice in it all the days of our lives. Amen.

End Notes

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- ⁱ Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday on average every 7 years.
<https://www.quora.com/How-often-does-Christmas-fall-on-Sunday>. (Accessed on December 14, 2017).
- ⁱⁱ 1 Thessalonians 5:23,24. All biblical quotations are from the 2011 edition of the New International Version unless otherwise stated.
- ⁱⁱⁱ David Kuske, *People's Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO: 2005), 67.
- ^{iv} David Kuske, *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English* (Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, WI: 2003), 339.
- ^v Genesis 3:15 is the first time our Savior is prophesied. There are numerous subsequent prophecies of our Savior's birth in the Old Testament either repeating or adding new details about the first Christmas.
- ^{vi} 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22.
- ^{vii} Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6.
- ^{viii} John 6:25,60.
- ^{ix} Matthew 26:57-67 shows how the Sanhedrin brought false witnesses to testify against Jesus. Luke 23:1-25 shows that King Herod and Pontius Pilate both recognized that Jesus was not guilty of a crime deserving death.
- ^x 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.