

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.

In the name of our coming Savior, dear friends,

I'm going to guess that if you haven't made any lists of things to be done before Christmas, you are in the minority. Christmas checklists are pretty popular. This "100 Things 2 Do Before Christmas" checklist (from the 100Things2Do.ca website) has you beginning one month before the big day and hits the usual cards, gifts, food items, decorations, but also includes some things don't apply to everyone like "book your dog into the groomer for a pre-Christmas clean-up" and the always-tough-to-do-in-Tucson, "go ice skating." Nevertheless, a majority apply to most of us, I would guess.

Here's another one—and apparently I found it too late so maybe I'm doing pre-Christmas prep all wrong because this has you starting "Three to Six Months Before!" I should have started back in June on a "Family Plan." And my baking should have begun in mid-October so that I could freeze it. Maybe you're that good, but I'm certainly not.

But I do need my lists. I'm one of those who has to write almost *everything* down or I'm going to forget something...and maybe something really important. There's just so much going on! If you don't have to write all your stuff down, I commend you because pre-Christmas activities involve a lot of things!

At a time when there is so much to do, can you believe that your pastor would have the nerve to give you another PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST? Actually, the list is not really mine, it's the Apostle Paul's. And so really, it's not Paul's either. God had him write these words to the Christians in the city of Thessalonica. And even though this wasn't intended to be a PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST for *them*, it will serve you well as

### **YOUR PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST**

Both of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians talk a great deal about what we can expect up to and on the Last Day—Judgment Day. But here he offers us a checklist of how God would have us live until Christ comes again. Since during this season of Advent, we focus on Christ's first coming as a baby and on his second coming at the end, this makes a perfect Advent text and checklist.

You are well aware that the pre-Christmas hustle and bustle often takes its toll on our attitudes. During what we want to be the happiest time of the year, we can end up being a little on edge, cranky, depressed because we have so much to do. Husbands and wives sometimes get into arguments over where to go for the holidays and how much to spend on gifts. There's so much pressure!

Well, the Thessalonians were pressured too. It wasn't holiday pressure. It was more serious than that. Those Christians were being persecuted for their faith. If anyone had reason to despair, they did.

But Paul reminded them to ***be joyful always***. And there was good reason for that kind of encouragement. Their joy came from knowing their Savior and the determination with which he bowed under the pressure of that sin-heavy cross to save them. They were blessed with the gospel. Christ mattered most to them and that would bring them great joy even during that time of great stress and pressure.

That same joy is also the first item on our PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST. Paul encouraged them to continue to remain joyful and encourages us this advent season with those same words: ***Be joyful always***.

Be joyful, even when stressed because of not getting everything done when we want to. Be joyful, even when pressured to help with and attend so many things during an already busy season. Be joyful, even when the egg nog gets spilled on the floor. Be joyful, even when in one morning your child eats a week's worth of chocolates from your daily Chocolate Advent Calendar. Be joyful, even when the Christmas tree dries out 2 days BEFORE Christmas or your artificial tree starts shedding! Satan attempts to spoil your Christmas joy with all sorts of little things. You're not going to let him do that, are you? All those things are so trivial when you think about the reason for our joy—that our Savior Jesus came as promised. No matter what happens, keep your Christmas joy.

The second item on our PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST is another attitude. It is thankfulness. Paul says...***give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus***.

Isn't it amazing that worldly people who live like kings still seem dissatisfied? People who have more often seem to just want more. We may not live like kings, but our sinful nature—whether we have a lot or a little—can still rear its ugly head. We can feel dissatisfied with the gifts God has given us. But a Christian with a proper attitude, knows that their spiritual blessings of forgiveness and peace and eternal life far outweigh any material blessings...and they do still have material blessings too.

How will your attitude be this Christmas? Will you ***give thanks in all circumstances***? What if you don't get that present you want so badly? What if you find out you charged more to the credit card than you thought you did? What if your Christmas has to be a modest one? What if God takes a loved one over the holidays? Will you still be thankful?

As Christians, whether we have a lot or a little, we are overloaded with spiritual blessings from our God. We have a Savior who is Christ the King. For that we can have thankful hearts in all circumstances, especially at Christmas as God's sending of that Savior is foremost in our minds.

So on our PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST, we can check off the first two items: Joy and Thankfulness—attitudes that you and I will have this season, attitudes which convey the true Christmas spirit.

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The next items on our list are all things for us to do. You say, “*Oh great! More things for me to do—that’s all I need!*” Ah, Ah, Ah, come on now, you’ve just checked your pre-Christmas attitudes of joy and thankfulness based on having a Savior so you don’t think like that anymore! So let’s look at the “to do” portion of our list.

We’ll start with an easy one. Paul says very simply, ***Pray continually***. That’s easy. We’ve got that one down. Do you? Some of us better than others, I suppose. Our sinful nature works against us here too. No time to pray. So busy I forget to pray. No patience for prayer. It happens, but that’s not what God wants.

Those pressured Thessalonians needed the reminder that constant contact with their God was needed to get them through each day and each struggle. We need that direct communication with our God just as much. Besides, if we’re joyful and thankful, we want to tell God. If we need help with all stuff we’ve got going on, then ask God to either settle you down or help you get it done...or maybe both! Prayer is important all the time, including the Christmas season.

The next one might seem harder to understand: ***Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt***. The Spirit’s power is the faith that lives in you. Certainly the Holy Spirit will not leave the Christian whom he has brought to faith. But a person who prevents the Holy Spirit from working in him or her by not regularly hearing, reading, studying God’s Word, can snuff out the flame of the Spirit that lives in them. We treat prophecies, or God’s Word, with contempt, when we don’t see the importance of studying the Bible and coming into his house to worship him and hear His Word preached. We pray that doesn’t happen to any of us!

So our pre-Christmas checklist would include spending time in church, attending the special services this time of year, and maybe reading through the Bible’s Christmas accounts a few times. There are lots of ways to build up your faith. And finally, be active in sharing your Savior with someone who is dangerously close to putting out the Spirit’s fire. Christmas time is a wonderful time for inviting those who are on that path to come back to God’s house to hear the good news of their Savior.

The third “to do” thing on our PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST is to ***Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil (21-22)***.

Those Thessalonians were to watch out and test everything. We are to do the same. But what does that mean? God’s Holy Word is the guide and rule of life. That Word is to be the standard that Christians use to “judge” or “test” the things you hear and see around you.

Watch what others teach and preach. Test them. Stack them up side-by-side with the Scriptures. Will you tolerate the belief that some will be spouting this season that Mary was not a virgin, but that Jesus was the son of a Roman soldier? Will you tolerate the lies of others who proclaim that Joseph and Mary were “shacking up” and Mary got pregnant by accident? Will you tolerate the teaching that Jesus was born, not as true God, but only a man? Will you tolerate the feeling of some, as I read on a Christmas Card once, that Santa Claus is the reason for the season and that we should “Thank God” for him? Will you resort to telling people, “*Happy Holidays*” instead of “*Merry Christmas*” so as not to offend others with the mention of Christ’s birth?

Will you just play along with these false ideas or will you “test” and speak up? God would have us hold on to the good and avoid every kind of evil this Christmas season.

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So there’s your list. You could be thinking, “*Oh, pastor, I have so much to do already. God expects me to do all that too? I’m not perfect and can only do so much!*”

Truthfully, not one of us could get even one of those things on our PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST done properly if it were not for Christ. Our sinful nature doesn’t even want us to see this godly list. We often leave the boxes on this little checklist unchecked. We don’t keep the other commands of God either. This is a PRE-CHRISTMAS list that we can’t keep perfectly before Christmas or even with extra time after Christmas!

This is why Jesus our Savior came into the world—to forgive all people of their inability to keep God’s lists of requirements for eternal life. We will celebrate Jesus’ birth in less than two weeks, knowing that from the minute he was born, Jesus began keeping God’s lists. He continued to do that for his entire lifetime until finally he laid down that life, giving you and me the greatest presents we’ll ever receive.

Jesus forgives us for all the times we don’t have joyful or thankful attitudes, for all the times we don’t put our faith into action by praying or by listening to His Word, by glossing over false ideas as if they didn’t matter, when we get it all backwards and avoid the good and hold on to the evil. All those sins and more are gone as his perfection is wrapped around us and we are given the promise of eternal life in heaven when our days in this world are done.

And so, this PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST is not one that you and I must keep in order to be saved, but one that we *want to keep* because we are saved by Jesus. Keep focused as you continue to prepare for the celebration of our Savior’s birth and his second coming to take us to be with him. May he bless you as you live your PRE-CHRISTMAS CHECKLIST. Be confident that God himself will give you the strength in the days leading up to our Savior’s birth and for those times when a box is unchecked, know that you have forgiveness in Jesus. The Apostle Paul sums it up best as he writes the final 2 verses: ***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.*** Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.