

Grace, Mercy, and Peace are yours in abundance. Amen.

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. **This is God's Word.**

Dear Friends,

This is a question I probably shouldn't ask but, "Have you ever gotten bored while listening to a sermon?" I think most of us would have to answer with a, "Yes," because not all sermons are "winners," and people are having a harder time keeping focused on the preacher for 15-20 minutes. When we are hearing about new things or something that specifically applies to a problem we are having it's not as hard to pay attention. But what I preach from the pulpit isn't always something new that you have never heard before. When I am writing a sermon I am always concerned about repeating the same truths every week. I know repetition is the mother of learning, but it can also be the father of boredom.

So let me ask you this - how many times have you heard the story of Jesus' birth? How many times have you heard that you are a sinner? How many times have you heard that Jesus died for you? Most of us have been told that we are sinners in need of salvation for years. We've also been certain of our salvation for years. It's nothing new.

Does that mean we should be bored with Christianity? Does that mean we can stop coming to church or at least skip the sermons? Paul answers that question for us today. Just because we are sure of our salvation doesn't mean that we have to be bored as Christians. We still have things to do. So our sermon theme for today is, "**I'm Going to Heaven. Ok, Now What?**" Paul will point out that first of all we should, "**Have the right attitude,**" and then we should, "**Hold on to the good,**" and finally we should, "**Trust that God will Keep Us Blameless.**"

I. You have to have the right attitude. Christmas is a good illustration of having the right attitude. If I were to ask most of the kids and younger people if they like Christmas, I'm sure the answer is going to be yes. They are looking forward to Christmas with anticipation. They like the special parties and the songs and especially the anticipation of opening presents. As we get older, many of us look forward to Christmas too, but as we get into it, some of the joys can turn into frustration. It's work to send out the annual Christmas card and letter, and maybe we can't find that perfect present for someone. If you work in a retail store, there are more people, so there's more stuff to stock and keep straight and you like Christmas music but after hearing the same 12 songs for eight hours straight day, after day, you can't wait for Christmas to be over. You know what Christmas is all about, but sometimes it's hard to feel the joy that is suppose to come with the season.

As you think about your life as a Christian, has your attitude about your Savior changed? Instead of being enthused and excited about Jesus, have you become a Christian Scrooge? The

Thessalonians had good reasons to be spiritual scrooges. The minute they were brought to faith in Jesus, the Jews started persecuting them. They were waiting and waiting for Jesus to come and rescue them on Judgment Day, but He wasn't coming just yet. Their joy could have very easily turned to frustration. That can happen to us too. The longer we live on this earth, the easier it is to become frustrated and disappointed with life and those around us. The longer we live on this earth, the easier it is to become a pessimist and not an optimist – to look for the negative about everything and miss the bright side.

God doesn't want us to be Christian Scrooges and that's why Paul wrote these words, **“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances.”** That is God's command to us, His people – to be Christian Optimists. You're probably wondering, How can I be joyful always? How can I be thankful when God allows me to have issues in my life like cancer or problems at work or a loss of some kind? Seems like God's asking an awful lot of me. Even Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. Was he sinning? Of course not. God would not ask us to do something we aren't able to and that is why Paul continues with the words, **“For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

Having the right attitude isn't easy, but we can do it with the help of our Savior. There will be times in our lives when we will be filled with sorrow. Yet even in sorrow, we have a basis of joy that cannot be drowned out by death or sickness. We have the comfort of knowing that Jesus lived and died for us. We know that Jesus uses these trials to make us grow in our faith. So we can thank God in all circumstances, we can pray for strength, and we can be joyful. With Jesus at the center of our happiness, we'll always find reasons to be thankful and joyful. This is the attitude that God wants you to have as you wait for heaven to come. Be a joyful Christian!

II. But this kind of attitude doesn't just happen. I can tell you that my wife doesn't jump out of bed and say, “I'm going to be happy today.” Most people don't because that's not our natural inclination. Something has to plant that happiness in your hearts and keep it growing. That's the job of the Holy Spirit and He uses God's Word to do it. All of us were brought to faith through the Word of God and now Paul tells us how to keep that fire burning – how to keep it from going out. He says, **“Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”**

During the time of the Thessalonians, there were false prophets all over the place. They told the Thessalonians that Paul had written a letter that said that Jesus already came a second time. These groups were trying to rip the joy from the Thessalonians' hearts. They were telling the Thessalonians that they had missed Judgment Day, and that they weren't really going to heaven. The Thessalonians did what Paul said and tested this message against God's Word and found it to be false and they held onto what was good. They held onto the Good News that when Jesus comes again, everyone will know it and no one will miss it.

There are just as many false prophets today distorting God's Word. Distorting the message found in the Bible and in that way sprinkling water on the fire of faith in many people's hearts. We too, have to hold onto what is good and measure all things against God's Word. And so we HOLD ONTO the Bible as the true Word of God, read it and study it and trust it to grow our faith. HOLD ONTO the sacraments of Baptism and Communion as ways in which God brings us to faith and strengthens us in faith. If you have home devotions, hold onto them as a way to help

you and your family grow in God's grace. HOLD ONTO the Word and sacraments because they will keep your faith burning brightly and watch out for those things that might try to snuff out the fire.

Paul said to **“avoid every kind of evil.”** The literal word for “avoid” is actually the opposite of holding onto - it means to let go of. We need to let go of **“every kind of evil.”** If the Thessalonians would have kept listening to these false prophets, their faith would have died. Some of the Christians following Paul eventually fell from the faith because of false preachers. Preachers that snuffed out the truth found only in God's Word.

We too, have to watch out for things that may harm our faith and avoid every kind of evil. There's stuff out there we know isn't always right, but we think it's not going to hurt us just once. Maybe it's some of the *people you hang out* with or *TV shows* or movies you watch. Maybe it's *telling a dirty joke* or two. That's not going to snuff out your faith. You have a hold on it.

But just think. If you were in a restaurant with a big steak and potatoes and salad before you and you were just getting ready to eat it and then the waiter sneezes all over it, there's no way you would eat it - no matter how hungry you were. It's not that eating it would kill you, but it still wouldn't be very healthy for you no matter how good it tasted. In the same way, it's probably not going to snuff out your faith watch an R-rated movie or tell a dirty joke, but Paul tells us to avoid ALL forms of evil because once evil gets it's foot in the door it can lead us down the path to destruction. It can eventually snuff out the fire of faith within you. So avoid it.

That means you might have to stop hanging out with a certain friend. It might mean that you stop going on the Internet. It may mean that you stop visiting a local hot spot or giving up membership in an organization that is not God pleasing, but let go of every kind of evil.

Why does Paul tell us these things? Not to rob us of our freedom, but to give us joy. To encourage us to HOLD ONTO what is good. To keep the Spirit's fire burning brightly in our hearts.

III. But Paul isn't done. He concludes with this last prayer that you would **“be kept blameless”** until Judgment Day comes. Thankfully, Paul isn't talking about something we have to do. His prayer is, **“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's asking God to do all the work to make us holy and to keep us holy and that's the way it should be.

God doesn't want us to even attempt to make ourselves holy. You see, God is a perfectionist. He doesn't want us to be just partially sanctified, sort-a-kinda holy. He wants us to be completely holy - sanctified “through and through.” If we tried to do it, there's no way we could succeed. So He has done all the work and has done it perfectly for us.

As we celebrate Christmas, we will see how Jesus got down in the trenches – How he started to work right from the beginning when he took on flesh and blood in the manger. He got out his hammer and saw, and started building that stairway to heaven as he obeyed every law for us.

Every time that Jesus avoided evil, another step was being built. Every time that Jesus learned God's Word, another step was being built. And then at the height of his work, He sacrificed Himself and gave us His perfect righteousness for our sins, so that we could stand before God blameless. Jesus made us blameless. His job of salvation is complete. Jesus did His work.

At your baptism, the Holy Spirit took over. He performed His work of entering your body and cleansing your soul with the blood of Christ. He has made us completely holy through His blood. Now He has to keep us in the faith. Therefore Paul's prayer is that the Holy Spirit wouldn't quit, but that he would continue to work in our hearts. We can thank God that the Holy Spirit never rests. For Paul tells us that, **"The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."** He doesn't take a day off and since the Holy Spirit continues to work through the Word and sacrament, we will be kept blameless until the day Jesus comes.

My kids used come and say me, "I'm bored." They soon figured out that was the wrong thing to say, as I would find plenty of work for them to do. I hope that Paul has answered the question for you Christians - "ok, now what?" As Christians living in the hope of the resurrection, you can never be bored. Now you know what to do. Rejoice! Enjoy life. Stay in the Word. Avoid every kind of evil. And finally, pray that the Holy Spirit will keep you blameless until the Day of Judgment. Amen.