

### ***Wish List for Advent***

In the name of him for whose coming we wait, dear friends in Christ: Every family celebrates Christmas in its own way, but here in America at least, it's a safe bet that somewhere near the center of each family's celebration is an exchange of gifts. I'm not knocking this tradition. As long as the giving and receiving among family and friends doesn't become the main focus of Christmas – as I fear it does for some – and end up overshadowing the real purpose and meaning of Christmas, which is our receiving of God's great gift of his Son, then I'm all for it. If nothing else, it's good for the economy.

But with this tradition comes the expectation that you'll give a gift to each of a certain group of persons to whom you are close. That can lead to a lot of stress because there are some people who are hard to shop for. You don't know what they want. And you don't want to give them something they'll think is lame or that they're going to take back to the store right away. It's to relieve thoughtful givers of such stress that many produce what is called a wish list. They hand it to you and say, "Here are some items I'd like to have. If you give me something that's on this list, you can be sure that I'll be pleased." It's the holiday version of a wedding registry. And it's a good idea.

So, for this morning's message I'm going to borrow it (with certain modifications). It's not Christmas yet. We're still in the season of Advent. And Advent is a time of spiritual preparation for the Lord's coming at Christmas and even more for his coming in judgment at the end of the age. And it just so happens that in today's Epistle, St. Paul provides us with a list of things we are to be doing while we await the Lord's coming. And since he was inspired by the Holy Spirit as he wrote it, we could call it the Lord's Advent wish list for you.

But before we get into it, a little background will be helpful. While the list applies to all Christians, Paul originally prepared it for the church at Thessalonica, so it will be good to know something about their situation. There was a very young church. Paul wrote to them less than a year after he and his companions first preached the Gospel to them. At that time Paul had spent only three or four weeks presenting the truths about Jesus to the Jews and "God fearing" Gentiles in the synagogue there in Thessalonica. Upon hearing the Gospel, many of the Gentiles and some of the Jews came to believe in Jesus; but many of the Jews did not. And these were not happy at all about the conversion of their fellows.

These angry Jews stirred up a lot of trouble for the new Christians at Thessalonica. They went around the city and told all their Pagan neighbors that the Christians were a dangerous new cult that practiced evil rituals. They said the Christians would cause trouble for everyone. Their slander campaign was so effective that it put the whole city in an uproar. Soon there were rioting mobs in the streets insisting that the Christians be imprisoned, beaten, or driven out. In fact, that's what happened: Paul and his companions were imprisoned for a while; and when they posted bail they were forced to leave the city, leaving behind the fledgling congregation of recent converts very much like defenseless sheep among wolves.

And that left these Christians only partially trained. There simply hadn't been enough time for Paul and the others to teach them everything they needed to know about Jesus. Sure, now that they had the rudiments of the Gospel they were able to open the Scriptures and understand them in a new light; but still, understand that at this time there was no such thing as

a New Testament for them to refer to. And people who are not firmly rooted in the truth are likely to have many misconceptions. Beyond that, they are more subject to being led astray by pious sounding but totally false teachings – which, as it turns out, is exactly what happened later to many of the new Christians at Thessalonica.

So, knowing that these dear Christian brothers and sisters were both suffering persecution for their newfound faith and that they were comparatively weak and extremely vulnerable to falling back or being led astray, Paul's list for them is what we might think of as the absolutely critical items. There's no fluff or padding here; just bare bones basics – all the more reason we should make this Advent wish list our own.

First on Paul's list is his exhortation to "**Rejoice always**" or, another way to say it, "Always be joyful". This, contrary to what some people think, does not mean that Christians should forever walk around with vacuous smiles on their faces pretending to have no other emotion than a perpetually giddy bliss because to fail to do so indicates a lack of faith. According to this view, good news, bad news, makes no difference: the correct response is, "That's wonderful! Praise Jesus!" But that's not it. Nor does it mean, as I hear from time to time, "God wants me to be happy all the time. And since I believe this particular sin will make me happy, I'm sure it's what God wants me to do."

No. First, it must be said that there's a difference between happiness and joy. Happy is surface level thing. It comes and goes with the ups and downs of life a dozen times a day. *Joy*, on the other hand, runs much deeper. You can be joyful while laughing and enjoying the company of family and friends, *or* while crying your eyes out at the funeral of one of them. You see, the basis of Christian joy is the great love of God for his children and the accomplished work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. God's love in sending his Son into the world to bear our sin and to be our Savior is the foundation and central focus of the Christian life. This Gospel truth fills us with deep, lasting, and inexpressible joy that puts everything else in perspective. In reminding us to be joyful, Paul is telling us to keep our focus where it belongs: on Christ and what he did to save us. Then, whatever happens, be it persecution, poverty, loss, or whatever, the true joy we have in Christ cannot be taken away.

Next on Paul's list is "**Pray without ceasing**". Again, contrary to what you'll sometimes hear, he doesn't mean that you should walk around on your knees wherever you go or that you should devote a certain number of hours to prayer each day. Rather part of what he means is that you should not give up or become discouraged when you make your requests to God and don't immediately get the result you seek. Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer. But more than that, Paul's thought is you should make your whole life a conscious conversation with the Lord. The idea is this: you've got this gracious Father who loves you so very much, and who (quite beyond reason) wants you to be in constant fellowship with him. Now, through the Gospel of Jesus and the gift of prayer he makes himself available to you twenty-four seven. And he invites you to share your thoughts, your hopes and dreams, your fears, even your jokes and foolishness with him, just as a child does with a loving parent. And the point is that this conversation can be ongoing. You don't have to stop and fold your hands and close your eyes to communicate with him. He's always there, and he knows your every thought. Constant prayer helps you to realize this and to live accordingly.

Item three on Paul's list is "**Give thanks in all circumstances**". Here's one we often forget, preferring instead to be negative and complain about the way things are. But the fact is that everything we are, we have, and we experience comes from the Lord's hand. And if we made it a point to count blessings before things to gripe about, we'd never get to the around to

counting the latter. Being thankful keeps us mindful of this. It also keeps our focus on the giver and helps us to appreciate the lavish love he has for us that much more. And recognizing his love also helps us to understand that we can be thankful even for the things we might otherwise complain about. We know that because he loves us, everything that God gives—even the trials and hardships, or that he withholds, he intends for our good.

Number four is “**Do not quench the Spirit**”. The word Paul uses here makes it sound as if the Holy Spirit is like a fire that can be put out with a bucket of water. And if you remember the story about the day of Pentecost, that’s exactly how the Spirit first appeared in the Church – as tongues of fire that rested on the heads of the Apostles. Now, sometimes we’ll hear people say that they are “on fire for the Lord”, and what they mean is that they are really excited; but usually that excitement is a more show than genuine heat and light. It isn’t what Paul means here anyway. Fire is for purifying and for burning up what’s to be consumed. And a big part of the Spirit’s work in our lives is to purify us by revealing our sin and our constant need for repentance. This is a fire we are to feed so that it gets hotter and burns away ever more of the sin and corruption in our lives; but sometimes we pretend not to hear the voice of God’s Spirit speaking through the conscience. We like our cherished secret sins and want to keep them in our lives. And to do it, we have to deliberately harden ourselves against what God says. That’s what quenches the Spirit: our willful refusal to hear and to repent. Paul warns you not to do that because it’s the opposite of growth in the Christian faith. And if you keep it up, the flame of the Spirit may go out completely.

Next on the list is “**Do not despise prophecies**”. We usually think of prophecies as revelations of future events that we find in God’s Word; but to prophesy simply means to speak on behalf of God. In this case, Paul means that we are not to reject God’s Word either through disagreement with it or neglect of it. Now we, of course, have the Word written down for us in the Bible – something the Thessalonians did not have as ready access to; so it will be good for us to know that what Paul primarily has in mind here is the preaching and teaching the church receives through the Lord’s appointed spokesmen. It may sound self serving for me to say it, but what Paul is saying is listen to your Pastor’s teaching. Don’t avoid the public worship of the church. Don’t stay away from opportunities to grow in the Word, and so on.

But then he adds, “**Test everything**.” That is to say your job is not over once you’ve heard what I or some other pastor has to say. You have a responsibility to verify that those who have been called to speak for God are doing it correctly. It’s worth noting that after leaving Thessalonica, Paul went to a city named Berea. There the Jews at the local synagogue received him differently than did the majority at Thessalonica. In Berea, they scrupulously compared everything Paul said and taught to the Old Testament Scriptures. They wanted to make absolutely sure that he was telling them the truth and expounding the Scripture as he should. You might think that Paul would be offended by this, as if they didn’t trust him to be honest; but he wasn’t offended – not at all. In fact, we’re told that the Bereans were more noble than the other Christians in Greece precisely because they did test everything Paul told them about Jesus – how he fulfilled all the things written about the promised Savior. We need to do the same sort of testing so that like them we can “**Hold fast to what is good**.”

The final item on Paul’s list is this: “**Abstain from every form of evil**.” In a world that is inherently hostile to the Lord Jesus Christ and his Gospel of salvation, people outside the Church are always looking for reasons to point their fingers and say, “Oh, those Christians: they think they’re better than everyone else. But see: they’re just a bunch of hypocrites.” Some even go farther, accusing religion in general and Christianity in particular of being the cause of all the world’s ills – a ridiculous charge that has unfortunately been repeated so often that it’s

gained wide acceptance. Now, it's true that great evils have been and continue to be committed by Christians, sadly, sometimes even in the name of the Lord. Obviously, such things should not be; but what Paul is saying here is that we need to go the extra mile. Not only must we strive to live as the Lord would have us do, to be his salt and light showing forth his love in the world; but we must also carefully avoid giving our detractors even cause to suspect that we might be doing something inappropriate. What Paul is saying is that we need to bear in mind that in all we say and do we represent Christ to the world – after all, we carry his name – and so it's not enough just to avoid evil itself, but also what might possibly be construed as evil.

So, to recap: Always be joyful. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. Don't quench the Spirit. Don't despise prophecies. Test everything. Hold fast to what is good. Avoid even the appearance of evil. This is the Lord's Advent wish list for you to keep yourself prepared for his coming. I commend it to you knowing that you will find it helpful, because Paul concludes the list with a blessing – a blessing that explains what the Lord will do for you as you apply these spiritual disciplines to yourself. He, the God of peace, will himself sanctify you completely. He will keep your whole spirit and soul and body blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. You can be sure of it, because the One who calls you is faithful, and **he** will do it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***