

Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent, December 16, 2020

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The One who Calls You Is Faithful

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.

²³Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Rejoice *always*, pray *continually*, give thanks *in all circumstances*, *never* quench the Spirit, *never* despise prophecies, test *everything*, hold fast to *every* good, abstain from *all* kinds of evil.

“Of course,” we say.

But “impossible,” we think.

And what do we do? Not much.

Too often we are hearers of the word, but not doers. We see the face of Christ reflected in these commands, but then we walk away and immediately forget what He was like. And we forget that it is not we who live but Christ who lives in us. Through baptism, we have been raised with Christ to walk in newness of life. The new life involves has a shape to it—the shape of these practices and attitudes. We are to be people who rejoice *always*, pray *continually*, give thanks *in all circumstances*, *never* quench the Spirit, *never* despise prophecies, test *everything*, hold fast to *every* good, and abstain from *all* kinds of evil. It is a full, rich Christian life, this life to which we’ve been called.

Yet we know how to keep a safe social distance from these commands. When they try to get your attention, just give a polite little nod or a friendly-but-not-too-friendly wave. Whatever you do, don’t let them near! Who knows what will happen if they get close? We might actually start rejoicing and praying and giving thanks! So I build a fortress out of my circumstances, or out of my guilt, or out of my desire not to come off as *too* Christian with others. We engage in self-protection, by which I mean, this is how we protect the sinful self from the Spirit and what He would work in us.

These commands are so all-encompassing, how could we ever accomplish them? And where we would even begin? And just what does it mean to rejoice *always* or pray *continually* or do all those other things? How do you do that when your mother's nursing home is a petri dish for the virus? Or when your sleep was interrupted every half hour by a child in need? Or when you're so lonely and depressed that you don't feel anything at all? The Holy Spirit wants too much of us!

Of course, these are all good things. We can acknowledge that much. It's okay to rejoice, in moderation. We certainly want to pray sometimes, but not too much. Giving thanks is great, when you've got something to be thankful for. No one wants to quench the Spirit entirely, just keep it in check. We wouldn't despise the prophetic and apostolic Word, even if we're not willing to test everything by it—can't we believe the Bible *and* what evolutionary science or social justice or feminism say? As to holding fast what is good and standing apart from every form of evil, well, what does God expect? We may be saints but we're also *sinners*!

Exactly! That's exactly why the Holy Spirit calls us to these things. The fact that we are sinners doesn't mean we can ignore these words. Being a sinner is no excuse for remaining in sin. These are practices and attitudes the Spirit uses to fight against our flesh, to resist the devil, and to overcome the world. So if you want to scare the devil, then rejoice, pray, and give thanks!

Take, for example, the command to pray continually. This doesn't mean we have to spend every moment on our knees with our hands folded and our eyes closed, though it is good to spend *some* time doing that. But it is an invitation for our hearts always to be disposed toward prayer. We are invited to consider every person we meet, every challenge we encounter, every unexpected blessing we receive as an opportunity for prayer. The other side of it is that God is ready and willing to hear our prayers at every single moment. Our dear Father in heaven never tires of listening to His dear children! He never tires of our prayers, praise, and thanks, or of our laments, confessions, and cries for help in temptation. Jesus Himself prayed continually. He prayed before He called disciples and before taking up the cross. He prayed with praise and thanks to His Father but also in the cry of dereliction, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He committed all things and all times to the Father—including Himself and all his followers. So every moment presents us with an opportunity to pray, if only our hearts, ears, and eyes would be ready for them.

"Rejoice always" is similar. It means that in Christ there is always reason to rejoice, no matter what my outward circumstances and life may be like.

So we don't ignore what God the Holy Spirit tells the Church, but we also don't let it cause us to despair. Despair is not a fruit of the Spirit. It is the work of the devil. What the Holy Spirit calls us to do is precisely what the Holy Spirit has begun to work in us. Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving are God's will for us and His good works in us. No, we may not rejoice *always* or pray *continually* or give thanks *in all circumstances* yet, but any joy, any prayer, any thanks come from the Holy Spirit. And the life of the world to come will be like that in every way.

St. Paul ends with these words: **“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”** His final blessing is an announcement that the God of peace will sanctify you *completely*. Not just in part, but fully. Holiness of life is God's gift, not our work. The same is true of our blamelessness. Your whole spirit and soul and body is kept blameless not by what you do but by what Christ has done. You are blameless because you are covered by His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. That's what will make us blameless at His coming!

To top it off, we have this guarantee: He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it. The God who calls us to rejoice, pray, and give thanks, to let the Spirit and the Word work freely in our lives, to test everything, holding fast the good and standing apart from the evil—the God who calls us to these things is faithful. He will surely do it. And the good work He has begun in us now, He will bring to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7