

## **“PREPARING OUR HEARTS AND HOMES FOR THE HOLIDAYS.”**

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard**

**First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA**

**December 2, 2008, 6:00 PM**

**Text: I Thessalonians 5:16-19** “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit”.

I want to reflect with you on how we might prepare our hearts and homes for the holidays in a way that doesn't quench the Spirit. I have taken as our text I Thessalonians 5:16-19.

Our priority as Christians and our priority as a church is to glorify God with all the joy we can throw into it. And that includes how we prepare for and celebrate the holidays ahead of us. Our text suggests three ways to do that, and behind each of those ways are three underlying reasons. Let's explore these together through the following outline.

Rejoice always because of the grace of God. Pray without ceasing because of the presence of God. Give thanks in all circumstances because of the providence of God.

### **Rejoice always because of the grace of God.**

Our God is a God of joy and gladness. Our God loves to rejoice, He utterly delights in His creation and in His creatures. From all of eternity, God has been and ever continues to be, supremely happy. God really enjoys life and He loves to celebrate. He loves a good party.

I base this on all the feasts and festivals God instituted in the OT. I base this on Jesus going to the wedding feast in Cana and caring enough about the celebration to perform His first miracle there. I base this on hundreds of verses, such as Matthew 25:23, where Jesus sums up the gospel by inviting us to “enter into the joy of your master.” Our master is a joyful God.

So it follows that He would want us to be joyful and that He would create us with that capacity. And what He commands He enables. He gives us His own Holy

Spirit and heaps on us grace upon grace and blessing upon blessing for the sake of our joy and happiness.

***Rejoice always, rejoice in the Lord always.*** Does this mean we are supposed to be light hearted and frivolous and chipper all the time, never take anything seriously? No. Does this mean that somehow God is going to make everything all sweetness and light so that we can be happy? No.

We have heard it before and so we know this joy is something deeper than circumstantial happiness. We know that the source and root of this joy is deeper than just our own feelings.

This joy referred to here and in many places in Scripture is often associated with hardship and difficulties. This joy is grounded in the past and future grace of God and in the sure and certain hope that all things must work for our good. So every hardship and trial will actually have positive and beneficial results for those who are God's children.

**James 1:2-3** Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

Our joy is deeply rooted in our experience of Christ and His salvation. There is a deep root here that is drawing up the sap of joy from a source that can't be depleted or cut off; nothing can separate us from it. It makes sense that we should be glad when you consider the grace of God and what He has done for us.

He sets before us joy and calls us to rejoice. But knowing that our hearts are so quickly turned to other things and that we are so easily depressed and discouraged, He gives us two further remedies. Prayer and thanks.

**Pray without ceasing because of the presence of God.**

Paul speaks often of his own unceasing prayers. It seems like he was praying all the time every where. Just reading his letters you see where time and again he breaks into prayer. Paul seems to live in constant communion with God. Rather than seeming unusual, it seems natural. He wasn't confined by set times or set places.

For us to pray without ceasing will require a fresh and deep awareness of the amazing closeness of God. It can happen while driving down the Hannegan, sitting at your desk, while eating breakfast or changing a diaper, while standing in the narthex, watching the news or reading the paper, while driving past an accident, or hearing a siren, seeing one of those people begging at an intersection, or a fussy child and weary mom in the grocery. You can break into pray anywhere.

**Philippians 4:5-7** The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

To live life in a spirit of prayer is to live with a constant sense of God's personal presence and our personal dependence. The Lord is at hand.

We rejoice more as we pray more and lay down every burden and care. And as our prayer turned to thanksgiving our murmuring and grumbling and complaining would dry up and cease.

### **Give thanks in all circumstances because of the providence of God.**

As believers we are being called to find reason to praise and thank God in whatever situation His providence places us. If it pleases the Lord, it pleases me.

So does this mean that if I break my leg I give thanks because I could have broken both legs? Not necessarily. This is not about giving thanks because we can always think of ways things might have been worse.

God wants us to give thanks not as a resignation that it could have been worse but rather, to give thanks **as an expression of faith in Him**, faith that He is not divorced from the details of daily life, faith that He is in control. To the believer there is no such thing as fate, or chance or luck. Everything falls under the gracious providence of a loving God. Everything. If we view life this way then everything can be viewed with thanksgiving.

When Phama and I pray together at the end of the day before sleep, I am deeply aware that the only right attitude and emotion for whatever that day has held, is gratitude and thanksgiving. "Thank you, Father, for the gift of this day, for life and health and strength, for our five senses enabling us to experience and interact.

Thank you for every trial that has exposed my constant need of you and dependence on you. Thank you for faith and hope. Thank you for the revelation of your glory, for seeking me, for making me one of your children. Thank you.”

Gratitude is looking back on the past providence of God. Gratitude is a humble emotion; it humbly accepts our place that God has given us within our world, confident in His goodness.

Gratitude is a counter attack against grumbling. There is a lot of ugliness and evil and meanness and ungodliness out there. Paul puts his finger on one of the main sources of this in Romans 1:21, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.”

Remember the children of God grumbling in the wilderness. They forgot the providence of God, they forgot God was in control and leading, so they forgot to give thanks and trust and wait.

The failure to give God thanks and the glory due His name leads to ugly results in our world and in our own hearts and homes. Gratitude and thankfulness are ways of turning ugliness to beauty and making the world and our hearts and homes more beautiful and more inhabitable. Gratitude and thanksgiving heal wounds in marriage and in relationships, they sow the seeds of love and forgiveness and compassion and kindness.

I know God loves to hear us give thanks because as a father I love to hear it from my sons.

### **What God commands, He also enables.**

Do you feel that joy is lacking in your life, that prayer is hard, and thanks is in short supply? Do you feel that especially as you approach the holidays? Finances are tight, a loved one is gone, there are extra stresses? You know what’s great about God? He can create things out of nothing. He is in the business of creating what is not.

Don’t be fatalistically resigned to how you are. Ask God to change you, ask Him to give you these desires and inclinations. Ask Him to change your heart and He will. Ask Him to restore joy, to nudge you to prayerfulness, to remind you to give thanks. This is His will for you in Christ Jesus.

I have seen it again and again, people who fight fear with faith, who push back complaining with contentment, who live a life of joy, prayer and thanks based on confidence and faith in the grace, presence and good providence of God.

Ada V. always looking at God's blessings.

Andy and Helen Hekman in Paradise, CA thankful for what they have, not focused on what they lost.

Evelyn N. peace in the face of death, trusting what she has in her faithful Savior.

Phama saying don't be sad something good is over, be thankful it happened.

People who rejoice in God's grace, in what they have, undistracted by what they don't have. They sense the presence of God and that strengthens their faith. They give thanks, trusting in the perfect providence of God. Their lives were not diminished by the suffering or hardship, their lives were enhanced.

It's about changing our perspective. It's about seeing these verses, not as impractical or impossible, but as the key to life.

### **Application and Conclusion:**

I would like to close by applying this to how we celebrate the holidays this year. We all know that there are lots of excesses coming our way. And yes, materialism is alive and well, and there is always someone to point out all the gaudy commercialization, but why do we need to focus on the negative? Of course the world's celebration of Christmas is worldly, what else can they do?

I propose something radical and revolutionary. What would happen if while we are standing 18 deep in some check out line, we turned to the person next in line and said, "Can you believe this? Look at all these people preparing to celebrate the greatest thing that has ever happened in the history of our universe. Don't you love it?"

"And did you see the parking lot? I mean it is awesome, I have never seen so many cars. I had to walk a quarter of mile just to get in here. Is that cool or what?"

Instead of complaining about the commercialism, let's be glad there is one time of year when everyone is less selfish and buying gifts for others. Perhaps in the midst of that some will remember the ultimate gift given to us in Jesus.

What would happen if we approached Christmas from the perspective of a child, full of wonder and awe and amazement, thrilled at all the sights and sounds and smells, the hustle and bustle, the anticipation, the preparation.

I am going to try to celebrate this Christmas differently. I don't want to spoil it by complaining about the traffic, or the lines or the prices or the snarly check out person. This is God's party, this is the Christians' celebration, it is a holiday that is a holy day.

Christ hasn't left Christmas. Once a year there are sights and sounds all around us even in this secular culture of ours. There are Christian songs on the radio and in the mall. There are symbols of our faith put up everywhere. There are special events and concerts and movies on TV. And no we are not celebrating some past pagan holiday, we are celebrating Christ, and the whole world has gotten in on it. Sure they do it poorly, but we can be a light in the darkness.

In fact, what if the criticism of our cultures' celebration being too excessive is actually wrong? What if the truth is that our cultures' celebration is too weak, too anemic in celebrating God coming to earth? Why not more dancing and singing and praising and giving and eating?

We should set the pace and pave the way, we should be the ones who really do it right. Why? Jesus has come, who can hold it in, celebrate with joy and gladness. Do whatever you can to celebrate that and enjoy every minute of it.

If it means more extension cords and you can afford it, go for it.

If it means baking 12 dozen cookies instead of 8 and it won't hurt the bathroom scale, go for it.

If it means 4 more chairs at the table and you have room to squeeze them in, go for it.

Let's imitate Mary in our adoration.

Let's imitate the angels in our exuberant singing.

Let's imitate the wise men in our extravagant giving.

Let's imitate the shepherds in our wonder and awe and in announcing the good news.

Jesus has come, think about the wonder and awe, the mystery and glory of it. Who can hold that in? Who would want to?

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.  
Luke 2:11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Luke 1:68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.

Luke 1:49 For he who is mighty has done great things...holy is his name.

Ponder it, and think about how we can out-celebrate the world. Let's out-give, out share, out-love, out-rejoice and out-thank them. I say let's out-party the pagans, after all our God is a joyful God and Christians are the only people on earth who can truly get it right.

Let's not be worldly and quench the Spirit by complaining and grumbling, murmuring and moaning. Our priority is to glorify God with all the joy we can throw into it. Rejoice always because of the grace of God. Pray without ceasing because of the presence of God. Give thanks in all things because of the providence of God.

**Prayer:** Holy Father, send your Holy Spirit upon us I pray. Forgive us of the sin of not rejoicing always and forgetting your great grace. Forgive us for forgetting that you are with us always and for neglecting communion with you through constant dependent prayer. Cleanse us of our thanklessness, and how that betrays a lack of faith or trust in your perfect providence in our lives. Restore in us the joy of your salvation and let this season be the new beginning of joy and thanksgiving in fellowship with you and your people. Open our hearts to this great joy.