

God Prepares You For His Coming 3) With His Spirit

1 Thes. 5:16-24 • 2020-12-13 • Advent Series: God Prepares You for His Coming



My family has had to pack and move ten times since my first year at seminary. The last move from our rental home to our current home was only across town, but it still involved a lot of packing. Packing up a household comes down to one important thing: sorting. *“Hold onto what is good... discard what is not.”* If you’ve ever had to move, you know how much sorting it takes! Sorting is something we do for every part of life, including our spiritual life. The letter to the Thessalonians Christians probably has a higher percentage of commands and instructions than any of the New Testament epistles. There are eight total commands in just the final section, some of which are among the shortest verses in all of Scripture. Yet these commands encompass what a believer needs to be doing until the last day: sorting through the good and the bad. How do we sort through everything? Today we continue our series “God prepares us for his coming.” We see that with his Spirit he sanctifies.

Consider how hard it was for the missionaries Paul, Silas, and Timothy when they came to Thessalonica. They had been beaten, jailed, and then escorted out of the previous city, Philippi. But at Thessalonica they were surprised. The Christians there had displayed an amazing turnaround. Paul, Silas, and Timothy witnessed them “turning to God from idols, to serve the living true God.” And the believers in Thessalonica did more than just come to faith in Jesus. They became “a model to all the believers in Macedonia.” Wow! From worship of idols to a model congregation of Christians. Paul goes so far as to say to these believers, “you are our crown, our glory, our joy!”

But these men couldn’t stay with their crown and joy for long. Paul and his companions were sent packing. That’s because their work in the gospel was met with more than great success. It was also met with great persecution and opposition. Many Jews became jealous and formed a riot to attack the missionaries. It got so bad that they were forced to flee. They left with an overnight departure in order to avoid arrest or death.

Now what were the believers to do? One of them, Jason, had been close with Paul and Silas. He had opened his home to them. He and the others were now left behind. Would Jason and the rest of them hold onto the faith?

Paul and his companions write to Jason and his fellow Thessalonian believers to remain steadfast in faith. Paul gives eight commands. But they are more than just calls to action. These instructions all have to do with the mind and the heart. That’s because at the core of Christian living is a new attitude, a new self. If these are the instructions for a model Christian body in hard times, they are also certainly fitting instructions for us in all circumstances.

It begins with, “rejoice always.” There is no room for a Christian to remain gloomy or down in life. Don’t misunderstand. Our lives are filled with things that bring grief, tiredness, and tears. Jason and the Thessalonian believers lost their friends and had every reason to feel abandoned and lonely. But the believer in Christ has a whole new attitude in life that says, “I have enemies but remains my friend. I’m separated from loved ones. But I’ll never be separated again from the one who loved me so much he poured out his life for me.”

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas it is easy for us to lose our joy as we focus inward on our losses. We remember past years and the loved ones who are gone. The picture-perfect Christmas celebration is fleeting. Why? The joys of this world are only temporary. In fact, many of the joys that this world promises are a false source of joy. The beauty product commercial shows smiling people. But the tears will still flow when you use that hair dye and eye liner worn by movie stars. The new technology seems so sleek and fun. But it won’t bring you joy when you look at the Facebook posts of everyone else who is social peacocking and apparently living in a fantasy world. But in Christ, you are living in a real and greater world. You have been called out of darkness into the kingdom of Christ. You have been made blameless and without blemish as he has cleansed you of sin’s ugly stain. You have a relationship status and family that is beyond perfection –it is the holy Church of God and you are his son and daughter through faith. How could this command to “rejoice always” ever wear thin? Rejoice in all circumstances because of Jesus the one you trust!

Along with constant joyfulness, “pray without ceasing.” Now this doesn’t mean that you have to be on your knees and constantly reciting a prayer. Prayer is pouring your heart out to God. Is there something that you desire which is in accord with the will of God? Pray. Is the busyness of life getting you tired and worn? Pray. “Lord, I’m worn. Please allow this body rest soon.” Is the temptation to sin crouching at your door? Pray. “Lord, I’m weak. Give me courage and strength to withstand Satan’s assault against my soul.” Is there ever a good time to cease praying? Pray because he invites you to and promises to hear and answer for your good.

“In everything give thanks.” When you consider the circumstances you are born into, naked and helpless, you have to be thankful. But the Christian has even more reason to be thankful. We know that in mercy he has taken those born blind, helpless, and enemies of God, and made us into heirs of his kingdom. We deserved to suffer his wrath in hell forever. But he paid the wages of sin and gave us freely the gift of eternal life. And as Paul reminds the Thessalonians in chapter 4 of this letter our physical bodies will last forever. He will transform us on the last day. With a perfect home with the Lord, we will be with him forever. In the meanwhile, be thankful in all circumstances. Consider how God has held back what we deserve and given us what we do not deserve! Is your Christmas celebration surrounded

by poverty? Thank God you have riches in heaven. Are you afraid of losing a job or a home this Christmas? Your circumstance hasn't changed in the book of life no matter what the bank's books may say. Not even losing your home, your health, or your life can remove the eternal gift this Christmas. *"In everything give thanks."*

The rest of the commands have to do with sorting out things in life. How can you remain joyful, prayerful, and thankful? By the working of God with his Spirit. *"Do not extinguish the Spirit."* The Holy Spirit has kindled in your heart the fire of faith. That gift of faith has been burning since you were first called to faith and is sustained by the Spirit. It is through faith that we are filled with constant joy, unceasing prayer, and thankful hearts. The Spirit lifts us up to be rejoicing even in the hard times. The Spirit intercedes on our behalf in constant prayer to the throne of God. The Spirit moves us to appreciate and thank God for all his physical and spiritual blessings.

And how does the Spirit work all this new life? Through the Word of God! *"Do not treat prophecies with contempt."* The Spirit has spoken in the past through the prophets. Scripture is God's Word. Yet so often in history the Word of the Lord has been placed on par with the word of man. This is showing contempt for the Word of God. There are people who still today, just as in Thessalonica, will strive against those who hold to the Word of God. They will put down all attempts to elevate Scripture. "You believe that book? You actually think that God gave them those very words to write?" Yes. He spoke in the past in various times and ways through his prophets. His Word was written down for us and our benefit. We remain joyful, prayerful, and thankful as we hold the Word of God in highest regard.

The prophecies of Scripture are the very source of our joy, the reason for our prayers, and the cause of all thankfulness. They point to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Jesus, the one born in a humble stable in Bethlehem, is the Son of God. He is the world's Savior from sin. He is the fulfillment of Scripture. He calls on us as his redeemed people to listen to all of it. There is no part of Scripture which the Christian can say. "I don't really accept that as true or like that." We can't look at any of God's Word and say, "That was then, this is now. Times have changed." The Word of God does not change with time.

That is why the next instruction is so important. It has to do with our minds and hearts. *"Test everything."* Rather than holding onto something because it's been in the family a long time, test it. See if it is in line with the Word of God. Test everything—including your cherished family traditions. Consider who alone knows when your child has been good or bad. Consider who alone holds a record of sins. Consider who alone is omnipresent to give gifts to his people. Consider who alone has divine power and mystery in his person. He doesn't wear a Santa hat. Test every tradition you might have surrounding Christmas. Is it in line with God's word? Overeating? Indulging in too much wine or alcohol? Skipping festival worship services to stay at home? Forgoing your Christian witness and worship on what the world even considers an important religious holiday? Test it. What entertainment do you feed yourself and your family? Test it. What level of greed do you tolerate for the sake of tradition? Test it in light of God's Word.

There are many things regarding tradition that are worth keeping. Centuries of Christmas hymns have been passed on generation after generation. Why? They are good. They teach Christ. They give us real reason for joy, prayer, and thanks. They fan into flame the Spirit's fire. *"Hold onto what is good."* Don't let good traditions like family devotions, teaching Christian hymns, and attending worship each week fall to the wayside. These are good. Hold onto them and any other tradition that is good and God's will for you in Christ. Don't give up or let go of what is good.

What if a tradition or teaching isn't good? What if God's Word is clearly telling us it is wrong? The final instruction for the new heart and mind of believers has to do with another action: *"Keep away from every kind of evil."* You and I have a tendency according to the flesh to want to blend in. Some false teachings in some churches make it easier to live the Christian life. Some help you avoid persecution for your faith. But every false teaching is a kind of evil to avoid.

Why is all this so important? Exchanging the diligent study of the Scriptures for a life of ease will not bring you constant joy, unceasing prayer, and a thankful heart in all circumstances. When we stray from the Word and put out the Spirit's fire, we are led to sadness, and emptiness, and discontent. And we have no peace. Soon the Spirit can be quenched, and the fire of faith will burn out. We will be unprepared for his coming. Our life will be one without rejoicing, without prayer, and without thanks. We will end up treating prophecies with contempt and holding onto what is evil instead of what is good. We will have failed to pass the test because we refused to put our hearts and lives to the test of God's Word.

But a final reminder remains. The God of peace himself will work out all he wills for us. You have been called to faith. The God of peace gives you his peace and works new life in you. *"May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and 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."* When Jesus comes again you will be prepared.

By the Spirit's working he keeps you in the faith and from the dangers of sin which would destroy it. He has made you blameless. Instead of sorting you to be a burning stick for the fire of hell, he has gathered you into his barn. Through the working of his Son and his Spirit he has in grace tossed you onto the keep pile. Now how will you sort out your life? Rejoice, pray, and give thanks always. By the Spirit's working, continue to *"Hold onto what is good... discard what is not."* God prepares you for his coming. With his Spirit he sanctifies.