

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *The King Shall Come*
Service Theme: *He is Bringing Perfect Joy*
Sermon Theme: *Rejoice ALWAYS!*
December 17, 2023—1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Have you ever been really mad; or really sad; or really worried; or really frustrated; and someone told you, “Hey, don’t worry about it! Just be happy!” If that’s ever happened to you, then you know how completely not helpful that is. I’m sure they had good intentions, trying to calm you down, cheer you up, or ease your mind. But telling you, “Just be happy!” when you’re anything but, isn’t helpful. Because basically they’re telling you to just ignore the very real circumstances that are causing your anger, sadness, worry or frustration. It’d be like telling someone with cancer, “Just be healthy!” or telling someone mourning the death of a loved one, “Don’t cry!” As much as Bobby McFerrin sings, *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*, we know it’s not that simple!

Maybe you felt the same way about today’s sermon text when I read it. When the Apostle Paul encourages the Christians in Thessalonica, and all the Christians who have read and heard it since, ***“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”***

Come again? Rejoice...always? Pray...continually? Give thanks...in all circumstances? That’s impossible, isn’t it? Even the happiest person isn’t always happy. Even the greatest prayer warrior doesn’t pray without ceasing. Even the most grateful person can’t be thankful about all the circumstances in their lives. Don’t we all have things in our lives that make “rejoicing always” impossible? Is Paul just patronizing us? Telling us the equivalent of, “Don’t worry about it! Just be joyful!” Not at all. In fact, Paul assures us that we can **Rejoice ALWAYS**; not by trying to ignore our circumstances, but even in the midst of our troubling circumstances. And Christmas is a major reason why!

Paul certainly wasn’t telling the Thessalonian Christians to rejoice always because they had no problems. In fact, one of the main reasons Paul wrote to them was out of concern that their troubling circumstances might cause them to lose their joy in Christ. They were experiencing crushing persecution for their Christian faith from those outside the church, and were wrestling with disturbances, and false teaching that caused misunderstanding, confusion, and fear inside the church. Not exactly ideal circumstances to tell someone to rejoice always!

And despite how prevalently “joy” is used in correlation with Christmas, I’m guessing there are circumstances in your life right now that make you feel like you can’t rejoice always. Maybe it’s the non-stop hectic rush, the daunting work deadlines, or the unending to-do list at home. Maybe it’s the lack of money that prevents you from giving your spouse or kids the Christmas you want to; or maybe it’s the mounting stress as your credit card debt grows so you can give them the Christmas you want to. Maybe it’s the grief of celebrating Christmas without someone you love, or the heartbreak of frayed relationships that will make your family Christmas gathering joyless. Rejoice always? Give thanks in all circumstances? Yeah, Ok Paul. Whatever you say.

But this isn’t even the only time Paul says this! He also commanded the Philippians, not too distant Greek neighbors of the Thessalonians, ***“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice!”*** There it is again! Rejoice...always!

Is this just some phrase Paul used to motivate people, even though he knew they couldn’t actually do it? Like telling a kid, “Don’t give up on your dreams! You can be anything you set your mind to!” even though you know full well that that 5’6” 120-pound weakling will never fulfill his dream of becoming an NFL lineman!

No, when Paul tells these Christians, and us, ***“Rejoice always...give thanks in all circumstances,”*** he’s not being patronizing, or blowing smoke. Rather, he’s inviting us to discover where “always” joy and “all circumstances” gratitude can only be found.

Paul telling us “rejoice always” is different than telling someone “just be happy!” because happiness and joy are different. Typically, happiness is based on certain circumstances in our lives going in the positive way we want. That’s why Paul couldn’t realistically tell people, “Be happy always!” Because that’s impossible! Even the happiest person you’ve ever met has moments and days when they’re not happy. Because the circumstances that spark our happiness are temporary—eventually, they’ll all come to an end. And they’re uncertain—sometimes, the things that usually make me happy don’t cut it. And they’re fluctuating—constantly taking us through the ups and downs of an emotional roller coaster.

Joy on the other hand, comes from more than just our reactions to the circumstances of our lives. Joy comes from certain realities outside of our circumstances. Joy is a character trait; an identity. Joy isn’t just how we feel, but who we are! Which means it’s possible to still rejoice always, even when you’re not always happy.

Paul isn’t telling us to just ignore the very real circumstances in our lives that make us angry, sad, scared, or frustrated. He doesn’t tell the Thessalonians to ignore the persecution or disturbances that were robbing them of happiness. Rather, he shows them, and us, that “always” joy is found in something outside of our circumstances. He encourages us to acknowledge our circumstances, to lean into them, as troubling as they might be, and rejoice even in them—because our joy is found in realities outside those circumstances, and that can’t be changed or shaken by those circumstances!

Paul assures us where that joy is found: ***“For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*** It is God’s will that we be people of joy always; that we trust in him and rely on him completely, so that we will continually be praying to him; that we can be thankful for our reality no matter the circumstances. And God makes that will possible—through Christ Jesus!

Imagine people’s joy when what God prophesied about his promised Messiah in Isaiah 61 would take place. ***“The LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. To bind up the brokenhearted, to***

proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” The Messiah was coming to change lives; to give new identities; to transform pain, mourning, and sadness into healing, comfort, and...joy!

And when Jesus taught in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, he pointed to himself and Isaiah’s prophetic words and declared, ***“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”*** Jesus is the one who came so that we can rejoice always! And while Isaiah prophesies the many ways that the Messiah would come to profoundly change people’s circumstances, he came to give us unending, unshakeable joy through the realities outside those circumstances; through the new identities he’s given us.

That Christ-child that we celebrate on Christmas was born in Bethlehem not just to give us some temporary happiness, but eternal joy! He came into the world not just to make us smile, but to save us from sin! He came not just to heal our perishable bodies, but to heal our eternal souls! He came not just to make our lives a little easier, but to give us eternal rest!

And because Jesus was born to be the Savior of the world, that means we can be people of joy, always! After proclaiming what the Messiah would do in the beginning of Isaiah 61, we then hear the words of people who have had their identity changed by the Messiah’s salvation. They proclaim, ***“I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”***

Basically, they’re rejoicing because the Messiah would put them in the finest type of clothing—that is, garments of salvation, and a robe of righteousness and perfection! Isaiah pictures it like putting on wedding

clothes, like a groom putting on his sharp tux, and a bride putting on her beautiful wedding dress and jewelry. If you're married, think of the joy you felt on that day. You might have stressed about all the little details and everything going perfectly leading up to the wedding. But on that day, when you were united as one with your spouse, your joy was so great that all the little circumstances didn't really matter anymore. Almost all of my wife's family ended up getting the stomach flu during our reception—and it was sad, but ultimately, it didn't steal away our joy—because what really matter was the unchanging reality that we were now husband and wife.

And the joy produced by Jesus our Savior also isn't changed or robbed by circumstances, because it's based on the unchanging reality of who we are, and what has been promised through him. When guilt tries to rob you of joy, it can't. Because the reality is that you're a forgiven child of God. When loss or heartbreak make you feel unloved, it can't rob you of joy. Because the reality is that you're loved perfectly and unconditionally by God. When circumstances in life bring questions about where your life is headed, it can't rob you of joy. Because the reality is, through Jesus you're destined for eternity in Heaven. When the circumstances of your life are filled with sorrow, pain, struggle, or loss, it can't rob you of joy. Because the reality is Christ the Savior rules as Christ the King of Heaven of earth, who is in perfect control over everything that happens to you. Which means if he allows it, he's permitting it for our good, and the good of his Kingdom. It means he's using it to draw us closer to himself; it means he's using it refine our faith like gold in the fire; it means he's giving us opportunities to confess our joy amidst the struggle before others. As James, the brother of Jesus writes, ***“Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”*** When we face persecution, opposition, or rejection for our faith, it can't rob us of joy. Because the reality is nothing can separate us from Christ's love!

While the circumstances that bring us happiness might change and fluctuate, there is nothing that can change the reality of what Christ has done for us, who Christ has made us, and what God has promised

to us. So, when Paul says, ***“Rejoice always,”*** he means it! And you can, because of the unchanging reality that Jesus, the child of Bethlehem, is your Savior. Nothing can change that! So rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances. That's God's will for you in Jesus! And it's our reality through Jesus.