

Last week, I went to the dentist. And you know how when they're working on your teeth, you can't talk, so sometimes the one working on your teeth will do all the talking for both of you? Well, that's what my dental hygienist did. She told me about her family, her Christmas plans...

And one story she mentioned came to mind while I was studying the sermon text this week. She said her 11-year-old son came to her all excited before going to bed the night before. "Mom," he said, "I have something really important I'm gonna give you tomorrow morning." So the dental hygienist got excited, too. She got excited, too. What was he giving her? A card? An early Christmas present? Well, next morning rolls around, and she was a little disappointed when...what did her son give her? His Christmas wish-list. All the presents *he* wanted *her* to buy *him* for Christmas.

It came to mind as I studied the sermon text, because...well...it almost seems like God does something similar to us this morning: Gives us *his* Christmas wish-list. Paul, writing to the believers in Thessalonica, says, **this is God's will for you**. And then he gives a rapid-fire list of things he wants - not just for Christmas, but for every day of our lives as we wait for Jesus' return. But here's the thing: The closer you look at this list, it's not so much what God wants *from* us as what God wants *for* us – gifts *he* gives *us* in Jesus. God's Christmas list is full of gifts for you... 1) won by Christ, 2) given by his Spirit, and 3) guaranteed by his faithfulness.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil.

²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

I. Won by Christ

I know, it might seem at first like God's gift list is more of a to-do list for you. Maybe it's even a to-do list that leaves you feeling guilty. Paul says, **Rejoice always**, and I say, "I know, I should be more joyful, but I'm not. God gives me every reason to be in Jesus, but I often look elsewhere for joy, and it escapes me." He says, **pray continually**. And I say, "I know I should. I know God wants me to. But I don't do it as much as I ought." Paul says, **give thanks in all circumstances**. But I struggle to say thanks to God in the good times he sends me – not to mention the way I can complain when he sends me bad times! One glance at this list leaves us feeling like failures, doesn't it?

But maybe that initial reaction to God's Christmas list is good. It reminds us that this list isn't what God needs from us, but what we need from him. Think about it: God doesn't need your joy. He doesn't need your prayers. He doesn't need your thanksgiving, either. No, we're

the ones who need more joyful, prayerful, thankful hearts! But most of all, we need forgiveness – for not being what God wants us to be.

And here's the good news: What you need, God gives. When Paul says, **This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus**, he's saying, "This is what God purposed and planned and purchased for you in Christ Jesus!" It's God's gift list for you - and the first gift on it is the one we need most, forgiveness. Our sins earned us God's punishment, but **God's will for you in sending Christ Jesus** was to save you. The **God of peace**, as Paul calls him here, was so intent on giving you peace with him that he sacrificed his Son under the punishment you deserved and won you the peace of forgiveness. It's yours, in Christ Jesus.

But so is the first gift Paul mentions: **joy**. In Christ Jesus, God has given you a reason to be joyful always. Not the fleeting and fading happiness that this world passes off as joy. No, a joy that doesn't go up and down with your earthly circumstances, a joy that's yours even in your tears: The joy of knowing that your sins are forgiven, that God loves you and is always with you. The perfect joy that's waiting for you in heaven.

And you have the gift of **prayer**. Without Jesus, your sins would be like a brick wall separating you from God – you could shout to God all day long, and he wouldn't hear you. But Jesus broke down that wall of sin for you. Through faith in him, Paul says, you have the gift of calling on God anytime, anywhere, all day and all night – and he never gets sick of hearing you. And he'll never fail to hear and answer you.

And you have the gift of thankfulness **in every circumstance**. People who don't know Jesus can be thankful when they don't have what they want or when things are going well. But you can be thankful when you don't have what you want, because you have God's promise to always give you what you need. You can be thankful when things go bad, because you have God's promise that he'll use even that for your eternal good.

All these gifts are yours **in Christ Jesus** Paul says. So, his point is, open them. Make use of them. And is there any better time of year to do that? At a time when most are looking for joy in all the wrong places - and maybe even we as Christians are struggling with sadness or loneliness - is there any better time to pause at the manger and let God fill our hearts with real joy? At a time of year when stress is at a high and personal problems are magnified, is there any better time to take our worries and problems and leave them at God's throne in prayer? At a time of year when many are focused on what they want and don't have, is there any better time to let God fill my heart my heart with gratitude in giving me all I need by giving me Jesus?

II. Given by his Spirit

And God does just that. The Holy Spirit works through the message about Jesus to fill us with joy, and gratitude, and give us prayerful hearts. That's why the next thing on God's Christmas list for you has to do with the Spirit and the Word. ¹⁹ **Do not quench the Spirit.** ²⁰ **Do not treat prophecies with contempt.** Paul describes the Spirit's work in our hearts like a burning fire...but there is a way that we can quench his work. Paul says we do that when we treat the Word that he works through with contempt.

It can happen so easily, can't it? Especially to lifelong Christians. After so many trips to the manger, to start to treat the news that a Savior is born to us – news so good it made the angels sing - as if it were old news. After spending so much time in the truths of God's Word, to start to think that I already know what God has to say to me, and so tune out and not pay careful attention. Paul says that contempt can leave us with a flickering faith on the verge of being snuffed out.

So, do you see why God puts this on his Christmas list, too? Out of love, pure love for you. Again, this isn't something he needs...but something we need: The ongoing work of the Spirit in our hearts. God wants us to always have the blessings Christ won for us, and never lose them; he wants us to enjoy them more and more. And that's precisely what the Holy Spirit does for us as he keeps our faith aglow through the Word of God.

So listen to the message about your Savior with all the eagerness of a kid waiting to rip open presents on Christmas Day. Pay attention to God's Words in here as if for the first time – because it's never old. His mercies are new every morning. Let your Christmas celebration center on it. But not just your Christmas. Let your life revolve around it as you wait for Jesus to return.

III. Guaranteed by his faithfulness

Which brings us to the final thing on God's Christmas list. Paul says it's also on his wish-list for the believers in Thessalonica. ²³ **May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Paul only got to spend a few weeks with the believers in Thessalonica before he was run out of town. So you can understand why he'd be concerned about their spiritual well-being; why he'd be on his knees asking God to keep them holy and blameless until Jesus comes again.

But if we're honest, isn't that the #1 item on our wish-lists, too? Is there anything more important, anything with more at stake, than being found blameless – without sin – when Jesus returns as judge? Even one sin on the record earns us eternity in hell! We need more than a wish that we'll be blameless on that day – we need to be sure!

And Paul was. Listen to where his certainty came from: **The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.** The God who calls you is faithful. When God called you to faith, he made you holy and blameless by washing your sins away. And the one who called you has been faithful ever since. He promises to forgive you each day for Jesus sake, and he has. He promises to keep working faith in Jesus in your hearts through his Word, and he will. He promises that through faith in Jesus, you'll be found blameless when he returns – and he'll keep that promise, too.

Look forward to that day. Because that's the day when God will give you the last and greatest Christmas gift on his list for you. This one, too, was won by Christ, given by his Spirit, and is guaranteed by his faithfulness: Life eternal. Amen.