

## The (nearly) impossible Christmas list.

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 for 12/13/2020 by Pastor Bolwerk

*<sup>16</sup> Be joyful always; <sup>17</sup> pray continually; <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. <sup>19</sup> Do not put out the Spirit's fire; <sup>20</sup> do not treat prophecies with contempt. <sup>21</sup> Test everything. Hold on to the good. <sup>22</sup> Avoid every kind of evil. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*

Have you ever been given an impossible Christmas list? It's a list where you look at the items the person wants and you don't even know what they are, or maybe there are things on the list you would be too embarrassed to buy someone. Imagine getting the Christmas list of a teenager. Perhaps it is a niece, or nephew, or a grandchild. On that list is only one item. That item is an Arduino UNO R3 ATmega328 Board With Boot Loader. What is this thing? And what are they loading into their boots?! Where do you find this thing and how much does it cost? This seems like an impossible list.

Perhaps the only thing more frustrating than that kind of Christmas list is the person who doesn't give you a list and then they say, "I don't really need anything, so just get me whatever you think I will like." This person apparently already has everything they could possibly want. Do you really know what they like? What do you get someone like that? Shopping for someone like that can feel like an impossible task.

Today, Apostle Paul gives us God's Christmas list. As Paul closes out his letter to the Thessalonian Christians, he gives a list of things that he says are **"God's will for you"** (v. 18). Things that are a part of God's will are things that God wants. For example: God wants all people to honor and worship him. God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of his saving truth. These are things that please God. They are part of God's will.

Paul gives us a list of things God is looking for in his believers. This list is kind of like a Christmas list because they are things that are pleasing to God. They are things God loves to see in his believing children. So, what a great gift to give to God, something that makes him happy! So what is on God's Christmas list? Let's take a look and see if there is anything we might possibly fulfill on God's Christmas list.

Paul starts the list by saying, **"Be joyful"** (v. 16). That certainly sounds like something we can do, doesn't it? Who doesn't like being joyful? Oh, wait. There is that little word, **"always."** How can we be joyful always? This world is so full of pain and trouble and sorrow and suffering. How can we be joyful through all of that! That doesn't seem possible.

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Let's check the next thing on the list. Paul says, **"pray"** (v. 17). That's easy enough. We pray every day. We pray before our meals, we pray here at church, we ... oh ... wait. Paul actually says, **"pray continually."** How is that possible? If we pray continually how would we never get anything done! That's just is not possible!

What's next on this list. Paul says, **"give thanks"** (v. 18). Here is something we can check off the list. We just did this a couple of weeks ago on Thanksgiving Day. We even thank God here in our worship. Uh oh. It seems we missed some "small print" here. It actually says, **"give thank in all circumstances."** That doesn't seem right. How are we supposed to be thankful with this COVID virus killing people and messing up everyone's lives? How are we supposed to be thankful with all of the political fighting going on, and the civil unrest and rioting that keeps happening? This item seems just as impossible as the others.

What else do we have here? Paul says, **"Do not put out the Spirit's fire"** (v. 19). Finally, here's one we can handle. We know the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost like flames of fire on Jesus' Apostles. Since the Holy Spirit is God, we certainly don't have the power to put out his fire. Unless that's not the fire Paul is talking about. When the Bible speaks about fire or a flame it is usually talking about faith. That is the "fire" that the Holy Spirit was giving the disciples on Pentecost. That is what the Spirit gives us. So how could we possibly put out the fire God's Spirit started in us? By letting our faith die. If we are not regularly feeding our faith with God's word and strengthening it with the sacrament of Holy Communion, then eventually our faith will die, and that fire will go out. This is another item on God's list that we are not always so good at handling.

Well, what about the next item, which is, **"do not treat prophecies with contempt"** (v. 20). To show contempt toward something is to show a lack of respect. Those prophecies Paul is talking about are all that God proclaim to us in the Bible. We would all have to admit that there are times in our lives where we have not show respect toward what God says in his word. We have broken his laws and abused his commands. Perhaps we should move on to the next items on the list.

Paul gives us three more items. He says, **"Test everything. Hold on to the good"** (v. 21b), and **"Avoid every kind of evil"** (v. 22). I don't know about you, but when it comes to taking care of these items on God's list, for myself I would have to say, "Fail. Fail. Fail."

We fail at all these things. It's just not possible for us to do these things on God's list. This is an impossible Christmas list! Although Paul does say something that gives us a glimmer of hope. He says: **"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**

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### **Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 23).**

Paul say, “May God himself ...” sanctify you and keep you blameless. To be blameless in connection with the list we would certainly need some help. Maybe if God helped us, we could do some of the things on this list. But Paul’s words here can still leave us with doubt. Paul say “May God” do these things. But what if God doesn’t? What if God decides he is not going to do these things? If that happens, then how can we ever possibly please God? God’s Christmas list just seems impossible!

Or is it? While God’s Christmas list may seem impossible, it might better be said that it is “nearly” impossible. This list is only impossible when we try to fulfill these things by our own strength and with our own power. The list is here, in part, to remind us that we need God because **“all things are possible with God”** (Mark 10:27)! We need his help to please him. But this list is also God’s gift to us. God wants these things to be a part of our lives so he can bless us through them. And he will bless us. In connection with this entire list, Paul says of God, **“The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it”** (v. 24).

The one who calls you is eternally faithful! God is perfectly faithful. He never fails to carry out what he says he is going to do. Our perfectly, eternally faithful God called you into his family using his powerful gospel. In your baptism he connected you to his Son, Jesus. In that water of rebirth God connected you to every part of Jesus’ saving work: Christ’s perfect life, his innocent death, his glorious resurrection. You are connected to Jesus’ full and free forgiveness for all your sins. In this amazing union with your Savior, your heavenly Father sanctifies you through and through. He makes you holy and blameless in his sight by covering you with the perfection of his own Son.

Having blessed you with forgiveness and salvation, having called you into his family by faith, God gives *you* gifts. He gives you the gifts of joy, prayer, and thankfulness. He gives you the spiritual strength to not put out the Spirit’s fire, but instead to show honor and respect to his Word of truth. God empowers you so you can test everything, holding onto what is good and avoiding what is evil. Like a loving parent at Christmas, God doesn’t give you one gift, but he pours out on you an abundance of gifts.

Yet sometimes, like small children, we do not always know how to properly handle God’s gifts. Sometimes, like children, we are more fascinated with the wrapper than the present – “Ooo, look at the shiny, new Bible I got for Christmas!” Then that shiny, new Bible sits on a shelf and collects dust. We might misuse or abuse God’s gifts by chasing after worldly “joy” or being ungrateful toward God’s goodness. We might “break” God’s gifts by breaking his commands to us. When these things happen, and as sinful humans we know

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they will, we don't want act like a little child and try to hide the damage we have done. In repentance, let us take that which we broke to our heavenly Father. There we can tell him we are sorry for the damage we have done. Then, in the power of his forgiveness, he can help us fix the problem. And he will help us because God is faithful. He will do it!

When we struggle with God's Christmas list we need to ask ourselves why is it we are not always joyful? It is because we take our eyes off the source of our joy: Jesus! Why don't we pray continually? It is because we forget Jesus has the power to answer all our prayers. Why don't we give thanks in every circumstance? It is because we forget that our loving Lord uses every circumstance in our lives for our eternal good. It's so easy to get caught up in the materialism and activities of this world. It's far too easy to focus on the world to the point where we take our eyes off the prize Jesus won for us. We get so wrapped up in worldly things we forget this world is not our permanent home. We forget that Jesus has gone to prepare a perfect place for us in his Father's home. That is why, through his word, God points us again, and again, to the greatest gift he has given us: his own Son. God the Father points us to his Son and says, "Keep your eyes on that gift and all these other gifts will fill your life of faith."

We can be certain that God will fill our lives with these gifts because he is faithful, and he will do it! With the Father's help we can fulfill this list. With Jesus' help we can do things that are pleasing to our heavenly Father. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can live a life that shows honor and respect to our faithful and loving God.

Take some time this week and meditate on God's nearly impossible Christmas list. As you do, keep this in mind. These are not really gifts for God, ultimately, they are all God's gifts to you. They are gifts God gives you in connection with the faith he has given you in his Son, your Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.