

December 17, 2023 (Advent 3 B)

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

***“Putting the POWER back into MERRY Christmas!”***

I like the fact that so many people down here in the Bible Belt still say “Merry Christmas” to each other in public places. In other places in North America there’s a lot of pressure to replace it with the generic “Happy Holidays” – I don’t like that phrase because I see it as a copout. It’s a tacit approval of religions that deny Jesus’ true identity and part of the push to say all religions are the same. They are not. Jesus is the virgin born Son of God who came to save us all.

So we Christians still joyfully say “Merry Christmas” to people all the time here in mid to late December. But what does it really MEAN when we say that? Maybe . . . *“I hope you have a somewhat merry or happy Christmas this year.”* And do you really even mean it? Maybe. Kind of. Sometimes. What if life **stinks**? The world is in chaos . . . the cities are in crisis . . . the border is wide open . . . health is fading . . . that loved one is not here for the holidays – it’s just not the same without him / her . . . And someone says, **“Merry Christmas!”**? Either it means nothing at all, or maybe it’s even putting salt in someone’s wounds – for those who would say, *“No, it’s not going to be very ‘merry’ this year at all!”*

Well, let’s not give up on “Merry Christmas” just yet. I have an ambitious goal for the sermon here today. Imagine the phrase “Merry Christmas” is a big glass ball – like a Christmas ornament, if you will. We’re going to CRACK that phrase open – as you know, like this ornament, it’s pretty much hollow inside. Today we’re going to FILL it with the words of our 2<sup>nd</sup> Lesson – and **reconstruct** it into something powerful. Today (assuming you can listen in for 15 minutes or so) the words “Merry Christmas” will, hopefully, be forever changed for you. That’s our goal for this message: ***Putting the POWER back into MERRY Christmas.*** From now on “Merry Christmas” is NOT a somewhat hollow, pious wish without any real and solid meaning or power behind it. It’s an **imperative** / it’s a **command** – just like the imperatives at the beginning of our text from **1 Thessalonians 5: 16 (NIV) Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.**

BE joyful / BE merry – both at Christmas and always! *Easier said than done, right?* What about the poor sap who has no family, who is facing jail time – in a dirty, dingy, foreign jail, waiting for a death sentence to be carried out . . . *Go say “BE joyful / MERRY Christmas! - to THAT guy!”* Well . . . THAT guy wrote these words with direct guidance from the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul had all that sitting in front of him. Still, no matter what he had to face – no matter what any believer down here may EVER have to face – God says, **“Rejoice!”**

Why? *Because of Christ.* Christ was born in Bethlehem. Christ came to save us. Christ died for all our sins. Christ rose again. Christ loves me and has forgiven me. Christ is here with me. – So . . . **rejoice! BE merry – because of ALL of that.** Stuff all that into “Merry Christmas” – and – what follows as well. **PRAY** continually. Make use of this incredible gift you have in Christ. You have the ear of the Almighty King – talk to Him. Give Him all your pain, requests, burdens, joys – He invites you to! And, **give thanks** in ALL circumstances – you have every reason to: Christ is born. Christ is alive. Salvation is yours. Everything else in life is just gravy, and you have lots of those additional blessings too. So – **rejoice! Pray! Give thanks!** Take these powerful words from the Holy Spirit and put THEM into the phrase, “Merry Christmas!”

But, what if I don’t *feel* like it? What if (like so many people out there at this time of year) I’m depressed. What if I’m sad, alone, miserable – is “Merry Christmas” supposed to change all that? Well, the next verses of our text provide some answers for us: **Verses 19-22**

**19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.**

The Holy Spirit brings out Joy, prayers, and Thanksgiving in our hearts in response to what Christ has done and won for us. The Holy Spirit is the FIRE in the believers’ heart – but we believers also know how to “dump water” on that fire. *How do we drench the Spirit’s fire?* Well – that’s a question you need to ask yourself. You know the **10 Commandments** (if you don’t – dust off your catechism when you get home, or simply look up Exodus 20). Look them over and ask yourself, *“Where am I struggling? Where am I failing? Instead of putting God first, am I putting Him last? Am I*

*disrespecting and despising authority? Is hatred, greed, lust lingering in my heart?"*

THAT stuff, that **sin** is what quenches the Holy Spirit's fire. It's not the outward circumstances in life that kill our joy – it's the sin in our hearts. Find it. Repent of it. Dig out that muck and bring it to the cross where its poison is destroyed and its power is broken forever. Your Savior died for those sins – He purifies your heart and soul, and sets you free. Then, the Holy Spirit works through that Gospel and you respond, *"Thank-you Lord! I'm free. I'm forgiven. I have everything and every reason to give thanks and REJOICE!"*

The Word of God brings with it that incredible **power**. That's why our text says, **"Do not treat prophecies with contempt."** It's basically a fancy way of saying, *"Take the Word of God to heart – don't consider it worthless, expendable, of low value. Don't deny its power or question its authority, clarity or truth – take it in, it will stoke the Spirit's Fire in your heart and will help you know what is good and evil / what is truth and what is false and destructive. It will remind you how loved you are / how forgiven you are, and how the richest blessings of all belong to you – now and forever!"*

Keep stuffing – all this needs to be crammed into "Merry Christmas" from now on. **MERRY Christmas – rejoice!** Don't feel like it? Get back in the Word – and you will. The Gospel produces a different kind of JOY that we can have no matter what the external circumstances of our lives are. We're not done stuffing yet, the last verses of this lesson give us something else we need to squeeze into our new and revised POWERFUL "Merry Christmas": **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.**

This is a BLESSING from God and it's a reminder too – God, who made you and saved you – God, who knows you and loves you – God, who brings you peace and sanctifies you – **will keep you blameless and ready to meet Christ when He comes again.** HE will hold on to you right up to the end, and He will share His eternal home with you.

From now on ALL THIS – all the richness and meaning and **power** of this text is stuffed into the phrase **"Merry Christmas"!** Let's wrap it up – so you can remember it and take it home with you

today: MERRY CHRISTMAS – and in good Lutheran fashion we'll ask, **"What does this mean?"** It MEANS:

1. **REJOICE!** It's not a wish – it's a command! Christ is born / Christ is ALIVE. **Pray** and **Give Thanks** because of what Jesus (the Savior) has done for you.
2. **Get back in the WORD!** The Gospel ignites the Spirit's fire within you producing this joyful response. The Word gives wisdom, freedom, direction and clarity as take each step closer to our heavenly home.
3. **God is HOLDING on to you!** He will keep you blameless and in Christ until the end. His power and blessing is upon you.

Now that we have all this **power** and **meaning** stuffed back into the common greeting *"Merry Christmas"* – are we going to use it? Of course! We'll use it with our **fellow believers.** *Merry Christmas – REJOICE!* Because of Christmas we have every reason to – no matter what. In Christ we have every reason to offer up prayers and to give thanks, in every circumstance. And, if they don't feel it – remind them to get back in the Word where the Holy Spirit stokes that fire within our souls through the powerful Gospel. And no matter what we should have to face in this difficult life, remind them that God holds us in His loving arms and will keep us blameless to the end – because Jesus came at Christmas.

*Should you say "Merry Christmas" to someone if you're not sure if they believe? Or, what if you're quite certain they don't believe? What about the muslim lady at the check-out counter? YES – absolutely!* Say "Merry Christmas!" Jesus came for her too! Consider it a mini evangelism opportunity. Packed into that phrase is the hope that God would bring this person in front of you to know what Christmas – and therefore CHRIST – is all about. If he/she says they are not Christian then TELL them who He is and why He came – that He came to save each one of us by living a perfect life for us and dying to take away all our sins. He rose victorious and now salvation is God's Gift to each one of us. Say a quick prayer that they would discover Christ and the joy that only He can bring us. Pray and stand ready for God to use YOU as an instrument to bring the true meaning of Christmas to anyone you can. Well – now that those words have such power / punch / meaning / depth behind them – I'll simply close the sermon by saying to you all: **Merry Christmas!! Amen.**