

### **New Perspective....In Christ Jesus**

What is the one thing you want more than anything else this Christmas season? And I'm not talking about the physical gifts you've asked for from your spouse, your kids, your parents, or your friends. What I mean is, what is the one thing you want more than anything out of this holiday season. I'll bet it's the same for every single one of us: happiness. We all want to be happy at Christmas time. We want our families to be happy. That's part of the reason for buying gifts, brightening our homes with decorations and lights. It's why we set aside an entire season to "spread good cheer." Unfortunately, for many, even Christians, happiness is not something they receive at Christmastime, and for a number of reasons.

I'm going to tell you a pretty sad fact. If you take the number of people who are murdered every year, add to that number the number of people who die in war every year, and then add to that number the number of people who die in natural disasters every year, you will end up with a number that is still less than the number of people who die every year by suicide. About a million people die every year by suicide. In other words, when they put "happiness" on their Christmas lists, it's not happening. And they're convinced it never will.

So what *is* on your list this year? The important one. The one you want to see checked off in order to find that happiness. Maybe it's a loved one you want back, maybe it's feeling a bit more confident about your life and its direction, maybe it's an ailment you want removed, maybe it's simply to feel a little more liked or loved. Are those things sucking away your happiness?

For some people, a lack of happiness around Christmas time, can be blamed on something called Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which is a mood disorder in which people who have relatively normal mental health throughout most of the year experience depressive symptoms in the winter months. Here in the United States, about 4% to 6% of the population may have it. People who suffer from SAD tend to sleep more, have less energy; they are slow and sluggish, socially withdrawn, and irritable. That's a very real condition.

Among believers there is a similarly real disorder which causes a lack of happiness. You could call it "spiritual affective disorder." And I would guess that greater than 4-6 % of believers have at some time suffered from its symptoms. I would guess that there are days when you are not in the mood to sing "Joy to the World". They are the days when you are so far behind on your bible study that you don't know where to begin, and you find yourself giving in to an old temptation that has plagued you your entire life, and the sun sets without you having said a single prayer. As a result a sort of spiritual depression sets in. A sleepy, slow, and sluggish faith has an effect on us, Christians, and on those around us.

This morning our Lord reminds us of how such a spiritual condition can be overcome, how our perspective on what happiness is, can be changed. Listen to Paul's words this morning from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 as he gives us those answers.

***READ TEXT***

The believers in Thessalonica had reason to be spiritually grumpy and irritable. Thessalonica was a hard place for Christians to live. It was a port city populated with sailors and soldiers, most of whom worshiped the Olympian gods from Aphrodite to Zeus. No doubt they mocked those who worshiped a God who was crucified, died, and buried. And the Jews living in Thessalonica were no better. They actively opposed Christianity. They drove Paul out of town after only three weeks, leaving these Christians to struggle on their own.

But despite all these negative influences in Thessalonica the believers were not spiritually depressed. When Timothy returned from Thessalonica to Corinth he brought news to Paul that the Christians in Thessalonica had remained faithful to the Lord and had even become a center for mission activity. So Paul gets out his pen and writes this letter in order to remind them of what will keep them spiritually happy and healthy. He lays out eight imperatives here for all Christians to follow.

Just listen against to his first couple words, ***“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you ... in Christ Jesus.”*** And those last three words there, are the key to all this. Just consider how different those commands sound to someone who has faith in Christ Jesus compared to someone who does not.

***“Be Joyful always...”*** If from time to time you’re in a bad mood, it doesn’t mean you’re not a Christian. If you suffer from depression, it doesn’t mean you’re not a Christian. No what Paul is saying here is that Christians, have the ability to be joyful always in light of Christ. God’s prescription for joy is a spiritual one. Sure it will affect your mental mood but more importantly, God is concerned that you are always surrounded by the joy of the Gospel. That makes it possible for you to be spiritually joyful, even when you’re not feeling happy.

Paul goes on, ***“pray continually,”*** he says. This does not mean we sit down at all times with hands folded and heads bowed. Paul simply means that “In Christ Jesus,” we consciously or subconsciously commit all things at all times to our Lord. Because when we look at the cross, we know how much he cares for us. When we read our father’s Word, we know he invites us to speak to Him as children talk to their father. We hear Jesus telling us that we can come to him and cast all our burdens on him. And when you’re burden free, isn’t your life happier too?

I think this next imperative is especially challenging: ***“Give thanks in all circumstances.”*** That’s entirely different for those who do and do not have faith in Christ Jesus, and not because our circumstances are any different. Friends, the pains of this life pierce the hearts of unbelievers just as sharply as they pierce yours. But there’s one thing we know in our pain that they don’t. The promise that ***“in all things God is working for the good of those who love him.”*** Paul’s not telling you to give thanks because of *what* you go through, but *because of the good* we know God is going to work for you. And when we cannot see that good, when we doubt whether God is really ***for us***. He reminds us, ***“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”***

Paul's Christmas list of imperatives for you, Christians, is not a list of worldly success principles. But it *is* a guarantee of spiritual happiness and fulfillment. And it can be summarized in one sentence: **God wants you to always see your life from His perspective.** He wants you to see the treasure you have in Christ Jesus and to hold onto it as if it were your most valuable possession....because it is!

God gave his people the Israelites a vivid illustration of how great a gift this was for them. In the Old Testament, every seven Sabbaths of years (7x7 years which would equal every 49 years), God commanded the Israelite people to observe what was known as a "Year of Jubilee." On this year, every debt was forgiven, every loan was forgotten, every slave was freed. Isaiah speaks of this year of Jubilee in this morning's first lesson and the freedom it gave to God's people; the happiness it brought to them. Not only did it release them from their debt, but also pointed them ahead to the greatest freedom they would ultimately have through their Savior, and that's the gift you and I have today.

The debt for your sin has been erased. There is nothing you could hope for this Christmas that is greater than your God saying to you, ***"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more (Isaiah 43).*** So "be joyful, commit everything to the Lord, and give thanks in every situation of life." And when you live like that you accomplish two things: 1. You will find your perspective on life is a much happier one. 2. You become witness to others of the power of the Gospel.

It's not easy to look at things from our God's perspective, mainly because we are weak human beings who don't see eye to eye with our Lord. But for every Christian who struggles with this, in other words for everyone here, Paul gives an encouraging reminder in today's final verses: ***"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."*** That's God's perspective on your life. Our failures to be faithful to God do not at all change his desire to faithfully be there for you through anything, even if Christ Jesus would eventually have to carry the heavy load of our sin, suffer our hell, die alone with nails in his hands and no one there for him, all in order for the phrase "in Christ Jesus" to really mean something. And it does. And you are free to use it as often as you possibly can, to motivate every shout of praise, every ounce of trust, and every prayer of thanksgiving.

"In Christ Jesus," you've been given a new perspective on your life – and a really good one. You didn't have to pay off your debt to get it. And there's no expiration. So why not use it as often as you can. Open the Word and feed it to your heart every day. Serve it to your children. Worship together. Take communion. Celebrate your baptisms like they're your birthdays. Then do it all over again. Let your eyes see your life from God's perspective as often as you can. And no matter how many times you come back, you will always find the same thing: a reason to rejoice, a reason to pray, and a reason to give thanks. In other words, you may not always be in a good mood, but you will find true happiness, spiritual happiness. Because that is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

