

# Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



For eleven months out of the year our mail looks about the same: grocery and fast-food ads, fliers from small local businesses, a few monthly magazines, lots of bills, and some political campaign ads. But beginning on December 1<sup>st</sup>, the mail starts to have a different look to it, and I'm sure your mail is pretty similar. Of course, once when we get into December, that's when the Christmas cards start rolling in.

Every day when I come home from church, there are several new Christmas cards sitting on the table for me to look through. They're generally all unique from one another, but the basics remain the same: there will usually be at least one photo of the family, or the kids, or a pet, and then a very brief Christmas greeting. The simplest greetings include, "Merry Christmas!" or "Happy Holidays!" Since most of the people we receive Christmas cards from are Christians, it's not uncommon to see, "Unto you a Child is born," or "Oh come let us adore him," or "Joy to the world"—greetings of that nature.

In God's Word before us this morning, the Apostle Paul is sending a group of Christian friends his own greetings. We know that he was a world traveler and a prolific writer, so it's not hard to imagine him regularly sending warm messages of love to his friends and family members. And so the theme we'll be considering today is "**Christmas Cards from the Apostle Paul.**" We'll consider each of these cards as they come in. And we'll start by reading our text from:

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, 23-24** *Rejoice always,<sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing,<sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.<sup>23</sup> Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

## I. Rejoice Always!

Let's imagine it's a rather crisp December evening. You walk out to your mailbox after getting home from work and open it to find a red envelope bearing the name of your good friend, Paul of Tarsus. You open it up and there's a nice photo of Paul standing outside the city of Corinth, big goofy grin on his face and giving the camera a thumbs up. That's a nice photo, he'll look happy and well. And there on the card superimposed above the photo is his Christmas greeting, "**Rejoice always!**"

Now that's the type of greeting that you might have even gotten on a few Christmas cards this year. "Rejoice always!" Yeah, that's a nice sentiment, not one you'll spend too much time thinking about. Clearly Paul doesn't really mean "rejoice always," that's just the type of trite Christmas greeting we've all grown accustomed to receiving. But as you take the card into the kitchen and affix it to the refrigerator with a magnet, you start to realize that maybe Paul isn't being trite with this message. No, he really means, "Rejoice always!"

Well, that's pretty much impossible, is it not? Rejoice during the Christmas season, I can manage that. Rejoice on Christmas Day, yes, that's relatively easy. But what about when the calendar flips to January and the holiday distractions are behind us? I confess, there were a lot of days in which

rejoicing felt pretty impossible during 2020, and I'm sure it was the same for you. When a loved one died, when the finances took a hit. "Rejoice regularly, sure. But rejoice always? I'm not so sure."

I believe it to be generally true that each of us would like to be seen as a "happy person." I believe it also to be true that so much of our happiness is tied directly to what happens to us. And for that reason, we may be happy the one moment and discouraged the next. Excited then frustrated. Elated then depressed. That's the normal cycle of our sinful lives. Yet Paul tells us not to be generally happy people or to rejoice most of the time. He says, "Rejoice always." How can that be possible?

When Jesus was talking to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, he warned them, "***So also you have sorrow now, BUT I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.***" (John 16:22) You see, true joy does not depend on life's affairs and therefore cannot be affected by daily events. True joy comes from knowing Jesus as your Savior. True joy is knowing that one day you will see Him face-to-face as He promised. True joy is knowing the Lord of Heaven and Earth was born for *you*, and as Jesus says, this joy, "***No one can take away from you.***"

But you can give that joy up. We give it up when we let our sorrow drive us away from God, instead of drawing us closer to Him. We can give it up when trials of life cause us to despair, those trials which God gives us for our good to refine and purify us as gold, but we despair anyways. When we fail to rejoice always, it's because our hard-hearts are content on finding fleeting joys to replace true joy.

May the Lord give us a new heart, so that we find real true joy in our Savior. No one can take God-given joy from you, so don't give up your joy either. Instead, "***Rejoice always!***" Not just on Sundays, and not just on Church festivals, but let every day be a reminder of God's grace toward you. Be reminded when you take in that breath of air, when you're nourished by a warm plate of food, when you are warmed by the clothes on your back—be reminded that these are all gifts of God's grace.

But more than that, rejoice in that child born in the manger on Christmas. Rejoice that He was born for you. All the other troubles in life just seem so insignificant when we remind ourselves daily that God is our Father in heaven, whose Spirit and angels attend to our every need. Every other event feels much smaller when you remind yourself that your big troubles have all been chased away by the blood of your Savior. Because of this, it doesn't matter what time of year it is, we can still, "***Rejoice always!***"

*Sing TLH 92:1-2*

## II. Pray without Ceasing

Well, it's another chilly December evening, and, surprisingly, in your mailbox you find a second Christmas Card from the Apostle Paul. This time he's not alone in the photo; now he's joined by his two closest friends and fellow pastors, Timothy and Titus. There they are, arms around one another, big smiles from all of them, and above them, the Christmas Card greeting—"***Pray without ceasing.***"

Well, you might think as you toss the card onto the stack, "They sure are high and mighty. First it was 'Rejoice Always!' now it's 'Pray without ceasing!' Maybe those clergy types have the time to sit around all day with their heads bowed in prayer, but not me! I have stuff to do!"

When Paul urges us to pray without ceasing, he's not suggesting that we forego eating and sleeping and working and instead spend every waking moment in prayer. Rather, he is encouraging Christians

to live lives of consistent open communication with God. We all know what it's like to have poor communication with someone, and we all know how difficult that makes everything else.

It's even more tragic when we attempt to shut God out for a time by failing to keep those lines of prayerful communication open. Prayer is that means by which we may always draw close to God through repentance. God invites us to pray so that we may daily repent of our sins and ask for forgiveness from Him, being reminded that His answer is "Yes, you are forgiven." And because of this important aspect of prayer, we've all done it before, we will sometimes go dark in our prayer life for a time—likely due to the feeling of guilt over some sin. It's as if we assume we can hide these things away in the shadows, that as long as we're not praying to God He won't be thinking about us or what we've done. But even when we fail to communicate with God, even when we go dark on our end, it is not dark on God's end. The reality is that God sees through the darkness, and can even see those sins we're so desperate to cover up.

But in the beginning of the Gospel of John, the Apostle writes, ***"In Jesus was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*** (John 1:4-5) You used to be lost in the darkness of sin, but not any longer! So don't fool yourself into thinking that you can lurk in the darkness and break down those lines of communication with God. On the cross, He paid for all our sins, even those ones that we hide in the shadows and bury deep in the back of our guilty consciences. So let those sins be brought forth. Confess them. Take them to the Lord in prayer. Be forgiven of them. And be done with them.

Because that's what Christ did with them. He made your sins obsolete. He rose from the tomb, but your sins stayed buried. Assuring us of all that, the Lord is letting us know that there is nothing to stop us from praying without ceasing.

But perhaps the problem is that you just don't think about praying very often. If that's the case, I've got one easy trick for you to help you pray without ceasing. It's not rocket science—pray more often. That's all it takes. The best example of this is Jesus. In the four Gospels, we have record of Jesus praying on 25 different occasions, and considering that John says, ***"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written,"*** (John 21:25)—I'm certain there were countless other prayers as well. Jesus was constantly in open communication with His Father; He made sure of that by actively touching base with Him throughout each day.

I'm not telling you to go home and pledge yourself to two hours of prayer daily, but try starting with two minutes in the morning. Two minutes at night. On your drive to work. Start small and work your way up from there. Countless Christians before you have found it to be true that it makes a great difference in your life when you touch base with God throughout the day. ***"Pray without ceasing."***

***Sing TLH #106:1,4,5,7***

### **III. Give Thanks**

Well, you wander back out to your mailbox after work the next night, and it's a bitter cold 45 degree evening in Florida, when you open your mailbox and find a third Christmas card from Paul with a

photo from his beach trip to the Island of Malta. There he is, living his best life, and the message above him says in all caps, **“GIVE THANKS!”** Underneath that in cursive script, it continues, ***“In all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”***

Easy for Paul to say, you know where he carried out his ministry, don't you? In the sunsoaked Mediterranean, hopping from island to island along the way. Pretty easy to give thanks in those circumstances! Of course, if you remember a few things about Paul's trips from the book of Acts, you might remember that none of it was a vacation, certainly not his time spent on that Island of Malta.

Two years earlier, Paul had been arrested in the Temple of Jerusalem for preaching about Christ. He was put on trial and then thrown into prison. After 18 months behind bars, Paul appealed to have his trial taken before the Caesar in Rome, since he was a Roman citizen that was his right, and on the way, Paul was shipwrecked in the Mediterranean on the Island of Malta. We're even told while he was building a fire for warmth, a poisonous snake jumped out and bit him on the hand. Some vacation.

And yet through it all, what does Paul do? He takes his own advice. He continues to give thanks. If Paul could give thanks in prison, on a sinking ship, with a fresh snakebite, do you think you might be able to give thanks this Christmas regardless of your circumstances too? Certainly, the circumstances in your life this Christmas might not be what you would have hoped for.

Maybe there's a family member no longer with you whose absence you'll be feeling today. Maybe the finances have taken a hit recently, and with all the expenses of this time of year, boy it's hard to take your mind off of all that. Maybe there was someone you had hoped to spend Christmas with, but due to COVID, that just didn't happen. Maybe you hoped to sit in Church for a Christmas Eve service or a Christmas Day service, and now you're on your couch instead.

But you know what? Give thanks. I promise you, there is thanksgiving to be found in each of these circumstances. You know how I know that? Because that's exactly what Paul says, ***“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*** God's will is being done in even these disappointments, and for that reason, there is no disappointment. For we know what God's good and gracious will is toward us, it's to bring us home to heaven. His good and gracious will toward you involved sending His son to earth in order to die. His good and gracious will toward you involves making you His child by faith. And His good and gracious will toward you involves giving you exactly the right blessings or maybe sometimes taking them away, all to bring you closer to him. So today, even if everything's not all the way you would have liked, you can still ***“Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever.”***

**TLH 78 #1-2**

#### **IV. Merry Christmas!**

Now, I'll be honest, when we send out our family Christmas cards, I don't do a whole ton for it. Jess gets the boys dressed up, she takes the pictures, she designs the card, really all I have to do is show up for a few minutes for the photo. If there's anything else I do for our Christmas Cards, it's usually helping Jess pick out what phrase to put on it. It might be a bible passage, it might be a verse of a hymn. But what our aim is something short and sweet, and filled with the joyful message of the Savior. Some years are better than others.

Well, Paul's last Christmas card for us this morning, there's no short message, it's a bit lengthier but it is packed with that Gospel goodness. ***"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."***

All three of Paul's Christmas greetings up to this point have encouraged us in our Christian living. ***"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks..."*** But all three of those messages would be pretty worthless if he didn't give us something more. Even if we try our hardest, there's no way we could achieve any of those goals: rejoicing always, praying unceasingly, or giving thanks in every circumstance. As sinful people in a sinful world, we're going to become resentful, we will put a wall in the way of our communication with God, we will be thankful only when we want to be.

That's our nature. Our nature is to have no relationship with God at all. Our nature is to know what we should do, what would be good for us to do, and to desire to do the opposite. Our nature is one enmity with God. Yet God responds in love.

Maybe you have a relationship with someone that's very similar to that which I just described. You don't talk, there's built up resentment, you know what you should do but it's easier to just ignore them. Imagine that you had just such a relationship with one of your parents. Every Christmas that came along, you knew you should reach out and make amends, it would be good to be a family again especially on Christmas. And imagine that you never did. Imagine they died, and you never were able to apologize, never able to forgive them, never able to tell them you still loved them. Now imagine the next Christmas comes along, you're feeling your parent's absence a bit more strongly, your celebration tinged with regret, and you're opening the presents under the tree. And your heart stops when you see an additional present addressed to you, and it's from your parent with whom you'd never made amends. You open the card and all it says, "I love you."

Isn't that *exactly* what our heavenly Father has done for each of us? When we were estranged, when we wanted nothing to do with Him, when we had no desire to repent or make amends—He sent His Son down to earth as a gift for you. Unto *you* God's Son is born. This child is the Love of God, not just a reminder of the love of God, but the Love of God made flesh for you. So that there's no more doubt, there's no more worry, there's no more fear, for we've been given God's love as a free gift, and no one can take it away from us.

Because of that love, despite our sins, in spite of our failure to rejoice or pray or give thanks, in Christ Jesus we are blameless before God. And we will be kept that way until the day when our Savior comes again. This same God, who on that first Christmas kept His promise to send a Savior, has given you His firm, unwavering word to bring you in faith safely through all the sorrows and circumstances and life until He takes you to the place where there will be no more sorrows and no more tears. Merry Christmas! Amen.

***And the peace of God which surpasses all our understanding will guard and keep your hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus.*** Amen.