All I Want For Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth. Don Gardner, a music teacher in Smithtown, NY wrote that song in 1944. He asked some first graders what they wanted for Christmas. When they all answered with a lisp, he noticed that all of them had at least one front tooth missing. Do you think our 6-year-olds today would be happy if all they got for Christmas was two front teeth? I’m guessing they have much longer lists than that.

God wants us to give him some Christmas gifts. Through Paul God wrote them down in this text. There are four. **ALL GOD WANTS FOR CHRISTMAS IS** - Gift 1: that we be joyful always, Gift 2: that we pray continually, Gift 3: that we give thanks in every circumstance, and Gift 4: that we do what is good for ourselves spiritually.

Is it even possible to give God the first gift - to be joyful always? Think of the Christians to whom Paul wrote. It was no walk in the park being a follower of Jesus in Thessalonica during the first century. When Paul arrived to proclaim Jesus, angry Jews instigated a riot and chased Paul out of town.

We do not have to fight our way through an angry mob when we come to church, yet you and I each have our own struggles that have potential to rob us of joy. Is it possible to be joyful always when your relationship is crumbling, or your children are chasing after everything but Jesus, when your heart is failing, or you are sitting next to the casket of a loved one, or your boss tells you the company is going to be cutting back?

Yes, you can still be joyful. You see, there is a difference between joy and happiness. Happiness depends on whether I am having a good or a bad day, whether I got a bill in the mail or a rebate. Happiness is a feeling. Joy, on the other hand, is an attitude. That is why Paul tells us to give God the gift of being joyful always. That is why he told the believers in Philippi: **Rejoice in the Lord always.** I will say it again: rejoice! Why? As he says: **Rejoice in the Lord.** In the opening of this letter Paul says: In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the gospel with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. We find real joy in Jesus and all that he has done for us. That is why we sing: Joy To The World! Why? The Lord is come!

The gifts you will unwrap next week will probably make you happy, but they will eventually wear out and end up permanently stored either in your garage or the garbage dump. They bring no lasting joy. Christ is what brings lasting joy even when we are going through trials, temptations and tough times. God gives you Jesus in his Word and sacraments to bring you joy, not just when you celebrate his birth, but every time you open his gift of forgiveness in the Scriptures or in his body and blood. Jesus is our joy - always.

Gift 2: Pray continually (literally without stopping). Does Paul really mean that we should fold our hands and bow our heads all the time? If he does, I have let him down. No, Paul is talking about something other than your dinner or bed-time prayers. Again, it is an attitude. God wants us to live with a growing awareness that he is always with us, that we can talk to him any time, that we make all of our decisions with him in mind. He wants your life to revolve around him. Think of Jesus as your best friend - the one you talk to all the time, bounce ideas off of, someone with whom you share your joys and sorrows. The all-powerful God’s ear is always ready to listen. So give him that gift. Pray to him continually.

As we keep God on speed dial, Paul encourages us to give God the 3rd gift: Give thanks in all circumstances. How could the Thessalonian believers give thanks to God at a time when Jews were arresting their Christian friends just because they were confessing Christ as Savior? How can we be thankful all the time? Are you to be thankful that you spilled your coffee on the way out of the house, found a flat tire on your car, were late for your meeting, and got yelled at by your boss?

Well, yes! Here is why: **IN all things God works for the good of those who love him.** God uses everything in your life - whether you think it is good or bad – he is using it for your eternal good. That is why he wants us to give thanks in every circumstance and not just with our
words. Paul says in his letter to the Colossians: **Whatever you do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.** In everything you, do give thanks. Above all, give God thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of the Word made flesh.

Joy, prayer, thanksgiving – that is God’s will for my life and yours. I do not always live that way. You do not either. That is why we need to go to God’s Word for his forgiveness in Christ. There is our reason for joy, for prayer, for thanksgiving. Unwrap God’s gift every day as you search the Scriptures, and then watch the Holy Spirit feed the flame of faith as he fills you with joy, and leads you to pray and moves you to give thanks. All gifts you give to God.

The last gift on God’s list for you is to do what is good for yourself spiritually. False preachers grabbed the microphone in Paul’s day just as they do today. They were telling the Thessalonians lies and half-truths. They taught that Jesus’ second coming had already happened and that he had left them behind. These false preachers were robbing the Thessalonian’s hearts of the joy they knew in Jesus. So Paul gives them some instructions, instructions we should follow as well: **Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil!**

As you prepare to celebrate Jesus’ first coming and look forward to his second coming, think carefully about what Paul says. You have the fire of faith burning in your heart. Do not douse it with water by skipping worship. Do not deprive it of oxygen by letting less important things stop you from studying the Bible or enjoying a devotion. If you do, your faith will burn out.

Instead fan the fire of your faith daily. As you fan your faith, Paul says: **Test everything.** What you let into your ears and your heart will affect your faith. Give it a test. See if what you are hearing is in line with God’s Word. If it is, Paul says: **Hold on to it.** Like a dog that guards his bone and will not let anyone try to take it away, hold on to the truth of God’s Word and guard it.

But here is what you should stay away from: anything that can harm your faith. Paul says: **Avoid every kind of evil.** If the Thessalonians would have kept drinking the poisonous lies of the false teachers, they would have been in danger of dousing their faith and putting out the Spirit’s fire. They needed to avoid the false teachers.

We need to do the same thing. There are plenty of false teachings out there in books or on TV or the radio. Test what you hear. Just because someone’s a good speaker or writer does not mean their message is going to feed your faith. Would you eat steak and potatoes and drink wine if you knew they had poison in them, even just a trace? Do not drink in all that is out there - devotional books, inspirational books, or self help books. Make sure there is no poison in their words. If there is, stay away from them!

The same applies to the TV shows you watch or the people you hang out with. Maybe a dirty joke or two will not snuff out your faith, yet Paul warns to stay away from ALL forms of evil. That might mean not watching your favorite comedy every Tuesday night. It might mean that you stop hanging out with a certain friend; that you stop surfing the Internet when alone; that you stop visiting a local hot spot. Think of it this way. If you have a drinking problem, do not rent an apartment above your favorite bar. Stay away from it. Get as far away from it as possible. Avoid any evil that may ruin your relationship with your Savior.

Why does Paul tell us these things? Not to rob us of our freedom, but to give us joy. As we wait for the second coming of Christ, God wants us to be sure that we continually receive a steady diet of what God’s Word says, so that we grow in faith. When you know the truth of the Word of God and avoid every kind of evil, the devil will not be able to steal the joy from your hearts. No, you will be filled with joy in God’s gift of Jesus, forgiveness, and salvation. And you will give him the gift of doing what pleases him - doing what is good for yourself spiritually.

But Paul is not done. After he records God’s Christmas list for you, he ends with a prayer: **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.** Being sanctified or holy before God has nothing to do with us. It is all God’s doing. And God is a
perfectionist. He does not want us to be 90% sanctified or mostly holy. He wants us to be completely holy - sanctified **through and through**.

He wants us to be joyful always, praying continually, and thanking him in every circumstance. If we try to do that on our own, we are going to fail miserably. We'll only feel sorrow and guilt, and we will be leading thankless lives. But God is the God of peace, the one who established peace for us by the blood of his Son, Jesus. He sent Jesus to joyfully carry out his soul saving plan: to intercede for us when we pray, and to give thanks in every circumstance, even on the night before his death. Listen to Jesus' prayer for you on that night: **For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.**

God is the one who sanctifies us. In 2nd Thessalonians Paul writes: **From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.** The Holy Spirit is the one who brought us to faith. He is also the one who keeps feeding our faith through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. And the Holy Spirit will keep us blameless until the day of Jesus' return. You have God's promise on that. And you can hold him to his Word. Paul says: **The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.** He will keep us in his grace, not because we are faithful, but because he is. **He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

By now most children have made out their Christmas lists. This morning you have heard God's list for you. Four gifts to give him, to put under the tree - not the Christmas tree, but the tree we call the cross. Because it is the cross - isn't it? - that makes giving gifts to God not a matter of pulling teeth. It is the cross that makes you want to give gifts to God that will make him say: **This is just what I have always wanted. Thank you.** Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill