The Gift of Holiness
(1 Thessalonians 5:16–24)

This morning we find ourselves worshipping at the third Sunday of Advent. In just over a week, we will be celebrating the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The first gift we have all opened this Christmas is the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. This gift provides us with the knowledge about God through Jesus and we are then able to share our own testimony of what Jesus is doing in our lives and the spiritual power to do what God wants us to do.

Today we open our Gift of Holiness. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Since we don't know when Jesus will return, shouldn't we live our lives as if Jesus is already here?

What do you want for Christmas? This is a common question during the holiday season. Friends and relatives, who know that you already have everything you need, ask you for hints about what to get you this year. So we make a Christmas lists of things we want. This is easy to do because we have been practicing making Christmas lists since we started writing lists for Santa.

Let's start by looking a Santa's Christmas list. Santa Claus has a list and he checks it twice. He's going to find out if you are naughty or nice. You better watch out. You better not cry. You better not pout. I am telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town.

He carries a whole bag of gifts but if you are not a good little girl or boy you might receive a just lump of coal in your stocking. Everything depends on your behavior so "be good for goodness sake." That's Santa's Christmas list. Now let's turn to God's Christmas list.

God wrote a Christmas list so that we will know what he wants this Christmas season. God has given us so much in our lives. It is good for us to give God a Christmas present. So here is God's Christmas list.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances.

So God wants us to rejoice, pray and give thanks. That seems easy enough. We should have no problem satisfying this request. But, did you notice the adverbs?

We are to rejoice - always. Always? How can we always be rejoicing? Sometimes life circumstances bring sadness into our lives. The losses of family and friends, people looking for employment, our communities filled with homelessness and hungry people. It just doesn't seem possible to rejoice – always.

The second item on God's Christmas list is that we should pray. No problem there. We pray at church and during Bible studies. We pray before meals, in the morning and before going to bed. All of this is good. But God is asking for more. God wants us to pray continually.

Continually? How can we do that? We are very busy people. We have things to do and places to go. We can spare a few minutes every day to come to God in prayer, but there is no way we can pray continually. This just seems to also be impossible.

So God's Christmas list seems pretty demanding so far. Let's look at the third item on the list to see if it is any easier. We are to give thanks. And we do. We are so thankful for everything God does for us. We thank God for the world we live in. We thank God for family, friends, and church. We thank God for our health and the health of loved one. Thanksgiving is our favorite thing to do. But God wants us to be thankful in all circumstances.

All circumstances? We certainly can't seem to be able to do that. How could we be thankful when a spouse or a child dies? How could we be thankful when we lose a job or lose a house? How could we be thankful

when the doctor gives us bad news? It just seems like we just can't be thankful in all circumstances.

God, I don't think we can give you what you have asked for this Christmas. We can't rejoice always. We can't pray continually. And we certainly can't be thankful in all circumstances.

God's knows that we can't satisfy his Christmas wishes unless he helps us. And the good news is that he does help us. Let's listen to the Apostle Paul.

18 for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

With the Spirit of Jesus in us, these things are possible.

God has blessed us with joy to enable us to rejoice. We come to church to rejoice in our worship. But for some of us, grief crowds out our joy. And so when we find ourselves unable to experience rejoicing all the time, there is a remedy in Jesus Christ. Our rejoicing in Christ can overcome our grief and our sorrows. When we experience the loss of rejoicing, all we have to do is turn to Jesus, remember his promises of life after death, and his rejoicing will replace our sense of loss. The Holy Spirit allows us to always rejoice by comforting us in our grief and pain.

One practical way of dealing with grief and sorrow is through prayer. But how can we pray without ceasing? We still have to go to work. We lead busy lives. There is a lot to do. We can't spend all day in prayer. But we must set aside some time for prayer in our busy lives. And as we go through the rest of the day we can be aware of God's presence with us.

To pray continually means to be conscious of the fact the God is always with you in whatever you are doing. We are always in fellowship with Jesus. We are always filled with a sense of dependence on God. And then, from time to time, we use specific thoughts and words that we recognize as prayer.

God wants us to always be able to rejoice. And he has blessed us with his presence so that we can continually pray whenever we experience pain and loss. But God also wants us to be thankful in all things. And there we must draw the line. There is evil in the world, and we cannot be thankful for it because this would be contrary to God's will.
So how can we be thankful for all things? If we believe that God works all things together for good for those who love him, then we can be thankful for a God who uses evil for his own good purposes. It is a tough one.

We can be thankful that even today God is working toward a New Heaven and New Earth when his good creation will be restored. So even if we are unable to be thankful for everything today, we can be filled with hope that everything will turn out right when Jesus returns.

God wants us to rejoice all the time. And when we are not rejoicing he gives us Jesus. God wants us to pray all the time and has given us Jesus to be with us always. And God wants us to be thankful that all things will ultimately be used for God's good purposes.

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Paul is stressing that it is a believer's responsibility for guarding his or her own spiritual integrity. The prophecies are messages from God, and therefore we are not to despise them.

Santa expects us to be "good for goodness sake". If not, we receive a lump of coal in our Christmas stockings. God knows what we are going through and by his great power allows us to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks for everything. Which one will you worship this Christmas?

So God will fill his own Christmas list. By the power of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing presence of Christ, we will always rejoice being filled with his spirit whenever joy seems far away. We are enabled to pray all the time

aware the Jesus is always with us. And we can be thankful for everything because God will use everything for his good purposes.

Paul calls all of this holiness. We are made holy, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. And as Holy People, we always rejoice, continually pray and give thanks for everything.

Amen