

December 17, 2017 – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

It's amazing what you have to teach a 3 year old to do. You kinda take some things for granted. Until you've got this little person, who doesn't know how to do anything until you teach her.

She doesn't know how to go to bed at night unless you teach her to go to bed at night. She doesn't know how to sit at a table until you teach her to sit at a table. She doesn't know how to put on her pajama's at night. Or brush her teeth. Or go to the potty before she goes to bed. Unless you teach her. Children have an incredible capacity to learn. But they still need to be taught.

And that won't ever end, really. Because that's true of adults too. I won't ever learn something new unless I have someone to teach me. I won't ever behave as the child of God that God wants me to behave as unless God's Word teaches me.

There's an awful lot of people who criticize Christianity for just being a bunch "do's" and "don'ts." Christians just want to tell me how to live my life. The Bible's just a big rulebook. Christians just want to judge people. Blah, blah, blah.

Well, guess what? I do want to tell you how to live your life. Because you need to be taught. I need to be taught. We won't know otherwise. The Bible is, in many ways, a big rulebook. It does have a lot of rules for what is good and bad, right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate.

Jesus tells us in the Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything I have commanded you." We are called to teach people what Christ commands. And, yes, that includes some do's and don't.

When we read our Epistle lesson for today, we see a lot of those. Do, do, do. Don't, don't, don't. Paul is very upfront about it. He's not afraid to tell us what to do and what not to do.

He tells us first, do rejoice always. As difficult as it may be. As overwhelming and depressing and frustration as life may be. Take that moment and find joy in it. It's somewhere. Look for it.

And if you have trouble finding it, then do pray without ceasing. God wants joy for His children. And He wants to hear what is overwhelming or depressing or frustrating us. He wants to answer that prayer and bring joy back into our lives.

But, in the mean time, give thanks in all circumstances. Whether God has answered your prayer or not. Whether He's answered it with a yes or a no or a not yet. There are plenty of other gifts He has given you that you can still be thankful for, even in the midst of hardship and trial.

Paul is upfront about what we should do. He's also upfront about what we shouldn't do. We shouldn't quench the Spirit. Like taking a bucket of water to quench a campfire. The Spirit of God burns within us. And there are things we can do to feed that fire. And there are things we can do to quench it.

Baptism. The Lord's Supper. Reading and hearing the Word of God. These are things that feed the fire of God's Spirit. But there are plenty of things that quench it too. Sin and impurity. Hateful thoughts and violent actions. Doubt, bitterness, and materialism. The Spirit of God cannot thrive in a person whose life is spent doing ungodly things.

Likewise, don't treat prophecies with contempt. I said this a couple weeks ago. You may not think of it as such, but you hear prophecy on a regular basis. Right here, from this pulpit. Because a prophecy is nothing more than a message from God to you. And that's what I'm called to deliver.

So when you roll out of bed on Sunday morning and say, “Ugh. It’s too early. It’s too cold. I’m too tired. I’m too busy.” Or whatever. You’re not just showing contempt for a single church service. You’re showing contempt for prophecy. You’re showing contempt for the opportunity to hear a message from God. As Luther says in his explanation of the Third Commandment, you are despising preaching and His Word.

And so, as Paul says, all of these do’s and don’ts really wrap up in one important principle. Reject every kind of evil. Don’t give in to evil. Don’t give in to temptation. Don’t give in to sin. And really, don’t sin. That’s Paul’s standard. That’s God’s standard, actually. And it’s a good standard. An impossible standard, sure. But a good one.

That’s exactly the standard that Christ lived up to. That’s exactly the example He set for us. That’s exactly what God wants from us. Do this. Don’t do this.

Paul talks about it like it’s easy. He talks about us being sanctified through and through. Of being holy and righteous and blameless before God like it’s something that just happens. Just pray for it and... poof! There it is.

That’s what it looks like on the surface. And when we read it like that, it can be incredibly frustrating and a huge burden. Because it doesn’t just happen. You can’t just pray to be perfect. And then be perfect. You can’t just decide one day to do every righteous thing and to avoid every single sin. It doesn’t work that way.

And really, nothing in scripture tells us it should. From the time of Cain and Abel, God tells us that sin is crouching at our door, waiting to devour us. Paul says in Romans that everyday he does not do the things he wants to do because sin is always waiting for him.

So how is that in one book Paul can say that the battle against sin is one we cannot win, and in another book he can tell us to be perfect because God has sanctified us through and through? Well, the answer lies, I think, in the very next verse. *“May your whole spirit, soul, and body, be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Not “keep yourself blameless.” May you be kept blameless. Passive voice, for the English nerds out there. In other words, something that is done to us. You are a sinner. And yet, you are kept blameless until the end of time.

Paul says the one who calls you is faithful. Not us. Nothing about us is faithful to God. Nothing about us can keep us blameless in His eyes. But He is faithful and He can do it. He will do it. He has already done it.

As surely as our Lord Jesus Christ came to us the first time in Bethlehem. As surely as He made us blameless through his death on the cross. As surely as He has promised to be with us always until that day when He comes again. He is faithful. He will do it.

Even as you struggle through sin. Even as you reject evil and fight to do what is right, God has kept you blameless. He has lived the life you couldn’t live. He has done all the do’s and He has resisted all the don’ts. He has called you as His child. He has sanctified you through and through with His Son’s own blood in the waters of baptism. And until the end of time, you will be kept blameless.

Not so that you can be crushed by the rulebook of the Law. But so that you can rejoice always. And pray continually. And give thanks in every circumstance. And encourage the work of the Spirit. And embrace every Word that God has for you. And hold on to all that is good.

These are the blessings of being sanctified through and through. These are the blessings of being enabled and empowered in spirit, soul, and body to live as the child that he wants you to be. The blessings of knowing the life He bought for you. The blessings of knowing without a doubt, that no matter your successes or failures, you are kept blameless in His eyes forever. Amen.