



Sermon: Dos, Don'ts, and Done (Advent 4) - Jeff Kurbis (Evergreen Lutheran High School)
Sunday Advent Service 10:15 am – December 18th, 2011 – At [Living Hope Lutheran Church](#)

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 – (NIV 1984)

¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil. ²³ 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.



Sermon: **Dos, Don'ts, and Done**

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Jeff Kurbis (Guest Speaker - Teacher from Evergreen High School)

Uncertainty can breed anxiety. What isn't yet set, certain or determined naturally makes us nervous. Leading by three at the two-minute-warning in the second-half of a football game when the opposing team has the ball is a very unsettling feeling. All your team needs is one more win to clinch a playoff spot. Sure, they've three more games to lock it up, but until it's a done deal, you can't really celebrate the way you want to. Waiting for the results of a college application can make one's senior year stressful as well. It's only after you know whether you got in to the school you're really hoping for that you can relax and enjoy your final year of high school. Waiting for the results of a medical test is harder than both. Until the lab calls with a clean bill of health it can be almost overwhelming. And what about kids, waiting for Christmas morning?

In times that may be every bit as anxious, it might be difficult for us to hear and to heed the Apostle Paul's exhortation to us today: "Be joyful always." How are we ever going to rejoice—or be anything like the holy, sanctified people were supposed to be—when so much in our future seems so uncertain? Paul gives us a "to do list" and a "to don't list" in our text to help us out.

Paul writes, "Be joyful always." Paul's *joy* isn't the saccharine smile that seems pasted on the faces of so many Christians, nor the ecstatic enthusiasm children feel when they first spy their presents under the tree. That lasts about as long as it takes for them to be upset that their new coat's the wrong color or that the toy they had to have breaks before Christmas morning is over. Paul's *joy* is far deeper, more profound, and more resilient. It abides even in the face of life's toughest tests or most extreme challenges. To know for certain that God pledges to "work all things out for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose"^(Rom. 8:28) gives us joy way down in our soul. It's a fruit of God's Spirit, worked in the hearts of all who have been led to trust in Jesus as their Savior from sin & the Lord of their life. When a dear one in Christ dies, for example, we "grieve" too, but not "like the rest of men who have no hope" ...

"Pray continually," is next on Paul's "to do" list. Relationships grow with good communication. Losing track of how to talk openly and honestly with one's spouse is a huge marriage killer. The same can be said of the parent/child relationship. What applies to our human bonds also applies to our spiritual bond with God. As we bring our cares and concerns, our joys and successes, our decisions and our desires to the Lord in prayer, it builds trust to watch Him answer every one of them in the way that's ultimately best for us. Nothing is too small or too big for us to approach God with. He promises to hear and answer every request: sometimes with a "yes," sometimes a "no," and often His answer is: "wait awhile until my Spirit works patient perseverance in you."

Sunday Worship Service: 10:15 A.M. (Sunday School/Adult Bible Class 9am)

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Paul's "to do list" concludes with the admonition: "Give thanks in all circumstances." The gospel message of God's love and forgiveness breeds an attitude of gratitude in our hearts as we reflect on our paltry pattern of conforming our lives and our wills to God's Ten Commandments. We fail each day, in ways large and small, to honor the LORD with our lips and with our lives. He has every right to cast us from His holy presence in this life and the next! Yet, the psalmist exults, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For . . . as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (103:10 & 12).

Being joyful always, praying constantly, and being ever-grateful, even in the face of adversity, are marks of spiritual maturity. They are "God's will for [us] in Christ Jesus." How do we get there? How does our faith grow to the point that we can be thankful even when tragedy strikes or uncertainty overwhelms us to the point of a nervous breakdown? What about those times when everything seems to be headed for that proverbial "hell in a hand-basket"? What then? Those are the times in our life when we need to pause, take a deep breath, and hit the rewind button. Look back on your past. Hasn't the Lord brought you safely through trial after trial? Hasn't He worked, by His Spirit, to meet and master every challenge you faced along the way? Hasn't He turned darkness into light, despair into hope, sadness into joy, and chaos into order? The Lord delivers us from all our struggles and liberates us from everything that isn't crucial for our eternal good. He safely leads us by His Spirit on dry ground through the waters of our own, personal "Red Seas" to prove to us beyond a reasonable doubt that He is our divine Deliverer.

Now on to Paul's "to don't list." "Do not put out the Spirit's fire," he writes. Fuel, oxygen and a source of combustion are the essential elements for fire. Minus those three ingredients, and you're out of luck. So what are the essential elements for "the Spirit's fire"? Simple: the gospel in Word & Sacrament. God's Word is crystal clear that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). To keep a fire going, you need to keep adding wood. To keep the flame of your faith burning brightly—shedding the light you need for the path of righteousness and generating the warmth of God's love—takes more than just a once a week visit to church for an hour or so on Sunday morning. It takes a daily dose of God's Word. Our Synod's *Meditations*, for example, provides a daily Bible reading based on one of the Sunday Scripture lessons. Set aside a few minutes out of your busy day to dig into God's Word in order to equip you for whatever God sends your way. Recall your Baptism into Christ and regularly partake of His Holy Supper to keep the Spirit's fire in you burning brightly.



Next on Paul's "to don't list" is "do not treat prophecies with contempt." Looking back at Jesus' account of the rich man & poor Lazarus from Luke ch. 16, the rich man—suffering as he was in the unrelenting fires of hell—begged father Abraham to send Lazarus from heaven to warn his five brothers "so that they will not also come to this place of torment." But "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets'—in other words, they have the Old Testament Scriptures—'let them listen to them.'" That wasn't "spectacular" enough for the unbelieving rich man. "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" Nothing is more spiritually potent than the gospel! Paul wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). We have God's almighty Word at our disposal in print, on the net and in audio form 24/7 at home, on the move and here at church. Don't let familiarity breed contempt!

God never goes back on a promise. His Word is certain, reliable and true. He wants us to hold Him to it! He wants us to search the Scriptures, dig into His revelation & prize His prophecies to shore up our faith and give us the courage, hope and conviction we need to move forward in life.

Last, but not least, on Paul's "to don't list" is: "Avoid every kind of evil." That's awful hard to do these days, isn't it? Everywhere we look, evil surrounds us: on TV, at the movies, in books and magazines and especially on the internet. But the real battle between good and evil is fought at another, deeper level. We're not just folks who struggle with slight defects in our character. Evil corrupts us to the core. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). The real issue for us isn't about being physically able to do what we want when we want to. It's about being released from our bondage to sin. The frustration that most of us feel when we encounter limitations isn't really about logistics. Deep down, we're disturbed by an ominous reality: God created us to soar, but our sinful human nature has clipped our wings. Crafted for glory, we wallow in captivity. In our optimistic moments, we console ourselves with the mantra of self-acceptance—"I'm only human"—but we know there's more to life than the person we settle for. We long for God's glorious grace! Far too often, though, we misdiagnose the problem.



The problem is sin. It's a part of us and we can't escape it—not by ourselves. We think we need to try harder, do better, know more, think clearer, you name it. No. We need Jesus. We need to realize the gravity of the problem—the sin that plagues us—and beg for freedom. It comes from outside of us, not from within. It comes from Jesus alone. And so Paul could write in tones we treasure from his epistle to the Ephesians: “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (2:8-9). How awesome it is that we can rely on Christ alone for all that we'll ever need to live in a right relationship with God! It's still so amazing to me, every day, that the God of the universe cared enough for me, personally, that He sent His One and Only Son to be my Savior from sin and to deliver me from its guilt and power. How wonderful it is to know that I'll inherit heaven—the place of “no more death or sorrow, crying or pain” because my risen Lord has promised me so!

Friends, “Test everything” against the truth of God's Word. If something doesn't measure up, reject it. It's a lie from Satan, “the father of lies” (John 8:44). Paul's lists of “do's” and “don'ts” flow from the “done” of God's Son! Jesus did it all! “It is finished,” He cried out in victory from the cross before entrusting His soul to the care of His dear Dad. As those who have been adopted into God's family of believers, you and I are “God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). This is the “good” Paul urges us to “hold on to”: the “good” of Christ's “done” and the “good” of the “good works” God has set up for us to do each day as we honor Him with our lives & reach out to others with His love. Our “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33). And so, “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. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.” Amen.