

Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God—to the saints, that is the holy ones, who are in Odessa [Oak Grove] and faithful to Christ Jesus:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

For some time I have wanted to write to you – but much like your life, mine can be rather hectic – especially this time of year. But establishing and maintaining relationships is important to me – so in spite of all the other things going on in my life – I am intentionally sitting here, writing these lines to you – because you are precious to me. I hope you feel that way toward one another.

What a blessing for you to have a community of faith that gathers every week to spend time breaking open the word of God and being nourished by the very Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I hope you do not take this time together for-granted and so do not easily excuse yourself from the table of the Lord. I do hope you make it a priority to nourish your relationship with the Lord, and one another, by gathering Sunday after Sunday.

Speaking of priorities – I thought it important for me to write to you at this time, during this season of Advent – because if there is any time in which your Church life could and actually should be out of sync with what is going on in the world around you – it is now.

In the world around you – it is one great push to Christmas – all of which started even before Halloween. No wonder you are tired of hearing Christmas music well before the Holy Night even rolls around! Much like by election day – you’re ready for it all to be over with.

And the consistent messages you receive from the world these days--- is to buy this, and you just have to have this, and be sure to get this while it is on sale.

Rush here, rush there, go to this party and be sure to not miss this event. Bake this, put this up, drive here, and be sure not to miss this. . .

All of this activity – why it’s enough to make your head spin and weary even the strongest among you!

And in the Church, it is Advent – a time of INTERIOR preparation for Christmas – a time of watching and waiting and anticipating and reflecting and longing – all of which requires us to slow down and to quiet ourselves. . . Not quite what the world is trying to get us to do. . .

How different these two ways of being are – how tough it is to be a Christian during this time – how hard it is to keep the season of Advent!

So it is all about priorities – if you want to take the coming days of Advent to do what is important for your soul --- rather than to get caught in all the hustle of pre-Christmas shopping, sales, and socializing ---- then you have to quiet your heart and your life -- you have to listen and wait: so that when Christmas does arrive – you feel refreshed and renewed – instead of worn out and exhausted.

And then Christ will have the space to move in and take possession of your heart, your will, your soul. And you will be able to fall in love with Jesus all over again. . . That’s what this season is all about!

As I said, if you want to truly keep the season of Advent – then you have to be out of sync with the world. Tough stuff – but not impossible to do.

Because let me be honest with you – the Christian is supposed to be out of sync with the world – because it has completely different values than those of the kingdom of God. If you need help figuring that out – then just read some of my other letters. . .

So, to help you in your endeavors --- each week, during Advent, as I continue to write to you – I will just ask you to consider one thing ---

actually to consider one obstacle – that if you can remove it from your life – it will allow you to make room in your heart for Jesus to come anew and dwell there.

This week, just in case I haven't made the point clearly enough by now – it is for you to stay awake – and pay attention ----- not to what the world is telling you or where it is trying to lead you ----
----- but to what God wants to tell you and to where God may be quietly calling you to go ---
Turn inward – rather than running outward. Take some time to get in touch with what is truly important to you – and hopefully that includes your relationship with God and those around you.

Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come – or how God will come: it may be in that stranger on the street – the outcast cousin that nobody invites to Christmas but maybe you should reach out to this year –
it may be in your son or daughter who just wants to spend time with you – but never gets to because you are always so busy.

If you don't pay attention to the often times subtle ways God is trying to enter your life – you will miss God as surely as those in the days of Noah missed the signs that the flood was coming.

Spend these Advent days throwing off the works of darkness – that is the way of the world --
and putting on the armor of light –that is the light of Jesus Christ.

Until next week, I am affectionately your brother in Christ, Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles.