

Shepherding Notes

1 Thessalonians

By Caleb Bunch

This letter is being written to the church in Thessalonica, which was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia (modern day northern Greece). It was a major trade city, linking land and sea trade routes. As with all transient centers of commerce in those days, trade cities were flooded with temples of many deities so that travelers would be able to worship their own gods. The two most common objects of worship were the local deity, Cabiri (a pagan god of the sea said to protect sailors), and the emperor himself. Many of the Roman emperors incentivized governors and regional rulers to promote the imperial cult — emperor worship. For all these reasons, the city of Thessalonica was littered with temples, altars, and shrines to everyone but the One True God. Paul underscores that the Christians in this city "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

Paul and Silas visited Thessalonica and preached the gospel in the synagogue over the course of three weeks. The response was one of the greatest and most rapid receptions of the gospel found anywhere in Paul's missionary journeys. "Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women." (Acts 17:4) Many people came to Christ quickly and with deep conviction to abandon their lives of idolatry and fully trust in Jesus. This is probably what Paul is describing in 1 Thessalonians 1:5: "our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

The Jewish community, however, was infuriated and started a riot, forcing Paul and Silas to depart. 1 Thessalonians was written roughly one year later in order to disciple and encourage the saints that had very little time under Paul's teaching. It is likely that the same people who became such a scourge to Paul continued expending their aggression in the direction of the Christians that Paul left behind. This is the "affliction" that Paul is referencing in verse 6: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction."

How did these faithful saints respond to their affliction? "with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything." (vs. 6–8) Their faithfulness in the face of violent opposition was more than just a good reputation. It was a constant proclamation to the whole world that they treasured Jesus more than anything, even their own lives.

What could possibly make someone live like that in the face of such hostility? Because they were fully convinced of what comes after this life. "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." (vs. 9-10) The Thessalonians were able to honor the Lord in the face of persecution because they were anticipating the life to come in eternity.

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Paul often wrote to churches about what kind of pastors Christians should listen to and which "pastors," "preachers," or "teachers" to avoid. In most cases, Paul will point out the negative aspects of false teachers that disqualify them. In this chapter, Paul will present himself and his fellow ministers of the gospel as a positive example. This is what a pastor should be.

A Message Free from Error

"Our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive..."

By "appeal," Paul is speaking of the gospel that he proclaimed. His message was not built upon error. Those who preach error preach a false religion — Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and protestant denominations that have shifted to a gospel of works righteousness are all examples of an appeal that springs from error. Their starting point is a lie from hell, so their end point is hell itself. "Impurity" may either be impure motives or impure actions. Paul's motives were pure, as we will see throughout the development of this passage.

A Message That Pleases God, Not Man

"But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts."

Some people who claim to be spiritual leaders will say whatever they think their audience wants to hear. True messengers of the gospel say things that are offensive to people's pride. The gospel is divisive, disruptive, and disinteresting to many. As people often say, we are supposed to preach to an audience of One. It is God who tests our hearts, and faithful pastors are only interested in proclaiming Him, not worrying about the response of the people.

A Message Free from Flattery

"For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed — God is witness."

Flattery is a form of a lie. It is a wicked perversion of encouragement — saying kind things about someone so that you can manipulate them to your will. People love to hear kind words about themselves, whether or not they are true. It is bait that people readily

consume. It is, therefore, a standard tool of false teachers. Someone once gave my wife a mug that said, "I homeschool for the money and fame." That is a sarcastic way to recognize the immense sacrifice made by homeschool parents. Paul's gospel was not a gospel of self-enrichment. Faithful preachers are not in it for the money or fame.

A Ministry of Gentleness

"But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children."

My wife is one of the most incredible displays of godliness in my life. One of the ways that her godliness is displayed is in her tireless care of our children. Being a nursing mother is exhausting. A large part of the nutrients that you take into your body is given away. The imagery that Paul is presenting is one of a gentle mother whose greatest desire is to provide nourishment for their child so that they will grow and thrive. Faithful pastors gently give of themselves so that the flock of God among them will thrive.

"Faithful pastors are only interested in proclaiming Christ – not in pleasing their audience, enriching themselves, or flattering the people before them."

To grasp what is taking place in this chapter, it is really helpful to understand the order of events.

- Philippi: 1 Thessalonians 2:2 says, "But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know..." After being attacked by a mob, having their clothes torn to shreds, and being beaten with rods, Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi. This is the famous story of the Philippian jailer found in Acts 16. That was a painful, miserable experience, even though it resulted in the salvation of many.
- Thessalonica: This was the city where Paul traveled directly following his time in Philippi. He would have still had welts, bruises, and bloody wounds from the beatings he endured. Paul used those wounds to instruct the people and inform them that persecution was certainly on its way. That is why Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 3:4, "When we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass and just as you know."
- Athens: Paul and his entourage left Thessalonica and continued in ministry. He wrote this letter to them while he was in Athens, where he was experiencing further afflictions.
- Timothy Sent: He was unable to travel to see the Thessalonians, so Paul decided to send Timothy to serve them and help strengthen their faith. Paul was deeply concerned that the Thessalonian church was in danger of complete collapse — he had left them while they were still in their early stages of faith. He was so worried that "somehow the tempter had tempted" them, causing Paul's labor with them to be in vain.
- Timothy's Report: Timothy remained in Thessalonica for an unknown amount of time and then returned to Paul's side. Paul's constant prayers for them had been answered. Timothy's report revealed that the Thessalonian church had some problems, but that many of them were "standing fast in the Lord." (vs. 8) This good report filled Paul's heart with abundant joy in the Lord.
- The Letter: Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians as a response to Timothy's report. He wanted to encourage them where they were weak and praise them for the ways they had displayed strength in their faith. Included in his reply was a commitment to return to them if the Lord permitted.

"Is your relationship with your church like this? If you were separated, would you have this same kind of longing to connect with them and know how they are doing in the Lord?"

What is God's will for your life? This question is most often raised in our hearts when we are presented with decisions regarding our future — what college should I attend? Should I marry this person? Which job offer should I accept? Those are all indeed questions that we should seek to answer through prayer and godly counsel. But there is a much more foundational sense in which you can always know what God's will is for your life. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification..." (1 Thessalonians 4:4)

God's ultimate desire for your life is that you might be made into the image of Jesus Christ. Like a skilled stone carver, He is chipping away at your sin piece by piece. However, like a skilled masseuse, Paul is going to quickly identify the areas in the life of the body of Christ at Thessalonica that require the most immediate treatment.

Sexual Immorality

We live in a sexually perverse world. However, many people are under the false impression that societies from days gone by were more innocent or pure regarding sexual sin. People in those times and places had the same wicked hearts that we have today. They were lured and enticed by their own desires. We are commanded to abstain from sexual immorality. Paul describes this as a form of self-control over our bodies. If you don't take control of the steering wheel of your car, you will wreck and damage your body. If you don't take control of your sinful desires, then you will wreck your life and damage your soul.

Paul provides the negative example of the Gentiles who live "in the passion of lust." Passion is the epitome of emotion — it is the opposite of thoughtful, sober-minded living. The word for lust in Greek is a compound word: epi (over) + thumea (desire). It describes desires which could be good in the right circumstances, but an overgrowth of desire has caused it to become a perversion of what is good. In this instance, Paul is zooming in on the way that this over-desire relates specifically to sexual sin.

"Saints, be self-controlled. Abstain from sexual sin. Avoid movies, shows, videos, apps, social media, or anything else that will feed your mind with sexual perversion. Starve sinful desires. Honor God in your body. "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness." (1 Thessalonians 4:7) Notice how Paul concludes this paragraph: "Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you." He is making it clear that you can't live this way without His help. Only the Holy Spirit can

transform our desires. Call out to God and ask for His help.

"God's ultimate desire for your life is that you might be made into the image of Jesus Christ. This is the will of God: your sanctification."

1 THESS. 4:3

Last Days

Paul echoes the commands of Jesus as he instructs the Thessalonian church to be ready at all times for the coming of the Lord. The central message of this section boils down to verse 6: "So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober." There are two metaphors that he has set up and traces forward throughout the passage.

Stay Awake

I remember as a child being told that my dad was coming home late from a business trip and that I would see him the next morning. I was so excited that I snuck out of my bed and hid in the kitchen as I eagerly awaited his arrival. The next morning, my parents found me sleeping by the stove. My dad had come home and I had missed it because I couldn't keep myself awake. When Jesus asked the disciples to stay awake and pray with Him the night that He was betrayed, they famously fell asleep multiple times. The response was, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Spiritually speaking, you have all the power that you need to stay awake. Your job is to be a watchman who fights his urges to become comfortable and complacent so that you can keep your eyes on the horizon, awaiting the dawn.

Stay Sober

It is my understanding that drunk people don't think about the bills they are racking up, so they spend frivolously. They don't think about the consequences of their actions, so they say and do things that they would never imagine doing if they were sober. Drunk people lose control of their reason, their sense of urgency, and their rapid response capabilities. God's Word is commanding that we refuse to get drunk on the pleasures and distractions of this world. This is not to say that you should literally watch the sky or live in fear of the imminent return. Rather, it is to live every day as though it could be your last. Keep your life in order. Jesus is coming.

Last Instructions

There are times that I instruct my children that require long, sit-down conversations. On other occasions I will simply walk out the door and say something like, "Listen to your Momma." There is no difficulty to be found in the complexity of the command. The only

challenge comes in the implementation. Paul has given very few commands so far in 1 Thessalonians. He makes up for that by loading both barrels and shot-gunning them all at once. I am only going to zoom in on one of them today.

"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

It is all too natural for us to be critical. We easily identify the things that we do not like in others, and we are often too vocal about those things in unhelpful ways. We must train ourselves to encourage one another. When you see spiritual growth in someone, highlight it! Make sure to point out when you see someone using their spiritual gifts well. If a fellow church member served as a good example to you, be sure to tell them. The word "build one another up" is sometimes translated "edify." It is literally a construction term. Think of people as God's architectural masterpieces. Don't tear down His works. Help the Lord to build them up.

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