

A Growing Relationship

Living in Light of His Return (1 Thess. 5:16-24)

Introduction

- If you remember from the opening sermon in this series, we said **Paul's mission to ancient Thessalonica could be a model for reaching modern prosperous, pluralistic, & politically-sensitive cities with the gospel.**
 - The city's location was strategic, making it a magnet for wealth.
 - The city's residents were very religious, worshipping a large list of Greek & Egyptian gods along with the Roman emperor, himself.
 - The city's officials were protective of their privileges as "Roman Free City."
- I want to circle back to the spiritual context in Thessalonica because I believe it has a big influence on our understanding of today's focus passage.
 - Polytheism (worshiping many gods) was anything but personal; devotees offered various sacrifices at various times, hoping for a favorable response.
 - Emperor worship was also impersonal - forced loyalty without question.
 - Wealth isn't a religion exactly, but Jesus said it be a substitute when he said, "You cannot serve both God and money." (Matt. 6:24)
- The letters of 1 & 2 Thessalonians are all about gospel transformation as these early believers "turned...from idols to serve a living a true God." (1:9)
- And the last paragraph of 1 Thessalonians stops in the same place the letter started - by talking about the reader's relationship with God. (Read 5:23-24)
 - The 7 verses before this cap off a long list of imperatives that start in v. 12.
 - Starting in v. 16, the focus shifts from horizontal relationships with others in the church to a vertical relationship with God.
- Included in this final section, these verses have a message you & I need to hear: **the gospel allows us to enjoy a growing relationship with God.**
 - Like walking through a doorway or a gate, trusting in Christ allows us to enter a new reality a new environment – w/o the separation of sin.
 - Christianity is different than pluralist worship, emperor worship, or the worship of money – it involves a personal, dynamic relationship with God.
- The practical and pointed verses in this section outline 3 ways that you & I can enjoy that relationship, beginning with our approach to God's will.
- Before we further, I need to make a quick comment about alliteration.
 - Alliteration is starting all the words in a list with the same letter.
 - It can be "the lazy way" to make a sermon outline, but I'm telling you there was no other way than to talk about God's will, God's word, & God's work!
 - Don't let your familiarity with these concepts get in the way of listening!
- So, how can you and I enjoy a growing relationship with God?

Body

I. Seek Out God's Will. (v. 16-18)

- A. The first 3 imperatives are all modified by the phrase, "this is God's will."
- B. The phrase, "in Christ" reminds us of that activity is related to the gospel.
- C. God's general will for all believers involve 3 attitudes and activities.

1. Rejoice at all times: This isn't fake emotion, but joy rooted in Christ's return.
2. Pray about everything: No list, just a desire to bring everything to God.
3. Give thanks in all situations: Everything passes through God's hand.

D. God's general will may be distinct from His specific will, but they don't contradict one another. He wouldn't call everyone to be grateful, then tell you to be the most ungrateful, self-important, entitled person ever. Before we move on, let's engage in a little self-reflection.

1. What's the 1st thing that comes out of your mouth when you have a hard time?
2. When was the last time you prayed over something other than a meal?
3. What's something you are looking forward to this week or month?

II. Listen to God's Word. (19-22)

- A. The next 5 imperatives all relate to the Holy Spirit, prophecy, & obedience.
 1. The Holy Spirit plays a critical part in the revelation of God's Word, and must not be silenced like pressing the mute button on a remote.
 2. The spirit gift of prophecy has changed from being the ability to foretell (predict) in the OT to the ability to forth-tell (proclaim) in the NT.
 3. 1 Thess. is one of the earliest books in the NT, so it makes sense that Paul instructed them to "check out/look over" everything.
- B. We have the complete & authoritative Word of God today, but we must still be discerning about the interpretations we hear & embrace.
 1. Here's a convenient example: growing up I always heard v. 22 as a warning against doing things others might think was sinful (like going to the movies).
 2. But in context, *eidos*, means category/kind, not appearance/impression.
 3. And combined, with verses before it, it seems to be talking about abstaining from incorrect interpretations of Scripture, not evil activities.
- C. The book of James (another early NT book) contains a wonderful illustration of this point: a mirror. God's Word has an amazing ability to tell us about ourselves (the good, the bad, & the ugly) & we must not walk away unchanged.

III. Receive God's Work. (23-24)

- A. When all is said and done, salvation is God's work in the life of a believer & Paul mentions a key aspect of salvation in his final wish for his readers.
 1. Sanctification is the position of being & the process of being made holy.
 2. It involves cooperation as God works in us & we work out the gospel.
 3. The scope of this work emphasized with the terms: "spirit, soul, & body."
- B. Theologian St. Au-GUS-tine, emphasized this cooperation when he said, "Without God we cannot; without us God will not." But, Paul clearly places the emphasis here on God's part in the process.

Conclusion

- Christianity is different than every other religion because **the gospel allows us to enjoy a growing relationship with God – the Creator of the Universe!**
- If you have twisted it into a bunch of rules, you are doing it wrong!
- You were made to enjoy a relationship with God, and you can do that by seeking out His will, listing to His Word, & receiving His work in your life.