

1st THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

Lesson #5

Introduction

If you remember, last week we finished up through verse 12 of chapter 2. We covered this in two lessons. The first lesson was verses one and two, and last week we covered verses three through 12. In these verses of chapter 2, Paul's main emphasis has been on the responses of the gospel by both those who believe it, and those who don't believe. On those who do believe it, there is a visible and positive change in their lives and attitudes. On those who don't believe it, there is varying degrees of rejection and even persecution. In the verses we're studying now, versus 13 through 20, Paul continues on this theme, so I've titled this study:

The Responses To The Gospel

13 Also, this is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the message about God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God, which also works effectively in you believers. 14 For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, since you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews. 15 They killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and persecuted us; they displease God, and are hostile to everyone, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. As a result, they are always adding to the number of their sins, and wrath has overtaken them completely. 1 Thess 2:13-16 (HCSB)

Verse 13:

13 Also, this is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the message about God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God, which also works effectively in you believers.

a. The first point that I'd like for us to take note of in this verse is just exactly who it is that Paul thanks for the positive response in the believers. It's not a small thing that the apostle Paul did not say "I sure commend you believers for having the wisdom to recognize the truth of these words." So what's the difference? Why does it matter? As seemingly simple as this statement appears, for those who understand the grace of God, it's a powerful affirmation that all the glory and credit for the positive reception of the gospel goes entirely to God. Because the positive response of faith from within us is in fact a gift of God's grace. (Eph 2:8-9)

The ability to recognize the gospel as a message from God rather than just a human idea is much more than just a simple human action. While it certainly does involve our human mental capabilities, the impetus, the motivation, the clarity, the recognition, that drives that human reaction is the grace of God acting on the heart and mind of man. Apart from God's grace acting upon the will of man, he will inevitably not believe the message, because it's entirely contrary to our fallen human nature. (Rom 3:10-18)

And it is for this reason that Paul says he thanks God constantly for the believers. And just as Paul, every human being who believes the gospel must understand that he or she has God to thank for that faith to believe, and not ourselves. It is not that we were wiser, that we were holier, or in any way more deserving than anyone else, but solely because of the unmerited grace of God were we granted that precious gift of saving faith. No one has ever believed the gospel simply by an act of the human will. Because the human will is incapable, and thoroughly unwilling, to believe the gospel of grace, and truly desire to repent their sins. This desire is the gift of God, so we thank Him constantly and without ceasing.

And then after recognizing the truth, and understanding who to thank, we have a powerful and undeniable confirmation. Which confirmation is its powerful and visible effect on the lives of all who believe it. The truth bears fruits of righteousness. The truth frees us from the bondage of sin in our lives. And this authenticates beyond a doubt both the truth of the gospel and the source of the power that's behind it. These visible effects cannot, and must not be missing in the lives of every true believer, because they are both a testimony to the glory of God, and our assurance of salvation.

And this is exactly what the apostle Paul means when he says that they knew his message was true by how effectively it was working in all the believers. In spite of escalating persecutions from their own townsman, and their own families, and their own neighbors, nevertheless the Thessalonian believers persevered in the faith, and this perseverance was a visible testimony to the power and mercy and grace of God. And, at the same time, an equally powerful authentication that it was true and it was divine. To use a biblical metaphor, the fruit authenticates the tree.

In other words, good fruit good tree, bad fruit bad tree, no fruit no tree. To put this in very plain language, if there are no fruits of righteous behaviors being demonstrated, then there can be no assurance that the Spirit of God is resident. It is the fruit that provides both the means to glorify God, as He requires, and at the same time, the means to firmly assure ourselves of our position as His elect children.

In second Corinthians chapter 13, verse five, Paul tells the Corinthians to test themselves to see if they are in the faith. And he tells them how, by self-examination. He tells them to examine themselves. If Paul tells them to make this examination then it certainly follows that there must be something that can be examined, and a means by which they can make a determination, lest the exhortation be meaningless. So just what is it that they are to examine? The answer is they are to examine their lives and attitudes, to see if they are consistent with the faith that they profess. Are they still indulging themselves in unrepentant sin? Or, do they genuinely hunger and thirst for holiness and righteousness, and grieve over their sins and seek earnestly to forsake them?

This is not a difficult test to perform, either you're living in sin and comfortably enjoying it, or you're earnestly seeking to repent and obey God. It really is that simple. Your lifestyle, and your heart attitude give you the answer to this test, and answer the question as to whether you are or aren't in Christ. The answer is right there in front of us if we dare make this self examination. There can be no excuses for failing this test. The Scriptures tell us that anyone and everyone who earnestly confesses their sins, and asks the Lord for repentance and faith will not be turned away, so all mankind is without excuse. Repentance and faith are available to "whosoever will" which is repeated by Jesus as a kind of last call in Revelation chapter 22. Repentance and faith are offered to all who desire it, so those who don't have it, didn't want it and never asked for it.

Now don't misunderstand me, there are multitudes who don't want to end up in hell, and so they ask, and even beg to be forgiven for all their sins. But here's where we have to recognize an important distinction. These are the multitudes of humanity who are not sorry for their sins, nor in any way desirous to forsake them, they just don't want to have pay the price for committing them. No one in their right mind really wants to go to a hell of eternal suffering. Now some do claim that that's where they want to go, but I suspect that they'll change their mind when they actually stand at the precipice and perceive the horror and hopelessness that extends eternally before them.

But as we've said, wanting to avoid punishment is quite different from earnestly seeking righteousness and holiness. The kingdom of God is a place for those who love the Lord with all their heart and all their soul, with all their mind and all their strength, and earnestly and truly hunger and thirst for his righteousness and his holiness. Those who are sick to death with sin and temptation, with pride and lust, and want nothing more to do with them, forever. This is that effectual work of God in the believers to which Paul is referring in this verse that we're examining.

Verse 14:

14 For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, since you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews.

As we mentioned earlier, Paul's principal concern it would seem in this letter to the Thessalonians, was his fear that the intensity of the persecution that the believers were experiencing might tempt them to turn away from the faith. And in this verse he is acknowledging that persecution, but comforts them with the reminder that this is precisely the same thing that happened to the believers in the church in Judea. Just as the Judean believers suffered severe persecutions at the hands of their own brethren, likewise, the Thessalonians were suffering persecutions at the hands of their own brethren.

What Paul's telling them is that this is not unusual, and should not be interpreted by them as a discredit of the gospel, but rather a validation. Contrary to the ways of the world, when it comes to the gospel, rejection and persecution by the majority are not a disclaimer, but rather an authenticator. And this is of God.

Verse 15-16:

15 They killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and persecuted us; they displease God, and are hostile to everyone, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. As a result, they are always adding to the number of their sins, and wrath has overtaken them completely.

Paul continues in his analogy of the Thessalonians and the Judeans by saying that they, the Judeans, both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets before him. Contrary to many modern historians, who routinely lay the blame on the Romans for the death of Christ, Paul places it squarely on the Jews. He was there, he saw it all happen, he was even likely a part of it, so he knows full well what happened and he knows who's actually to blame. He is fully aware that the religious Jews knowingly manipulated the Romans into crucifying the Lord Jesus for their own selfish interests.

Then he says clearly that they displease God and are hostile to everybody. They demonstrated this hostility by doing everything they could to hinder Paul from speaking the gospel, even to the Gentiles, though they hated the Gentiles. It's interesting that there is no record in the Scriptures that they hindered any of the pagan priests from practicing and spreading their religious beliefs, but they vehemently resisted the apostle Paul from preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. If they didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah, then why would they care what Paul says? The answer is clear isn't it?

If Paul's gospel was true, then they deliberately murdered their Messiah. None of the pagan religions caused them this dilemma, so they had no reason to resist them. After all they considered the pagans to be nothing more than dogs, and cared little what they believed. But, if the Christian gospel was true, then the Jews had rejected and murdered their long prophesied coming Messiah. This must've been absolutely unthinkable to them, but then how did He do all those miracles, and what about His body being mysteriously missing from the grave, and all this testimony about people seeing Him resurrected? Certainly these were very difficult questions, so it's no surprise at all that the religious Jews really wished that those annoying Christians would just shut up and go away.

Of all the religious systems known on Earth, and there are hundreds or even thousands, only the gospel of Jesus Christ was viewed as posing a threat to the Jews religious system. And so it is with all religious systems, which seemed to be able and willing to coexist, for the most part, with others. But, all seemed to be threatened by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why is this? Answer, because the gospel of Jesus Christ is absolutely exclusive by its very nature. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, then every other religious system in the entire world must be false. Truly this is a very narrow way, and therefore cannot possibly be popular with those who don't embrace it. The Jews fully understood that as long as this gospel was preached in the world, they were in jeopardy of being exposed for the hypocrites and frauds and murderers that they were, so they made it their business to resist, even by violence, whenever and wherever they could.

Therefore verse 16 says that they are always adding to the number of their sins. With every effort that they make to resist the gospel they multiply their sin. While this persecution began with the Jews it has quickly spread to a much broader group. And to all of those who actively resist the gospel, this scripture says that wrath has overtaken them completely. What does this mean? This scripture doesn't mean that wrath has already caught them and the suffering has already begun, but rather it means that the divine sentence of wrath has been pronounced upon them completely, inescapably, and without restraint. Although the time of that wrath has not yet begun, when it does begin it will be complete and without mercy.

It's one thing to personally reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it's another thing entirely to actively persecute those whom God has appointed to preach the gospel, and those who believe that gospel. It is a very personal thing in the eyes of God when men intentionally do harm to His elect. For this, every man who does so will know God's wrath completely, without measure or mercy. The writer of the book of Hebrews put it well when he said "it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hand's of the living God," And those who reject His Son, and deliberately persecute His children, will inevitably and inescapably come to know firsthand the stark terror of the Lord.

Imagine for just a moment the terror of those who spit in his face, who struck him with their fists, who mocked him and belittled him as he suffered on the cross, when they're brought on their knees before His great white throne, and look up into his face awaiting His sentence to be pronounced upon them for all eternity. Truly wrath has come upon these completely. And so it is said for all of those who hinder the speaking of the gospel and persecute the children of God.

Under the law of God we are commanded to repent of our sins and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Under the laws of our nation everyone is free to believe or not to believe, as they see fit, but the scriptures warn all mankind that disobedience to God has consequences that are so severe, so dire, so unthinkable that we're unwilling to believe or even consider them, and yet God has repeatedly warned us before hand, so when that time finally arrives, we should not be shocked or surprised when we see that there will be no mercy extended, and no excuses accepted. Listen to just a few of the many admonitions of scriptures:

Job 28:28

28 "And to man He said, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; And to depart from evil is understanding.' "

Ps 111:10

10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever.

Pr 9:10

10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Now Paul shifts his emphasis, and in direct contrast to these just described, he says the following:

Verses 17-20:

17 But as for us, brothers, after we were forced to leave you for a short time (in person, not in heart), we greatly desired and made every effort to return and see you face to face. 18 So we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. 19 For who is our hope, or joy, or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy! 1 Thess 2:17-20 (HCSB)

Conclusion:

We've discussed in these last lessons the responses to the gospel. Both by those who believe it and by those who do not. We've seen the scriptural models of both types, and been told how to recognize which are which. The natural response of those who believe is to repent of sins and pursue righteousness with unrelenting vigor, in spite of the difficulties involved. Also there's a new set of desires and affections that are diametrically opposed to all the previous ones.

On the other side, among the disbelievers, there's varying degrees of opposition to the things of the gospel. The more deeply a person is involved in sins of disobedience to God, the more heated their opposition usually is. Persecution is a sign of rejection of the truth, and generally shows that the person perpetrating the persecutions knows they're living in sin, and violently dislikes being openly confronted with it. Most people won't vigorously persecute you because of what kind of car you drive, or the kind of clothes you wear, or even because of who you voted for, although this does get closer. However, when you declare that there is a true and living God, and He has set rules, and made laws concerning human behaviors, at that point there's no avoiding conflicts and escalating hostility. The Lord has designed it to be this way, and uses it to demonstrate both His mercy and His power.

With this we've completed chapter two, so next week we'll move into chapter three, which has only 13 verses, so we may do them all in one lesson, that remains to be seen. To Him be the Glory forever. Amen