

1st THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Lesson #11

Introduction

Last week we covered the first eleven verses of this chapter and we said that they belonged with the verses from chapter four dealing with the catching away of the believers to be with the Lord. Paul still has much to say on this subject in the second letter that he wrote to them, and we'll be getting to that shortly, but for now we must follow the text of this epistle as Paul presented it, and the Holy Spirit inspired it.

From this epistle we can see that there were essentially three problems that Paul was concerned with in his first letter to the Thessalonians. First there was intense and probably escalating persecution, and Paul was concerned about what this would do to their faith. Then there was the problem of confusion being introduced into the church regarding what would happen to the Christians who had passed away before the Lord's gathering together of the Saints. And third, there appeared to be certain brothers who had given up working, and we're simply going about as busybodies and depending on the other brothers to support them. Paul wrote this epistle to address these three specific issues.

In chapters 1 through 3 he acknowledged their faithfulness and his affection for them, and spoke to them about persecution and reminded them that he had told them in advance that it was coming, and that Christians have been appointed to persecution in this world by way of the unbelievers. He assured them that this was not unusual but was typical throughout the land for all the churches.

Then he addressed the issue of the resurrection of the dead. He assured them that their loved ones who had passed away in Christ would not miss any of the promises of God. At the gathering together they would receive their resurrection bodies first, and then all those who remained alive would be caught up into the clouds to be with them and with the Lord forevermore. Now, in these next few verses, 12 through 28, he's about to encourage godliness of attitudes and behaviors among the Christians, sensible and careful examination of any teachings, and address the unruly behaviors of certain brothers. We can title this:

Christian Conduct

12 But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 14 We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. 16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

25 Brethren, pray for us.

26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. 27 I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

1 Thess 5:12-28 (NASB)

Verses 12-13:

In verses 12 and 13 Paul makes a request of the brethren, that they remember to appreciate those who diligently labor among them in the ministry of the word. To show them love and respect because of the work that they do for the benefit of all.

He finishes with the statement “live in peace with one another.” Now this is such a simple little statement to make, but a very different thing to carry out. Nevertheless, the Scriptures tell us to do so. History is replete with dear Christian brothers who have struggled to balance this directive with an equally difficult directive to earnestly contend for the faith.

We are instructed to live in peace with one another *while* we earnestly contend for the faith. These directives are kind of like two bookends that bracket the boundaries of Christian behaviors. The goal of every Christian should be to live in peace with his brothers, but, the other directive to earnestly contend for the faith clearly tells us that we do not do so at the expense of the truth. The great theologian Jonathan Edwards once commented that the Christian life is a beautiful symmetrical balance. I thoroughly agree with brother Edwards, and I take note that he didn’t say that it was easy, as he himself knew full well. Nevertheless, we remember the words that the Lord himself spoke, that His disciples would be known by their love for one another, and our conduct must ever be accordingly.

Verses 14-15:

In verse 14 Paul continues with his instructions. He urges them to admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, and be patient with everyone. We see here that Paul says to admonish the unruly. To admonish is to rebuke, to reprimand firmly. Paul had just gotten through telling them to live in peace with one another, but he didn’t consider that command to in any way conflict with rebuking and reprimanding unruly behaviors. He didn’t consider it unloving or peace breaking to call the Saints to account for their unruly behaviors. In fact to him, this was a clear demonstration of his love for them and theirs for one another.

He told them to encourage the fainthearted, which means to show support, and confidence in them, to urge them along with compassion. He said to help the weak. This could be either mentally or physically. Provide help to any and all who need it, when it’s within your power to do so. And finally he said, be patient with everyone. Anyone who’s been a Christian for very long knows full well that not everybody progresses at the same level. Sanctification doesn’t happen at the same pace, and there are always those who will put our patience to the test. Being patient with difficult brothers and sisters isn’t just a virtue, it’s a Christian command.

Following along the same lines, regarding conduct, Paul says to see to it that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another, and for all people. Now we can’t help but notice from this verse that Paul acknowledges that we will be treated evil from time to time, even by our own brothers. And it’s right here that we’re told what the proper Christian response is, and what it is not. Being mistreated by a brother, or anyone else, is not a license for a Christian to react in kind. Oh yes, it certainly is the natural human response, unfortunately even amongst believers quite often. But this is where the Scriptures are issued as divine commands to constrain our fleshly reactions, and freely choose, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to knowingly be wronged and accept it, rather than respond in kind. (example, 1Cor 6:1-8) It is precisely at such times as these when Christians are called upon by the Lord to visibly demonstrate the difference that Christ makes in the lives of His followers. It is a display of His glory and a testimony to His Lordship.

Verses 16-18:

In these next verses, 16 through 18, Paul says rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Paul’s intention here is clear enough. He says rejoice always. Of course this doesn’t mean that there will never be times of difficulty and sorrow as we go through life, but we rejoice nonetheless in the sure and certain knowledge that all things in this life are going to work together for our eventual good. Nothing will ever snatch us out of the hand of God. Nothing will ever separate us from His love. In the worst and most horrible situations of life we are still His and our future is secure, therefore we may rejoice *always*.

We’re told to pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks. In other words continue to persevere in prayer for all those things which are pleasing to the Lord. Do not cease to ask for His forgiveness, to ask for a pure heart and a sanctified life, and that we would be transformed into His likeness. That we would walk in a manner that’s worthy of our calling and pleasing in His sight. And if we have tangible needs that are fitting then we’re free to ask for those as well.

We're told that in all things we are to give thanks. It's easy to misunderstand this verse and read it as saying we are to give thanks **for** everything that happens. But that's not Paul's intention. He's not telling the Thessalonians to thank God for the intense persecution that they're enduring, or the passing of the loved ones that they've lost. The point he's making here is that in the midst of all the triumphs and tragedies of life, the Christian has reason to be thankful to God, no matter what the prevailing situation of life.

Even in the midst of the worst, every Christian knows they are an eternal and protected child of God, and their future is secure forever. The unbeliever knows no such security, and cannot fathom rejoicing in the midst of calamity. Paul's point here is - no matter how bad it gets, give thanks to God and rejoice in the confidence of His eternal and unending love for you. You may have been called upon to suffer persecutions and hardships for awhile in this life, but you have not, and never will be abandoned. Therefore, rejoice always, and in the midst of everything give thanks to God.

Verses 19-20:

In verses 19 and 20 Paul tells us not to quench the Spirit and not to despise prophetic utterances. To resist or dislike the teaching of the Scriptures is certainly to quench the Spirit. And it's likely this was Paul's meaning. Perhaps because there was some controversy going on over issues of the resurrection and the day of the Lord, some may have been saying that nobody should be teaching Scripture. Now Paul didn't say that specifically, but he did say not to despise or resist prophetic teachings. To suppress the teaching of scriptures is the ultimate quenching of the Spirit. The entire work of the Holy Spirit is accomplished through the use of the holy Scriptures. His singular tool is the word of God and the power that it demonstrates. Suppress the word and you have suppressed the Spirit, quench the word and you have quenched the Spirit. Therefore Paul warns them not to do this. But, he immediately follows with a counter warning.

Verses 21-22:

21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

These two verses are a biblical mandate to examination. A biblical mandate to discernment and discrimination between that which is good and that which is evil. Between that which is true and that which is untrue, **or half true**. This is a mandate not to necessarily believe everything we hear. It is a call to discernment as a famous preacher of our day has called it. While we are exhorted not to quench the Spirit by suppressing prophetic teachings, at the very same time we're warned to very carefully examine everything that we're taught. Not everything that we hear will be true.

We're told to listen very carefully, to thoughtfully consider the implications, and then compare them for conformity to the Scriptures. It's unfortunate but true that many false prophets are in the world, just as the Scripture has warned us. It is the unwillingness, as well as the inability, to publicly identify false doctrine, that has been so damaging to the church. This has been far more damaging than persecution. Convincing Christians to tolerate anything and everything in the name of Christian charity and love has been perhaps Satan's greatest area of victory within the churches.

He has been very effective in convincing Christians that tolerance of sin, rather than repentance of it, is the best means to reach out to the unregenerate public and win their affections. If we can just show them that sin isn't a big deal in our church then they'll feel comfortable coming and worshiping with us. The folly of this is obvious, because worship cannot even exist in the midst of unrepentant sin. Worship and repentance are synonymous, there cannot be the one without the other. A church does not convert souls, nor gain worshipers, by ignoring or tolerating sin.

You can sing, and clap, and shout, and wave your arms in the air until you turn blue and collapse; but if you are living in unrepentant sin God has not accepted it, and you have not worshiped. When it comes to worship, there is that which is acceptable to God, and that which is not, and repentance and obedience to God's word is the determining characteristic. (Mat 7:21-23) It's about the demonstration of obedience, not words, or emotions, or enthusiasm.

When a church ceases to carefully examine and discriminate, either because it's unwilling or unable, it forfeits all defense against attacks of every kind. It becomes vulnerable to everything. When open debate of doctrine is discouraged because it's considered confrontational or unloving, then that's the beginning of the end for that church. When truth is moved below feelings and appearances on the priority list then the outcome is inevitable.

Something must be the unassailable priority in the church, and that's either going to be the word of God or the feelings and opinions of man. One must reign supreme and the other must bow and serve.

Discernment, and the willingness to exercise it biblically, is the distinguishing mark of every church. Who really is the God of that church? Everyone will say it's the Lord, but the truth will be found in how it treats the scriptures. Is the word of God truly supreme, or is it just given token lip service? Do the members carry their "Sunday morning Bibles" under their arms to church for appearance sake, and then go home and freely ignore what it says? By far most of them do.

There can be no greater and more significant teachings to a church than what Paul tells the Thessalonians right here in these verses. To examine everything they hear carefully, so as to discern the truth of it, and then to hold fast to that which is good and true; and to abstain from every form, that is every appearance, of evil. This is the mission and duty of every church. To first rightly divide the Word of truth, and then to actually practice it faithfully. To abstain from every appearance of evil. The Scriptures are not simply a call to hear the word of God, but a call to do it. The Scriptures are not simply a call to intellectually recognize good and evil, and appreciate the differences; they are a call to actually practice good, and faithfully abstain from evil.

I'm not aware of any where in the Scriptures that we're taught that we will be evaluated and rewarded based on how much we know, or how much knowledge we've accumulated. But the Scriptures are replete with verses that tell us that we will be judged according to what we have done. Paul wrote in the book of Romans chapter 2: *"for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified."* Romans 2:13 (NASB)

and again in Matthew:

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.' Matt 7:21-23 (NASB)

The discernment of truth, and the practice of it, are distinguishing characteristics of the truly born-again elect of God. There will be many who were familiar with the Word of God, and even genuinely admired it, but didn't put it into practice, because it was simply intellectual. It wasn't truly written in their hearts. Their desire was for religion and ritual, not for righteousness, and all of this will show itself, if one is looking, by the authenticity of their desire to know and practice the truth. Apathy towards divine truth is not a characteristic of regeneration. Regeneration includes, among various other things, a new innate desire to know the things of God, and to put them into practice for His glory and good pleasure. This is a characteristic of the Spirit, and a good indication of genuine regeneration.

It is the failure to examine carefully, and make vital distinctions, that have allowed, yea, even encouraged our churches to become literally overwhelmed with unregenerate members. It's doubtful that the truly converted compose more than 10 percent of the membership of most denominations, including our own. We see the unregenerate members making major policy decisions, the unregenerate members heading up committees, teaching Sunday School classes, teaching Bible studies, offering counseling, appointed as deacons, and even sometimes preaching in the pulpits.

How did we get here? We got here by opening the doors to any and every person who says they believe in Jesus, regardless of whether or not their lifestyle supports that claim. Speaking of just this sort of men Paul wrote to Titus: *16 They profess to know God, but they deny Him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, and disqualified for any good work.* Titus 1:16

We got here by tolerating any and every aberrant teaching and personal opinion under the guise of the priesthood of the believer. We have come to a point where we consider it appalling to even suggest that professing believers should actually be expected behave like ones. To suggest so in most of today's churches would get one instantly labeled as a radical. Any suggestion that we should admonish the unruly would be immediately rejected out of hand. And besides, how do we decide what is and isn't unruly, isn't that open to debate? Isn't that what the priesthood of the believer's means, that each of us is free to decide for ourselves what constitutes acceptable Christian behavior?

When we're told to examine everything carefully, what exactly does that mean? What does the scripture mean by examine everything closely? How do we properly conduct such an examination, and what do we use as a uniform standard? Let me make an example. Someone could come up to me and show me what appears to be a beautiful diamond ring. They might show it to me and say, what do you think? At this point the only thing I would have to offer is my personal opinion, because I neither have the knowledge, nor the instruments to make a valid examination. I might say, oh that's beautiful, but that doesn't mean that it's genuine. It might very well be nothing more than inexpensive glass.

Genuine examination demands both a uniform standard to which everything must be compared, **and** the expertise to conduct such an examination. One must be thoroughly knowledgeable about the standard itself or the examination is meaningless. What we're saying is that those who examine must be adequately equipped to do so, or all they have is an opinion. A thorough knowledge of, and total confidence in the Scriptures, is the basis for every examination. Conformity to the Scriptures, properly interpreted and understood, is the meaning of Paul's exhortation to examine everything closely.

We have such an example of this in scriptures, where Paul speaks of the Thessalonian's neighbors the Bereans, who listened to Paul attentively, but then went back to the Scriptures every day and examined what Paul said against that which was written in those Scriptures to determine if it was consistent with the truth. It doesn't say that these Bereans convened a town council, or conducted a group study, or met to express their own thoughts and opinions; it says they carefully compared the things Paul said to the holy Scriptures, and by this they determined if what Paul said was or wasn't true. The Scriptures say that these were noble minded men who exercised this careful discernment.

It is only when we have a reliable uniform standard that we are able to determine what actually is good, and what actually is evil. Then based on this reliable standard we know what to embrace and practice, and we know what it is from which we must abstain. As simple and obvious as this is, nevertheless it is precisely this standard that has been lost in our churches and our nation. We have abandoned the standard of Scripture, and replaced it with our own human standards. Just as the Pharisees kept the word of God but perverted its meaning, likewise, the churches of today still use the Bible, but have redefined its meanings. We honor Christ with our lips, but our hearts are far from Him. And we very cleverly cloak this all in a beautiful robe of Christian love and charity. Of tolerance and compassion for others. Our Pharisee brothers would be so proud of us, our hypocrisy may even outdo their own. Nowhere in the scriptures are ignorance of truth, nor tolerance of sin, called loving or compassionate. Rather, these are described as Satan's primary instruments of death and eternal damnation.

When asked the question "what is the greatest need of the churches today" a well respected pastor of our day answered that it was genuine discernment. As always, this dear brother really hit the nail on the head. And the problem isn't just that we've lost discernment, that would be easy enough to correct, it's that the very act of discernment itself has fallen into disrepute. The quest for truth and discernment has been successfully caricatured as being in opposition to love and compassion; when the Scriptures describe these as the defining characteristics **of** love and compassion. How desperate indeed is the church's need for authentic biblical discernment.

It's a very serious thing when a church, or a nation, loses its willingness to obey the word of God, but how much more serious still when it loses even its desire to rightly know it? When the love and tolerance of sin makes any discussions of righteousness abhorrent and intolerable. The only destination to which that road leads is God's eventual, and inescapable pronouncement of judgment. And such I fear, is the road that our beloved nation is now traveling. About the only thing that's now intolerable is any real discussion of godliness and righteousness and holy scriptures. Today the suggesting of abstinence from evil is absolutely intolerable, as are those who dare to make such a suggestion.

But this is not the path of the truly born-again, the truly converted, the Holy Spirit regenerated and chosen of God. We are exhorted and commanded to exercise discernment, to examine everything carefully, to cling to that which is good, and to abstain from every form of evil. We are to cling to that which is good even when society has abandoned it, and to abstain from every form, variety, fashion, and shape of evil, even though society openly embraces it and calls it good. We are commanded to discern the truth, based on the standard of Scripture, not the standard of the world, and then live our lives accordingly, even though it may cost us a great deal to do so.

Verses 23-24:

23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

In verse 23 Paul refers to God as the God of peace. I've read some commentary on this verse and there seems to be, as always, various points of view as to what is meant. But, as we've said so many times before, the context offers the best clue. In the beginning of this epistle it was the intense persecutions, and the turmoil of controversy over the fate of the deceased that prompted Paul's letter. Now, having comforted their hearts, and cleared up their controversy, Paul refers to the God of peace, and prays that He will sanctify them entirely.

Certainly God is, by his nature, a God of peace. But, He has also determined, by His own decree, much conflict and desolations during this earthly age. Nevertheless, amidst it all, He offers a kind of peace. Jesus said to His disciples on the night before His crucifixion:

27 "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

Jn 14:27

It's the second half of this verse from John 14 that provides the understanding for the first half. Clearly the peace of Christ is not that of the world. It is a peace that is of the heart, not of the world. In the world we will have tribulations, as He also declared, but amidst these tribulations the Christian knows a kind of peace within his heart, and a freedom from fear, that surpasses all understanding. The context of this verse in 1st Thessalonians also appears to support this same understanding.

And it's this kind of peaceful heart, that isn't troubled or afraid by what the world threatens, that God himself sanctifies and preserves. Paul goes on to say - "*may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Now we could, if we desired, go into making various distinctions between what is the spirit and the soul and the body, but there's no shortage of commentaries already out there on this. However, I feel like all too often, such discussions end up distracting us from the actual point that's being made here. There is no way that Paul's intention in this verse is to branch off into a dissertation on the component parts of the human psyche. The point Paul is making in this prayer is that the God of peace may sanctify entirely those who are His. That the thoughts of their minds, (their spirits?) the innermost intents of their hearts, (their souls?) and all the actions of their bodies, would be sanctified and preserved by God himself, and eventually they would be without blame at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, knowing full well that this is impossible to accomplish by man on his own, Paul goes on to say - "*faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.*" While it's clearly impossible for any man, on his own, to be blameless before the Lord, it is nevertheless our command to strive with all our strength in that direction. And progress is expected, despite our limited capabilities. It is the striving toward that perfect sanctification, which we cannot achieve, which makes us appreciative when it is received, and appropriately grateful to that One who has provided it for us. And this is how Paul finishes when he says "*and He also will bring it to pass.*" The perfect and final sanctification of life, the blamelessness before God, will only be brought about through the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who called us to this task, and faithful He will be to bring about our redemption and total sanctification at His glorious appearing. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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