

Priorities For Life In The Body

Series: Mission Accomplished

by Stephen Zeisler

As we have seen, this book of I Thessalonians is about the faith and mission of the Thessalonian church; it is about priorities, Christian leadership, obstacles to faith, and our destiny in Christ. In studying the Bible, however, most of us understand scripture only to a fraction of its depth; then we remember only a portion of what we understand, and apply only a part of what we remember. But Paul is a master teacher. He recognizes our difficulty in these areas, so at the end of this book he gives us truth contained in small packages, easily remembered and uncomplicated, so that we may take hold of it readily.

Chapter 5:1 2-28:

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, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. 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. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I am hesitant to begin home repair projects for two reasons: first, I am not sure I will be able to finish them (and the prospect of a torn-- up bathroom with half the pipes unconnected somehow deters me from getting going); and second, I do not always know where to begin. Some of you may feel the same way about the Christian life. When you see the panorama of all that God has laid before you, and realize how deep the truth in scripture is and the destiny that God has intended for you, you may feel either or both of those things about Christian life. You may feel, perhaps, that you do not have what it takes to finish, that you are not the kind of person who is apt to end up with the character of Jesus. Or you may feel, upon seeing all that is laid before you, that it is hard to get a toe-- hold; it is hard to get started; it is hard to feel that anything is happening, that you're going anywhere.

To begin I would like to highlight verses 23 and 24 of the passage we just read. I am not aware of anything more encouraging or more helpful than what these verses teach. This is the heart of the good news:

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.

Paul is praying here for the Thessalonians (and, by extension, all those who will receive his correspondence), and the highlight of this prayer, the very center of it, is the recognition that God finishes the things he begins. The words "entirely," and "complete" are emphasized in this verse: "May the God of peace Himself [i.e., no underling, no second-- echelon spiritual leadership! sanctify you entirely. "Entirely" is actually a double word in the Greek, both halves of which have the idea of completeness, or a finished work. "May your spirit and soul and body [everything about you, the whole person] be preserved complete, without blame . . ." God does not begin projects and leave them half done. Knowing that, Paul prays for these Thessalonians to recognize that he has in mind something finished, not something to be worked on for a while and then thrown aside.

Now having prayed for them, he treats them (and us) to this staggering promise (verse 24):

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

You are a Christian because you have been called by God, not because of something you have done, not because of any effort you have expended, not because of some insight you discovered. God initiated it; and he is faithful-- what he initiates he finishes. I hope that will grant you the freedom to step out in the Christian life, to recognize that the bathroom will be finished; there will not be any plumbing unhooked when you are done. Knowing that you are destined to be finished, destined to be conformed to the character of Christ, you have absolute freedom to take on the obstacles in front of you to live the life that God directs you to live. There is no anxiety left, there is no feeling that maybe you don't have what it takes.

Having decided that we do not need to fear an incomplete Christian life, the second problem we suggested now arises. Some of us wonder, "How do I get started? What are some concrete, helpful, uncomplicated things I can do that will launch me, steps that I can check my progress against?" Well, that is what the rest of this passage is about. And you can see all the way through here that these are very short commandments, very deliberately done. The complications are purposely removed to give us some specific, helpful steps to take. We know where we are going; we know we will be completed; therefore, we are free to launch out. In fact, we have already launched out.

Verse 25 says,

Brethren, pray for us.

This morning we already have had a time of prayer together. And although we did not pray specifically for Paul and Timothy, we prayed for their spiritual descendants.

Verse 27:

I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

Well, we have already taken at least one of the steps we are told to take, and that is, "read 1 Thessalonians to the brethren." Over the weeks we have studied this book we have read every single verse.

Verse 26:

Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

I would like to encourage you to do that right now. In our culture you might be a little more comfortable with a hug, but either way, a hug or a kiss. Turn to someone next to you and do what the Lord tells us to do! It's not hard to get started, is it? In fact someone mentioned earlier that it is harder to stop!

These are simple instructions, clear steps, uncomplicated directions that we can take to make real the promise of God that we will be completed.

Going back to the beginning of our passage we find that these neatly packaged truths center around three themes that we find in verses 12-22. The first theme has to do with our relationship to one another as Christians (that is found in verses 12 through 15); the second deals with our relationship with God himself (verses 16 through 18); and finally, our relationship with the truth (verses 19 through 22).

The first of these themes, our relationship with one another, has two halves. The halves might be described as one, getting along with people you look up to; and two, getting along with people you look down on. Either of these can cause problems.

Christian leaders (who have been looked up to) throughout history have been a source of much anguish

because of fighting, disagreement, jealousy, and envy. The Christian Church has broken into factions favoring one hero versus another. Christians have been jealous of one another: "Why him and not me?"

And obviously the other half of this issue has been a cause of difficulty too. There are those we have looked down on, treated with arrogance, ignored and avoided. Both of these reactions can cause problems, but here we have a series of short instructions on how to deal with these areas and honor the Lord. Verses 12-13a:

. . . 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, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Paul summarizes what Christian leadership involves by saying, essentially, that it is work. He says that those who bear responsibility for Jesus' name ought to be esteemed highly because that is work, because it is demanding, because it is difficult.

Paul uses three short descriptions of what he means by the word "work." First, ". . . those who diligently labor among you . . ." (Peter used that same word when he cried out to the Lord, "We worked hard all night and caught nothing.") Secondly, Paul describes leadership as those who ". . . have charge over you in the Lord . . ." It is important to recognize that this leadership is spoken of as "in the Lord." There is a lot of fleshly leadership oriented towards prestige and favoritism, but Paul is talking here about management "in the Lord." He is talking about those who are willing to make decisions and suffer the consequences of those decisions, who are willing to put in the long hours to choose wisely and to lead the people who need to be led. And those "over you" referred to here are not kings in the regal sense, but they are fathers who bear the responsibility of leading their families.

Finally, Paul says that those who work in Christian leadership, ". . . give you instruction. . ." This word would be better translated "admonition." It is not instruction or teaching from a kind of ivory tower distance. What it means is training people, getting down in the trenches with them and slugging it out; helping them; drawing them along; making the truth clear to them so that they can be helped by it. That word, by the way, is the same as the one in verse 14 where Paul says, ". . . admonish the unruly . . ."

We are to respect, very highly, in love, those people who, because of the call of God, are doing the hard work of Christian leadership.

His final summation of that leadership is in verse 13,

Live in peace with one another.

There are people in congregations all over the world who have used Christian leadership to cause unending problems. Some in a kind of fleshly, indulgent way have fawned over those in responsibility and made nuisances of themselves. Others seem to have made, as their goal in life, the creating of obstacles for anybody who is willing to bear responsibility in the Lord. The thrill of their existence is to hassle anybody who has been willing to take on some responsibility. Paul recognizes that because we have human leaders among us there is an opportunity for problems, and so his final exhortation is, "Live in peace with one another.

Now the second half of this issue that Paul raises of getting along with each other is that there are people in your life whom you are going to be tempted to look down upon, whom you consider less mature than yourself. He calls that group by three different names in this section: "the unruly," "the fainthearted," "the weak." Apparently the Thessalonian church had a particular problem with unruliness, or lack of discipline. (We mentioned it briefly last week when we talked about those who had abandoned their jobs and were waiting for the Lord to return. As a result they were living off the generosity of others.) But, as the opposite of unruliness, Paul says in Second Thessalonians, "We did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it." And that is what he is talking about here, I think. These are not necessarily ruthlessly selfish people, but they are the kind of people who can never get anything done; they never follow through on anything; they cannot hold a job. They are always looking for the pot of gold at the next end of the rainbow

"Can you just tide me over until my ship comes in?" But it never seems to come in. And they are not only undisciplined in financial things, but in moral and spiritual things as well. Those people need correction and direction and training.

Secondly, Paul says to ". . . encourage the fainthearted . . ." These people are not lacking so much in discipline as in courage. Their prayer life seems to consist of the statement the apostles made to Jesus during the storm, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Their life consists of crises and mountains that cannot be traversed; they are timid and afraid. Again, many of us in relating to people like this find ourselves wanting to ignore them; put them aside. They demand a lot of time; they take up our energy; we would rather hang around with people like ourselves instead.

Finally, Paul says ". . . help the weak . . ." Now "the weak" are people who are dominated by something. They have a habit that seems to control them, or a fear, or some dominant relationship in their life that makes them unable to follow in Jesus' footsteps. It could be alcohol, drugs, or a bad temper. It could be any one of a hundred things. They are too weak to have a victorious experience over these habits.

In all cases, finally, we are told to have patience. Verse 14: ". . . be patient with all men." Be patient with people you would otherwise look down on and reject. Be patient with them because God is not done with them. It seems, as you read scripture, that 99% of the people God has ever used at one time or another in their lives were in one of these categories. God has an unnatural affection for people who are undisciplined, fainthearted and weak. And if we, in our pride, turn them aside at the beginning rather than waiting in patience and offering a hand and seeing where they are headed, we are fools.

Look what Paul says about himself concerning patience (1 Timothy 1:15):

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all [the chief of sinners]. And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

Christ's patience produced the Apostle, probably the most significant follower of Christ who ever lived.

And as a final statement in this regard, we see verse 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 men.

Whether you have experienced trauma in your life because of jealousy and outrage directed toward those who are over you, or hassle and interference coming from those whom you look down on, in either case, do not retaliate; do not return evil for evil hassle for hassle, but rather,

. . . always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men.

The directions are simple, uncomplicated. These are the kind of things that we can take home and begin to measure our lives against.

In verses 16-18 we come to the second major section which, as] suggested, has to do with our relationship to God himself:

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Those who are in a right relationship to God are in the center of his will for them. And we will notice as we look at this we are told this is the will of God, i.e., these three short commandments; taken together as a whole. It is obvious that God is much more interested in our character, in the kind of persons we are on the inside, than he is with where we live, or where we work, or what degrees we have. California will not exist forever;

General Motors will not exist forever; the institutions you graduated from will not exist forever, but you will exist forever.

Now it matters to God where we work and live, what school we go to and who we marry. Those things are very important to him, but they are second in importance to the kind of persons we become. A good orthodontist will be concerned that the wearing of braces be as positive an experience as it can possibly be. It matters that the child wearing braces is embarrassed, or uncomfortable, perhaps, but it is much more important that his teeth be straightened because they are going to last a lifetime. The braces are temporary.

A second misunderstanding concerning the will of God is the idea that "What I want for myself will make me happy, fill me with pleasure and provide for my every need. Whereas what God wants for me is righteous and true and eternal, but unpleasant; it will make me miserable." But this is the will of God for you, ' Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks . . . ' Your life is to consist of unbroken rejoicing; it is to consist of unending intimacy with the Master of everything, with the Lord God of the universe; and it is to consist of the freedom to thank God in whatever circumstances you are. That does not sound like misery. God is not committed to making us unhappy if it is joy and intimacy with himself and thanksgiving that he is after for us. It is his intention that we live the most fulfilled and abundant and overflowing lives conceivable. He is much more concerned about it than we are for ourselves.

The last thing I think is important to notice here is that each of these characteristics are spoken of in a context that never ends-- "always," "without ceasing," "in everything." "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass" must be true because I am not capable of doing anything all the time. If God is not bringing it to pass, if he is not making the joy I experience possible, if he is not producing in me a regular, ongoing prayer life, if he does not fill me with gratitude for the life he has given me, then it will not happen. I am incapable of keeping my watch wound always. I on my own am incapable of never overdrawing my checking account, and if I cannot accomplish something that easy, then it is beyond me to even consider these demands unless Jesus does it. The will of God is accomplished by the power of God.

The third section, verses 19 through 22, has to do with our relationship to the truth.

Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances.

All of us have seen how the vibrancy and vitality of life in the Spirit can be strangled by tradition and by habit. Someone has said that the seven last words of the Church are, "We've never done it this way before."

But here the Spirit is envisioned as a flame, as a creative, powerful fire that is apt to do things we would never do. He will use instruments we would throw aside as unworthy; he will spring up life in the midst of the most agonizing death. But we, of course, expect God to operate as if he were a man. We would much rather trust Madison Avenue techniques or do it the same old way rather than take a chance that God's creative heart could do something new. We would much rather reminisce about the good old days than face the scary possibility that God might be present right now and willing to do something dramatic in our midst. ". . . Do not despise prophetic utterances." That is, do not despise the preaching of the Word by insisting that everybody who ever has an opportunity to say anything is safe and secure and bound up and will only concern himself with the favorite themes, the same old songs, the issues we are already comfortable with.

But there is a balance to all of this, and that is what we are given in the last two verses of this section.

But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good . . .

Being original has no value in itself; being new is no good at all if you are being disobedient. You can be the most creative follower of the latest antichrist and be doomed as a result. The Spirit of God will never contradict the Word of God. He will think of things that would never occur to us to do, but he will always operate in conjunction with the truth he has declared to us. So in our glorious freedom-- it ought to be glorious-- to expand and try new things and to seek God in areas where we have never thought of him before, check everything against the truth of Scripture. Do not be fooled; ". . . abstain from every form of evil." whether it is evil that comes from a hidebound, blinkered mentality that God has to do what he has always done, or

whether it is evil that comes from a thirst for originality and newness that needs to be sated, even though it means attributing to the Spirit of God things that are from the devil.

Election time is a crazy time of year. We are bombarded with statistics and analyses declaring that we are in desperate shape. If we are not careful we can allow ourselves to believe unquestioningly the analysis of the 30-- second political spot on the tube. We can begin to despair, and we can begin to quail before the problems the world presents to us. But I remind you again of the introduction to this letter of 1 Thessalonians (1:8):

For the word of the Lord has sounded [boomed] forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

These were people who touched the whole world they lived in for Christ. They affected the society around them: they affected the course of history. These people had had a dramatic impact on human events, and as a final word to them, Paul gives them all these uncomplicated, straightforward priorities. These are things we can remember too, things we can analyze ourselves by, things we can lay down next to our life to discover where we are.

I would like to suggest that you write down a few of them and put them on your mirror, or on your refrigerator, or on the dashboard of your car- someplace where you will see them. There is nothing complicated about them:

- . . . appreciate those who diligently labor among you
- . . . be patient with all men
- . . . Rejoice always
- . . . abstain from every form of evil

Those are four you could pick. There are many more here. You have steps to take; a place to go; a direction to head off in. But most important of all, you have the promise of God that he will finish it:

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Thank you, Lord, that you love us. We ask that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened. We ask that we will be the kind of people with freedom to live as you want us to live. We ask that we will quickly grow into the stature of Christ, because we need not fear any more that we are unfit, unable to finish. Thank you for the steps you have given us to take. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Catalog No 3569
1 Thessalonians 5: 12- 28
October 8, 1978
Fifth Message
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