



HOW LIVES ARE CHANGED

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 1 Thess 1:1-10
 First Message
 Gary Vanderet
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Most of us are familiar with the story, "The Little Engine That Could." It is the tale of a little engine loaded with toys and goodies for boys and girls on the other side of a hill, that broke down as it chugged up the slope. The engine was deeply disappointed for the children who now would be deprived of the goodies. Then along came a sleek passenger train, but it was much too busy to stop and help. A freight engine came by, but it had a lot of weighty matters on its mind. An old, rusty train that could hardly move came along, and it said it couldn't help. Finally, a little blue train came by, and it thought it could help. The first train emptied all its goodies onto the little blue train, and away it went. You know the refrain it made as it struggled up the hill: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can," all the way up the hill until it reached the top. And it did! And all the way down the hill, the engine said, "I thought I could, I thought I could."

That is a much loved story, and I don't want take away from the beauty of that little classic. But along with all the wonderful things that it communicates, it also perpetuates the myth that the possible can be done immediately, but the impossible takes a little longer. That is a part of the American dream that says that with enough time and gusto, we can get everything done that we want to. The problem is, when we wake up from the dream, we find there are a number of things that we cannot change. We run into an irresistible force: various passions, lusts and urges surge within us that we cannot deal with. We have emotions, fears and anger that we cannot come to terms with; they dominate us. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

The glory of Christianity, however, is that the gospel has power to change lives. Today we begin a series in the book of 1 Thessalonians that illustrates this wonderful theme. The apostle Paul wrote these letters to the young church at Thessalonica, because people there had found in the good news about Jesus a way to be changed. The focus and purpose of their lives had been drastically and irrevocably altered.

Paul had founded the church at Thessalonica himself. The city still exists, but today it is known as Salonica. Located in northern Greece, it is one of the few New Testament cities that is still flourishing. The founding of the church is recorded in the Book of Acts, Luke's history of the early church. Paul and his companions, Timothy and Silas, traveled there from Philippi, about one hundred miles west of Thessalonica.

After Paul had ministered in the synagogue for only three Sabbaths, the Jews of the city became so enraged by his teaching about Jesus that they caused a riot. They captured Paul's host, Jason, and held him responsible for the apostle's behavior. Paul left the city, having been there

only one to three months at the most. But he left behind the gospel, and the good news that he had preached continued to have free rein, changing the lives of the inhabitants of that place. He went south to Berea, and there began to preach again. The Jews from Thessalonica, however, followed him and caused another uprising. Finally, Paul was sent by himself to Athens. From there he went on to Corinth, the city from which he wrote this letter to these new Thessalonian believers.

As we study Paul's words, we would do well to remember that this is a letter. When God wanted to communicate with man, he did not drop a volume of systematic theology on us, an encyclopedia in which we could look up whatever topic we wanted to know about. No. God worked through human instruments who wrote letters, thus giving a personal touch to the gospel.

A study in Acts 17 of the history of the beginning of the Thessalonian church reveals that the fellowship there was born out of persecution, and that persecution continued throughout the life of the church. Paul will be referring again and again to the fact that their response to the gospel came out of a great deal of opposition. It was not easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica. Twenty years after this letter was written, the entire ancient East would be absorbed in warfare and rebellion. In AD 70, the armies of Titus surrounded Jerusalem and, following a bloody siege, the city was overrun, the temple destroyed, and the Jews taken captive. The movements that culminated in those events had already begun when this letter was written. So the Thessalonian Christians were facing perilous times.

Thessalonica was a large seaport town of about two hundred thousand people. It was a commercial center on the Egnatian Way, the main highway from Rome to the East. Thessalonica was a wealthy city. It had a competitive, cut-throat atmosphere, much like the valley we live in today. There was a lot of pressure on Christians to conform, so Paul wrote this letter to encourage them on how to live in the midst of opposition, misunderstanding and pressure.

The apostle begins his letter, following the pattern normally found in first century letters: The sender, to the recipient, and then a salutation. Verse 1:

Paul and Silvanus [this is the longer version of Silas] and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. (1 Thess 1:1, NASB)

These Thessalonians had two addresses: They lived in Thessalonica, but they were also "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Those of us here this morning who enjoy the friendship of God also have two addresses. We live in Cupertino or Sunnyvale or Santa Clara or Campbell or San Jose, but we also live "in God the Father and the

Lord Jesus Christ." It is that second address that makes it possible for us to live with the first address. Jesus referred to his disciples being "in" him as branches are "in" the vine. Paul sees us being "in Christ" as limbs are in the body. Our relationship with Christ is a vital, organic union that makes possible the sharing of a common life.

What encouraging words to a young and persecuted church! Paul is reminding them that in the midst of their trials, their security is in God. Jesus said in John 10: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." We can't jump out or wiggle out of God's hand. God won't let us alone. That is the flip side of the truth that God will never forsake us. He won't leave, and he won't let us run away. That is our protection in this world. It's the only protection we have.

A few nights ago, my youngest son Timothy and I were enjoying ourselves watching Tim's bother Steve practice football. Tim was playing in the grass about ten yards from me. I noticed a great big insect buzzing around him. In the space of a few seconds, Timmy kept crawling closer and closer toward me until finally he was sitting in my lap. He knew where to find his security. The threats to us are much more dangerous than anything an insect can pose. There is a great deal of misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian in our world, and much hostility toward Christians. But we are in good hands. Whenever tragedy strikes, when we hurt and our hearts ache, God's loving arms surround us. We may be in a great deal of trouble, but we are also "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

What follows in the first three chapters of this letter is a series of anecdotal reminiscences. This is a deeply personal communication. It is one of the first inspired letters that Paul wrote, probably the second, depending on whether he wrote the letter to the Galatians before the Jerusalem Council. The first three chapters are autobiographical. Paul describes in great detail his love for the Thessalonians, his concern for them, and the way he conducted himself while he was with them. Whenever he thinks of them he is filled with thanksgiving, remembering the work that God had done in their hearts. The book divides into two sections. The first is narrative, recalling his visit with them; the second is exhortation, addressing their concerns and problems.

After his initial greeting, Paul continues (verse 2):

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. (1:2-3)

As we read the apostle's description of the Thessalonian church, remember that this fellowship was only a few months old. These were all newborn Christians who had been converted from either Judaism or paganism. All their Christian convictions, their moral standards, were newly acquired. Add to that the persecution they were experiencing and you might expect the church to be very wobbly. But no. Paul is confident about this, because his confidence is in God. He knows it is God who is doing the changing.

The apostle is continually thankful for three things these believers already possessed: "a work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." Notice the three tangibles that are evident in this sentence: work, labor, and steadfastness. And there are three things that are unseen: faith, love, and hope. These are the underlying, unseen qualities that make the external manifestations of God's life possible. There is a work that God is doing in our lives by faith; there is a labor that we engage in because of God's love; and we endure, we hang in there, because we are inspired by hope. Here is how John Stott put this: "Every Christian, without exception, is a believer, a lover, and a hoper. Faith, hope and love are the evidences of God's regenerating work of the Holy in our lives. Together, they reorientate our lives, as we find ourselves drawn up towards God in faith, toward others in love, and towards the second coming in hope."

I think the work produced by faith is simply Paul's way of referring to the process of salvation, summarized in verse 9, where he says the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." That is faith at work. Faith is not merely a mental belief. Faith works. Faith has the power to change. Faith enables us to turn from what is wrong to what is right, from hurtful things to helpful things, from worshipping idols to worshipping God. Only God can deliver us from our idols, the things that we worship, the things that preoccupy us. Turning to God delivers us from idolatry to serve the living and true God. We can choose righteousness, but we cannot produce it. Only God can do that. How audacious of us to think that we can do God's work! Only God can change people. Only God can deliver us from our past. Only God can die for our sins. Only God can preserve us through this life. Only God can prepare heaven for us. What makes us think that we could do it? We did not save ourselves. That is the argument of the book of Galatians.

Jesus said, "The flesh [that is, our basic humanity] profits nothing. It is the Spirit that gives life." What a relief it is to discover that we don't have to try harder to be acceptable to God, to deal with our sin, to atone for our past, or to grow as believers. No. It is all of God. Unfortunately, for some believers the Christian life is a treadmill. They try their hardest, but trying only makes them more miserable. In spite of what Jesus said about his yoke being easy and his burden light, they have not understood that only God can produce his life in us. It is the indwelling life of Christ inside us that produces righteousness. There is no other way. We simply have to ask God to do his work in us.

Paul says, secondly, that the Thessalonians were possessed by a "labor of love"—a labor prompted by love. He uses a stronger word for labor, suggesting that sometimes it is arduous. Basically, he is talking about loving and serving people. The work of faith has to do with our personal salvation; the labor of love with our service to others. Our service is prompted by love. As someone has put it: "By love our love is inspired." In other words, it is because of the love of God for us that we can begin to love and care for other people. It is sometimes hard to love others, because we are born into this world as self-centered people. But once we understand the intensity and immensity of God's love for us, we can grow in our ability to love, and we can accept people just as they are and begin to love them as God loves us.

We cannot produce this kind of love ourselves. We cannot love from a vacuum. This love comes from a relationship with God as we put our roots into him, devote ourselves to him, draw upon his word, and live in his presence. Then, from his love comes our ability to love others. Instead of thinking only about ourselves and our things, we begin to give our time and our toys away, devoting our energy and efforts for other people's sake. That is the radical change that begins in us when the love of God is poured into our hearts. Our high schoolers learned that this summer. They did not have a speed boat for their lake trip until just a couple of days before they were due to leave. Then someone whom our high school pastor didn't even know called him and said he could use their boat. That is what the love of God does in our hearts.

Finally, Paul notes their endurance, their steadfastness, which is inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. They kept working and laboring, because they knew what was in store for them: an inheritance laid up for them in heaven, which was certain and sure. That is what hope is. Most people are without God and without hope. They think that when they die, that's all there is. That takes all the life out of living, doesn't it? But once we know that we have an eternal destiny, and that destiny is fixed, we are not going to lose it. We are encouraged to minister to others, and to ask God to change us. We don't give up, because we know that there is something ahead.

John puts this thought this way in his first letter: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." That is our hope! That is what is up ahead. That is the only thing we are really hoping for, because everything else disappoints. One of these days, Jesus is going to come back and get us, or we are going to die and join him. But in any case, we are going to get our inheritance, everything that is coming to us. That is what keeps us working on our marriages. That is what keeps us loving our children. That is what keeps us helping those who are weak, because we know that this life isn't all there is.

This also protects us from the delusion that the next big event is somehow going to satisfy us. It never does, of course. When we take our kids to Disneyland, the most often asked question on that long drive is, "Are we there yet?" That's the way we go through life, too. We get our license to drive, and we wonder, have we arrived yet? No. We get our first boyfriend or girlfriend, and we ask, are we there yet? No. Then we get married. Are we there yet? No. We have children. Have we arrived yet? No. But it is the certainty of our arrival, the thought of going home, that keeps us persevering as Christians. That is what Paul means by "the steadfastness that is inspired by hope."

In the next paragraph, Paul tells us how these miraculous changes that we have been talking about take place. What causes people to leave their idols for God? We live in a world where men and women are eaten up with selfish ambition for money or power or fame. Others are obsessed with their work or sports or television. They are infatuated with a person, or addicted to things like alcohol, food, drugs, or sex. These are all idols, and every idolater is prisoner. What is the process by which we are set free? How does the gospel change our lives and the life of a community. Here is what Paul says (verse 4):

...knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded 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. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1:4-10)

One of these days, God will take off the wraps and he will judge the world—and Paul is saying that you won't be there. You will be delivered, rescued from the "wrath to come." The thing that characterizes your life now, says Paul, is that you are serving the living and real God, and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. Oh that that might be the apostle's description of us as a church and as individual Christians: that we are serving God and waiting for his Son! In other words, that we have a divine, eternal, heavenly perspective. We are storing up treasure in heaven, rather than piling it up here.

Notice the process by which believers are called into God's grace. The first thing you need to know is that God loves you. He loves you even before you are his. Everything starts with God's love. So many people think of God as an old, out of sorts, heavenly crank. They think he is so insecure when people don't respond to his love that he stomps around heaven, shouting judgments and getting angry at everyone. But that isn't true! We are deeply loved by God. As a consequence, our hearts set up a sympathetic vibration to that love. When God sings his love song for us, our hearts reverberate. That's where that longing, that yearning comes from. That's the origin of the ache we feel when we want something so bad we can taste it, but we don't know what it is. Nothing satisfies it, because it is God singing his love song to us. He wants us to move toward him. So the process begins with the love that God has for us.

The book of Ephesians says that God set his love upon us in eternity, and he chose his people in love. No explanation of God and his election is given. It is a mystery. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. As Deuteronomy 7:7-8 says, "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

God loves you because he loves you! There is no other explanation of the love of God except the love of God. And there is no other explanation of the election of God except the love of God. He chose you because he loves you, and he loves you because he loves you. He doesn't love us because we are lovely or lovable. He loves us because he is

love.

The doctrine of election remains a mystery, but because it is a Biblical doctrine, we seek to commit ourselves to it. And neither evangelism nor the pursuit for holiness are inconsistent with this doctrine. On the contrary, it is precisely by means of evangelism that God's elect are discovered; and by personal holiness that they give evidence of their election. It is only when people respond to the gospel and grow in holiness, that their secret election by God becomes apparent. That seems to be what Paul means when he says, in 1:4, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." In other words, "We know it because you responded to the gospel and we know it because you are growing in faith, love and hope." And so it all begins with the love of God and our responding to that love.

That moves us to where we can begin to make sense out of the message, the gospel. Paul says "our gospel did not come to you in word only"—but it did come in words. And in verse 6, he says "they received the word," or as the NIV puts it, "they welcomed the message." Describing their spiritual journey, sometimes people will say, "I came to a church where the word was being taught, and for the first time it sounded like good news." It used to be that they couldn't stand to hear it; it didn't make any sense to them. But suddenly it began to appeal to them. After a while they found themselves welcoming the word more and more into their hearts. This is what Paul means when he says, "you received the word; you welcomed it." You invited it into your heart, convinced that it was true. Even though you did not have all of the necessary proofs, it sounds like truth, and you welcomed it.

After a while you began to think like God thinks. It was because you now had what Paul calls the "mind of Christ." Before you knew it you were thinking like God thinks. You realized how sinful you were. All along you thought you were a good person, but as the word began to penetrate, you admitted you had a lot of sins that no one knew about. You read that God came to earth to die for those sins and you believed that. Little by little God taught you more about himself. Then came this mysterious thing called the "new birth," which we don't fully understand. Your heart was changed, and you become a member of

God's family. Then you wanted to know more and more of God's word. Your appetite for it was insatiable. The word made sense. Not only did it ring true, but you began to ring true and live out the message. The word was doing its work in your life.

As the word penetrates our thinking, we begin to have the mind of Christ. We think God's thoughts after him. Our lives change and we exhibit more and more of the truth in our lives. People say, "There is something unique about that person. They have a different set of values. They respond to criticism differently. They are tranquil, gentle and strong. There is a winsomeness about them." Others wonder what has happened to us, and we have an opportunity to tell them about the Lord who has changed us.

The final thing is that we proclaim the truth to others. Paul says the "word of the Lord sounded forth from them." The gospel proclaimed by the Thessalonians made a loud noise, one that reverberated through the hills and valleys of Greece.

The most effective witness in this city, on your campus, in your office, at your home, is a group of people like you and me, living among their neighbors, making mistakes, not always getting it right, but moving progressively toward the likeness of Christ. That kind of transparency and openness has a powerful effect on a community. Evidently Paul had heard in some part of the Roman Empire that the story of the people in Thessalonica was known everywhere.

This is an important reminder to our media conscious generation. We should employ every means possible to communicate the good news, but let us never forget there is an even more effective way that requires no expensive gadgetry. You don't need Windows 95. You don't have to add more RAM. It's very simple. It's not organized or computerized; it's spontaneous. And it's not expensive. In fact, it doesn't cost anything. It is what John Stott calls "holy gossip." It is the excited transmission from mouth to mouth of the impact that the good news is making on people. When that happens, lives and communities are changed.

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THE MOTIVES OF MINISTRY

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 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
 Second Message
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Many believers are unaware of the fact that everyone who professes Christ is actually in the ministry. The vast majority of Christians have never taken vows of poverty, chastity, or obedience, nor have they joined holy orders, yet all who call themselves Christians are called to be ministers.

This raises the question, How can Christians make their ministry more meaningful and effective? Throughout the centuries, the church has turned away from many of the vital principles which made it such a powerful and compelling force in its early years. One principle that has been abandoned is that of the priesthood of every believer. Somewhere along the line there was a gradual transfer of responsibility from individual believers to what became known as the "clergy," a word that is derived from the Latin *clericus*, or priest. As a result, the Biblical concept that every believer is a priest before God was lost, and a special group of "super-Christians" emerged. This group was looked to and depended upon for practically everything that had to do with Christianity, and so came to be termed "the ministry."

When ministry is left to the professionals, however, there is nothing left for individual believers to do except attend church, observe what goes on, and bring others with them. So the Christian faith has become a spectator sport. Someone has even compared it to the game of football: twenty-two men down on a field, desperately in need of rest, and fifty thousand people sitting in seats, desperately in need of exercise.

I repeat: All who call themselves Christians are called to be ministers. Did you know that as a Christian you are endowed with a supernatural spiritual gift to do something that is eternally effective in the lives of others? Our Lord Jesus himself is our example. He was not a clergyman. He was a layman. Preaching was not his profession. He wasn't paid to preach. In fact, preaching wasn't a profession in those days, like it is today. Jesus was a carpenter. He didn't even come from the clerical tribe, the tribe of Levi; he descended from the tribe of Judah. But, in terms of ministry, he set the pace for every Christian who would come later. He described his mission in this way: "I came not to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

So Jesus is the Christian model for ministry. A study of his life (and, later, the life of the apostle Paul), reveals two things around which everything else revolved: Jesus and Paul were with people, and they taught them. They befriended others, and they imparted truth. These

were their primary tasks. Effective ministry, therefore, involves growing in those two areas: building relationships, and understanding and communicating the Scriptures.

These are the two areas to which the apostle Paul refers in the second chapter of his first letter to the Thessalonians. Verses 1-8 of this chapter, which we will look at today, deal with Christian relationships; and verses 9-16, which we will study next week, focus on the Christian message.

In chapters two and three of this letter, Paul defends himself and his ministry. The enemies of the gospel in Thessalonica had taken full advantage of his rather unceremonious departure from the city: Following a riot, he had to be smuggled out of town by night. His enemies were anxious to discredit Paul and his apostolic authority, so they launched a smear campaign against them. They tried to upset the faith of the Thessalonian believers by undermining his credibility. "Paul?" they asked. "He ran away. As soon as things got difficult, he took to his heels. He is not interested in you. He is in the ministry only for what he can get out of it, in terms of power, money, and prestige. He isn't sincere. He is an impostor. He ran away, and he hasn't been heard of or seen since." A number of Thessalonian Christians were close to being swept off their feet by these slanderous attacks; thus Paul found it necessary to defend both his ministry and motives. In order to maintain his credibility, and assert his integrity as a minister and an apostle of Jesus Christ, he had to pen these lines.

How then do we minister effectively as Christians? The last thing we want to do is waste our time. As Paul says in chapter 2, "For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, ..." Oh, that that might be said of us! That our time with our spouses produced godly results; that our talks with our children did not descend into arguments; that our conversations with our in-laws had righteous results. Yet, as we know, oftentimes, despite our best efforts, our conversations only make things worse. How can we be more fruitful?

Let us look at what the apostle has to say, as we come this morning to our second study in this letter. Chapter 2, verse 1:

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the

gospel of God amid much opposition. (1 Thess 2:1-2, NASB)

The reason we fail in ministry is that we have a strong opponent, and that is the evil one. I am convinced that every time we determine to do good, to minister, to serve and be of help, we are going to be opposed, and frequently thwarted. Satan's activity is the best kept secret in the universe. Secrecy is part of his strategy to keep us totally unaware of the spiritual warfare going on behind the scenes.

Let us review what happened to the apostle. Paul went to Philippi with his companions, Silas, Luke, and Timothy, and there they went looking for a synagogue. That was always where they began their ministry, in a synagogue. But they didn't find any. Philippi was a red-neck place, inhabited by Romans who harbored a strong anti-Jewish spirit. There were fewer than ten Jewish men, and just a few Jewish women (they probably were married to Roman soldiers or officials in the city) who gathered down by the river to support and pray for one another. Paul found them there and preached the gospel to them. A wealthy merchant named Lydia opened her heart to Christ. She invited Paul and his friends to her home, and the church flourished.

One day Paul was walking in the marketplace when a young woman, who was a soothsayer, began following him. She was a slave who brought in a great deal of income to her owners. Paul expelled the demon from her, and thus exorcised her owners' source of income. This so upset her masters that they put together a lynch mob and dragged the apostle before the local magistrates. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison—an illegal act in Paul's case, because the apostle was a Roman citizen.

We are familiar with the rest of the story. Around midnight, Paul and Silas were singing, and their duet brought the house down! There was an earthquake, the prison came crashing to the ground, and the terrified jailer became a believer. In the aftermath, Paul was asked to leave Philippi by the rulers of the city. Further, the Roman officials apologized to the apostle for the beating he had received, and begged him to leave. Paul describes all of this by the words "much opposition." Behind the opposition was the hand of the evil one, who tried to drive him and his companions out of Philippi—and succeeded in driving them out of Thessalonica. Later, Paul says he wanted to come back and minister to them, but Satan hindered them, in that the magistrates refused to let him come back.

That is what Christians discover when they decide to do what is right. When we resolve to get our marriages back on track, things begin to unravel; when we try to talk to our children, we end up in an argument and nothing worthwhile is accomplished. That is when we must remember that we have an enemy—the great opposer.

Paul's boldness to move forward in spite of the opposition came from two sources: purity in his motives (verses 3-6); and gentleness in his manner (verses 7-8). Verse 3:

For [the "for" explains why he was bold, why he didn't capitulate to the enemy] our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. (2:3-6)

Here Paul delineates a number of improper motives. Their exhortation, he says, did not come from error, impurity, deception, flattery, greed, and the quest for praise.

First, he says, "We did not come to you in error. We did not distort the truth." He was not like those who preach a prosperity gospel, saying that God wants everyone to be filthy rich. That so-called theology is merely a thinly veiled guise for greed. Nor was Paul's message like that of those who preach what they call freedom—like a certain guru in Oregon a number of years ago whose message of freedom was merely a cover for his licentiousness. Or, to bring the passage a little closer to home, there are those who distort the teaching of a man's headship and leadership in the home to selfishly get their own way—to buy their own toys, to get permission to use their leisure time for themselves rather than minister to their wives. Paul says he did not do that. He did not distort the truth in order to feather his own nest or line his own pockets.

Secondly, there was no impurity. The word literally means "dirt." Paul is saying they were not dirty old men. Possibly his enemies were implying sexual immorality, which was common among traveling teachers. The problem with dirty old men, of course, is that oftentimes they don't look like dirty old men. Their dirt is disguised by what looks like sincere motives.

Nor were they trying to trick the Thessalonians: "For we never came with flattering speech." Flattery is the use of insincere compliments. One scholar defines it as the "tortuous methods by which one man seeks to gain influence over another, generally for selfish ends." It is the insincere use of compliments in order to get something in return, like when someone tells you how great you are, and then slips you his business card.

Next, Paul says they did not come "with a pretext for greed." That is, they did not use ministry as a platform to make money. We must remember that it is not always obvious what one's motives are. I am learning to distrust my own. Recently my wife and I have had some interesting talks about motives, mine in particular, and why I do and say certain things. The prophet

Jeremiah said that “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?” Only God knows what is in our hearts. I don’t know what my motives are. All I can do is bring them to the Lord and ask him to test them. If they are improper, he will reveal that to me.

The word that Paul uses for being “approved by God” is a familiar one. It is the word *dokimos*, which is the noun form of this word translated “approved.” This is the word that potters in the Middle East inscribed on vases that withstood the heat of the furnace. Vases that cracked were discarded, but those that stood the test had inscribed on the bottom the word *dokimos*. That was the equivalent to our good housekeeping seal of approval, meaning “tested and approved.”

That is the word Paul uses. He says he lays his motives before the Lord and asks him to purify them and test them with a view to approving them. That is his motivation. He wants the God who sees everything to look at his heart. He wants his own motives to be pure, because he wants to please the Lord.

The only way you can do that is by knowing that God loves you very, very much. When you know that someone loves you, you want to please them. There is no secret of Christian ministry more important than this God-centeredness. Whatever our Christian work might be, we are primarily servants of God and no human being. We are not responsible, ultimately, to the church, or our bosses, but to God.

This can be disconcerting, because God sees what no human can see: God sees our motives. But, in another sense, it is tremendously freeing, because God is a more merciful judge than any human being or ecclesiastical court. He is compassionate and kind. He knows our frailty, that we are but dust. Being responsible to him delivers us from the tyranny of human criticism. We always need to listen to criticism, of course. (Some of us need to listen to criticism more openly and honestly than we are presently able.) Nevertheless, having listened, we must look beyond our human critics to the Divine Judge before whom we stand or fall.

So the first critical item in ministry is *pure motives*.

Before we move on to the second principle, I want you to call your attention to something. Notice in the passage Paul’s emphasis with regard to the Thessalonians’ knowledge of what kind of person he was and the kind of ministry he exercised. Regarding his openness:

- v 1 For you yourselves know, brethren...
- v 2 ...as you know...
- v 5 ...as you know...
- v 9 For you recall...
- v 10 You are witnesses, and so is God...
- v 11 just as you know...

Paul draws their attention to the fact that his ministry among them was public. He ministered in the open; he had nothing to hide: “You recall...you know...you were witnesses.” Happy are those Christians who exercise

their ministry in the open, before God and men. They have nothing to conceal, nothing for which they need to be ashamed. They can appeal to both God and men as their witnesses.

The second principle is that we must have *gentleness in our manner*. Not only must we not manipulate people, we must not dominate them. Verse 6:

nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. (2:6-8)

Note the contrasting picture between an apostle’s authority and a mother’s tenderness. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. He had the same authority that Jesus had. When he spoke, he did so with the authority of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. Paul was not one to be trifled with. He says he could have commanded them to obey, but he did not. He wasn’t hungry for prestige. He was not seeking honor and glory, making demands on people and throwing his weight around.

Describing his ministry among them, Paul uses a feminine metaphor—that of a mother tenderly caring for her children: “we proved to be gentle among you.” This word that is translated “gentle” is used only two times in the New Testament. The only other usage is in 2 Timothy 2:24, where the apostle urges Timothy not to be quarrelsome: “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be *kind* to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

The point that Paul is making is that Christians need to remember that they are addressing the word of God to people who have been enslaved by Satan. Those who need to hear the word are not the enemy. They never are. They are dupes, victims of the enemy. They need to hear the truth, but they will hear it only if the message is delivered with courtesy and gentleness. Paul says the same thing to fathers. He actually uses the antonym. He says, “Don’t be harsh with your children.” Don’t use a cross tone of voice. This truth stings me personally. Look at how patient a mother is with her children. Paul says that is how we are to be with each other. We may have to say some hard words to people, we may need to be tough, but we must always be gentle.

It is all too easy for me, especially when I am opposed, to assert my authority more strongly and speak louder. I give strong looks, or shake my head, or shame others into obedience. But that is diametrically opposed

to everything Paul is saying here. We are not to motivate others through guilt, but through love. Paul was approachable. He was safe. That is my prayer for my life. I want to be a safe person for others to come to, especially my family. It is going to take a while for God to chip away at my anger and discontent.

The best way to impart values is through warm, loving relationships. Take a moment and think of who has had the greatest effect on your spiritual life and ministry. It is probably not the person who imparted the most truth to you, is it? No. It's the one who loved you, who listened to you and thought well of you. Gentleness, and courtesy of manner. What a wonderful model for Christian ministry! Some of us become heavy handed and autocratic. There are those who seem to believe not in the priesthood of all believers, but in the papacy of all pastors. But Paul's model is that of a mother's gentle manner with her children.

Notice Paul was not only gentle; he was affectionate, too. He describes his feelings toward them as a "fond affection." One scholar defines this word translated affection, "to feel oneself drawn to something." He is referring to a warm inward attachment. Another scholar says it is a term of endearment borrowed from the language of the nursery.

So far from using ministry for personal gain, Paul gave himself to the Thessalonians and for them. He was not thinking of what he could get out of the ministry, but what he could give. There was nothing perfunctory

about his work among the Thessalonians. He loved them and longed to serve them. While I don't know much about a mother's role, I do know that her whole life and routine are determined by the needs of her baby. That is exactly how Paul felt about these newborn Thessalonian Christians.

I want to end this morning by reading a well known prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. It is probably one of the best statements of ministry ever written:

*Lord make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.
Oh Divine master, grant That I may not so much seek to
be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand,
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

That is ministry. And that is to what we are called to as Christians.

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THE WORD OF THE LIVING GOD

Catalog No. 1009

1 Thess 2:9-16

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

September 10th, 1995

I have already told you that when I was buying a watch a couple of years ago I was amazed at what was being offered. I saw wrist watches that chime, tell barometric pressure, check blood pressure, and play video games; some are even mini computers. I would not be surprised to find that one day, watches will be available that don't even do what they were designed to do in the first place—tell what time it is.

As I survey the Christian scene today I think that much of what passes for ministry is like that: all the embellishments are there, but the heart of the thing is missing. We need to get back to the basics. Any good coach will tell you that is the name of the game. We tend to forget the fundamentals, because we are either too busy, we think we know them already, or we assume that our compulsions are mandates from God. Our calendars are filled with appointments; our days consumed with engagements and projects. But when we stop and evaluate what we are doing, we have to question the significance of our activities.

The apostle Paul did not have that problem. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he believed that what he was doing was absolutely worthwhile.

In his defense of his Thessalonian ministry to his critics, Paul gives a model for an effective ministry. Here we find the fixed points around which everything else revolves. The apostle's life and ministry (and the life of Jesus as well) can be summed up in two observations: he was with people, and he taught them. He befriended others, and he imparted truth. Ministering effectively, therefore, involves growing in these two respects: building relationships, and understanding and communicating the Scriptures. These are the two areas which Paul talks about in the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians. Verses 1-8, which we will look at last week, deals with our relationships; and verses 9-16, which we will look at today, focus on our message.

In our ever-changing world, one thing remains unchangeable, and that is the word of the Living God. Its message never changes. It is always up to date. The Bible is a solid rock founded amidst the shifting sands of the earth. In our relativistic and subjective world, however, the notion of a decisive and final word from God sounds preposterous. Discovery, dialogue and debate are in vogue. Oftentimes when we share a word from the Scriptures, we hear the reply, "Well, that's fine for you. But it doesn't have anything to do with me." What we will see in this passage today, however, and

what we must never forget, is that God's word is exactly that—*God's* word.

We live in a world of cosmic deceit, hidden agendas, treacherous motivations, illusions and lies. Behind all of this is Satan, the great deceiver. His objective is to destroy; his strategy to deceive. His shrewd, cruel mind is behind the lies that buffet us all day long, the media barrage that encourages us to "find ourselves" in something or someone other than the living God; to "go for the gusto" but to leave the Savior out. But the word of God gives the lie to all this foolishness.

We begin our study this morning with verse 9 of chapter 2:

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess 2:9-12, NASB)

Paul thinks of his message in terms of two elements: he both *embodied* the truth, and he *imparted* it. As Chaucer said of his monk in *Canterbury Tales*: "First he wrought, and then he taught." That is where the apostle's authority and credibility derived: he behaved devoutly, uprightly and blamelessly.

"Devout" means holy, to be wholly God's; "upright" means to behave like we ought to behave. Paul is saying that Christians ought to look like men and women ought to look. And we know what that is, because we have truth. Paul says his life was consistent with what we know to be true. He was blameless. He is not claiming sinlessness and perfection. His authority sprang from his attitude toward holiness, his hunger for righteousness, and our progress. That is what gives the Christian authority.

And not only should Christians embody the truth, they should impart it by teaching the word of God. This implies that we spend time in the word to gain knowledge of it. We grow in our apprehension of Biblical truth, and we use it to encourage and exhort others.

And the purpose of it all must be kept in mind. Paul sets it out in verse 12: "so that you may walk in a man-

ner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." Why do we minister to our spouses? Is it so they will make more money and we can have an easier life? No. God's purpose must override every other purpose in life. We need to help people grow in their likeness of Christ, to become more and more of a visible representation of the invisible Christ. What do we want for our children? To do all the things we couldn't do in the fields of academics and athletics? Do we try to relive our lives through them, or do we want them to grow in their likeness to Jesus Christ?

This is where we get lost. We forget the purpose for which every other purpose exists: it is to create living reminders of Jesus Christ. That is what we need to ask ourselves when we sit down to talk to our mates and our children. Whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, we desire to be successful so that when we leave, they are more and more like Jesus Christ.

Next, Paul goes on to say some very powerful things about his message. Verse 13:

And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost. (2:13-16)

Notice Paul's striking statement, "*not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God.*" Our word, says Paul, was not the word of man, but the word of God. What a bold statement of authority! These words are indeed the writings of men. Writing from his own rabbinic background, Paul uses the language, grammar, syntax and vocabulary of men. And yet, he says, "what I wrote on the page is indeed the word of God." The other apostles believed the same thing. Throughout history, God has always communicated through human beings who look, talk and behave just like we do.

I know that for some of you the Scriptures are new. You are new believers or you are in the process of becoming Christians, and you are still trying to figure how all the pieces fit. For you, the notion that God's word is revealed through man's word may be difficult to grasp. You see the words on the front of the book, "Holy Bible," and you wonder what does that mean? The word "bible" is easy to explain, however. It simply means "book." It is the Greek word for book, *biblia*. There is nothing special about the word. Actually, it

means papyrus. There was a city in the ancient world called Biblos, from which papyrus was exported.

"Holy" requires some definition, however. We all have different impressions of what that word means. When we think of someone who is holy, we imagine a man or woman totally different from us, someone other worldly, perhaps someone with a long face and wearing drab clothes. But the word holy means "to be set apart," to be separated for a special purpose. Therefore, the words "Holy Bible" simply mean a book that is set apart, different, unique, unlike any other book.

In what way is the Bible unlike any other book? The words in our translations are English words, and we read them just like we would read the words of any book. We don't read them diagonally or upside down. We expect poetry to sound like poetry, and history to be history. We apply the normal rules of grammar and syntax that we apply to any language. Then how is it different? Its uniqueness is not found in its size, or its age, or in its cultural background. The uniqueness of the Bible lies in the fact that it is God's word! It claims to be God's word given through men, and in particular Jewish men.

Moses was the first of a long list of prophets to whom God spoke. To use the Hebrew idiom, God spoke "mouth to mouth" to Moses—face to face, in direct revelation. From Moses Israel derived what we call the first five books of the Bible. They probably were one book originally, written perhaps on different scrolls: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. When Israel entered Canaan (in the middle of the fifteenth century BC), they had a question on their minds. Moses was about to die, and they wondered how they would know when the next prophet came on the scene. How could they discern God's voice from the multitude of pagan voices in that land? The Canaanites, the Syrians, everyone had their own set of prophets. How would the Israelites discern the voice of God?

God gave them three criteria to help them: 1) The prophet must be a Jew (God would speak through a Jew). 2) God would speak to the prophet directly. His word would not come through divination. 3) The prophet must predict the future with one hundred percent accuracy. In the main, prophets were mostly preachers who proclaimed the will of God. One of the ways to determine whether they were speaking for God, for themselves or some other source was whether or not their predictions came true. So, in every case where the prophets gave a short range prophecy their proclamations could be tested. If their predictions came true, they were a prophet of God. If not, then Moses said not to be afraid or in awe of them.

From that point on Israel had a number of prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and other men who communicated the word of God in men's languages. And their predictions authenticated their proclamations. Around the fifth century BC, the process came to

an end. God no longer spoke through prophets. For a period of about 400 years, in terms of any new revelation, God was silent. The Old Testament was there for the reading—it was God’s word for that time—but God did not speak any longer until he spoke in his Son in his final revelation. As the writer of Hebrews begins his letter: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” That is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then our Lord passed on his authority to the twelve disciples whom he commissioned as apostles. Remember his words to them on his last night here on earth, from the gospel of John: “All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” *“Teach you all things”*: This is the apostolic warrant for their letters. *“Remind you of everything I have said to you”*: This is the apostolic warrant for the writing of the gospels. That is why the apostles remembered with such fine detail the things that Jesus said and did. The Holy Spirit brought it to their memory. Jesus went on to say: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” This covers the predictive element in the writing of the apostles. It is what authenticated them as prophets. They knew what was to come. This was John’s warrant for writing the book of Revelation.

All of this is simply to say that the apostles had the same authority as the Old Testament prophets. When they spoke, they spoke with the authority of God, specifically with the authority of Jesus Christ.

And that is why Paul refers to the gospel here in this chapter of Thessalonians as something that has been “entrusted” to him. He was a steward of the word. “Steward” is the job title of one who manages an estate. A steward could be a housekeeper or butler, someone who brings from the pantry food and wine for his master’s meals. Stewards and stewardesses on airplanes are entrusted with certain commodities they are responsible to dispense. Paul says it is the Christian’s job to enter into the pantry of God himself and bring out the good things of his word on which others can feed. That is my job as a pastor.

Christians have been entrusted with valuable commodities, what Paul calls in Corinthians the “mysteries of God,” that deposit of truth that contains the secrets of life, the truths about life, about God, and about ourselves. Ray Stedman used to call these the “lost secrets of humanity.” How do you deal with guilt in your life? How can you heal a hurting marriage? How can you be reconciled with a brother or sister from whom you are estranged? How can you find meaning and purpose in life? What do you do when your heart is breaking?

Those are the secrets that have been lost. They are mysteries, because they are undiscoverable by observation.

But God has revealed the answers to these mysteries. He revealed them to the apostles, who through the process of illumination and inspiration spoke and wrote about them. They are recorded for us in the Bible, and they are available to be revealed by the Spirit to those who love God. That is how we understand what life is all about. That is how we can face difficult times and not faint. That is how we discover a resource for living when everything else is taken away from us. When it seems there is nothing left to comfort us, there are always the thoughts of God to sustain us.

That is our message. We have no other. Our task is not to debate the gospel, but simply to announce it. God’s word alone is sufficient to cut through the lies that cloud the minds of unbelievers and ruin their lives. Some may defy it, but they know it is true. And frankly, I believe most people have never heard an intelligent presentation of the gospel. If you were to ask them what Christians believe, they would probably answer in terms of certain moral or political stands believers have taken, but they would have little awareness of Jesus and what he has done for them.

And Paul says something else concerning this powerful word. Notice two things about it. First, he says that the word produces change. He declares, in verse 13, that God’s message also *“performs its work in you who believe.”* It works if you believe it. Isaiah uses a different analogy. He likens the word to rain. He says in 55:10, “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

The word works! It will not return void. It changes lives. How does it do that? you ask. When you first begin to read the word, you realize that God loves you very much. That is something you would not know apart from revelation. That is the first thing that attracted me to this book. I grew up in a fatherless home, in a rather chaotic environment. Imagine how attractive it was for me to hear that I have a Father who loves me. You would not guess from this world that God cares about us, but he does! He cares so much for us that he became one of us. That is what the incarnation is all about. God is with us—God manifest in the flesh.

And God died for us. We would not understand the cross unless God explained it to us. And once we understand God’s love for us through the word, and we respond to it and receive it by faith, God begins to change us. The word affects our lives. We start to become more and more like Christ and like other believers who are following Christ. The word, working in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit, begins to change

us, little by little. It works!

That is the only message that we have. And that is why we go through this book Sunday after Sunday, paragraph by paragraph. We don't have anything else to say.

But unfortunately, the word produces not only change, it also arouses violent opposition. Throughout history, every generation of Christians has known persecution and martyrdom. Christians have been bound in animal skins and left to die in the hot sun, thrown into lions' dens, burned alive, exiled. What does the wisdom of man achieve? Mankind killed the Lord of Glory who came to save them. That is what the wisdom of man achieves.

Why such a violent reaction to this remarkable word that has such power to bless and transform? I am sure there are many reasons, but it is clear from the Scriptures that the gospel is not impressed with human achievement. In fact, it exposes our human pride. Everyone comes to God in the same simple way: admitting that they cannot help themselves, and accepting salvation as a gift from the hand of God through Jesus Christ. Jesus himself declared, "No one comes to the Father but through me." God insists there is only one way to be reconciled with him, and that is through Jesus Christ. That makes a lot of people angry.

Paul goes to the extent of saying that these people are hostile to all men. Isn't that an odd thing to say about religious folk and others who consider themselves humane and civilized? Yet if they oppose the gospel and keep people from preaching it, they are hostile to all men. In other words they are preventing them from hearing the secrets that make life livable. That is still

true today. Try to pass out Bibles on a school campus today and someone will oppose you, often in the name of freedom and liberty.

So, taking the passage that we looked at today, together with the verses we studied last Sunday, we see that the Christian's manner and message are inextricably linked. Without kindness, truth is just so much dogma; without truth, kindness is mere sentimentality. It is God's truth, delivered with lovingkindness, that has power to persuade. The good news sounds good only when it is delivered with good manners.

The best proclamation of the gospel takes place in the context of loving relationships. There is no lasting influence without loving contact. How well did Jesus enunciate and exemplify this principle! One of the distinctive features of his life was his inclination to eat and drink with irreligious, morally untidy people.

But friendship involves more than togetherness and small talk. It means sharing what we know of our Lord. As he teaches us new things about himself we must give those thoughts away. It may be a word of grace to a troubled conscience, a word of comfort, a kindly stated word of correction, a partial or complete explanation of the gospel.

I can't tell you exactly what to say. You won't find it in any book. There are no instructions that work all the time. Witness must come from the heart. We, too, must tell what we have "seen and heard." The essential thing is to sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him. The more we receive, the more we have to give. It is through prayer, thoughtful Bible study and quiet meditation that Jesus speaks to our hearts. So we must stay in his presence until he entrusts us with his word.

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A PARENT'S LOVE

Catalog No. 1010

1 Thess 2:17-3:13

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

September 17th, 1995

We all have models, people whom we look up to in Christian ministry. One man I greatly respect is Bruce Wilkinson, the founder of Walk Through the Bible Ministries. A few years ago I heard Bruce share an experience that had touched him. After he graduated from seminary, he took a teaching position in Multnomah School of the Bible, and one of the courses he taught was a freshman class on Bible study. On registration day, he learned there were eight sections of freshmen, and he was given sections one, two and three. Another professor pointed out to Bruce that section two was an honors class. Every year, he said, the top students were placed in that group. This section was usually reserved for professors who had tenure, and he expressed surprised that Bruce had got it.

When section two met for the first time, Bruce said he wondered what it would be like to teach an honors class. As the young people entered the classroom, he noticed nothing special or different about them; they were normal eighteen and nineteen year olds. But when he began to teach, he said the atmosphere was electric. The students were bright, their questions filled with insight. This continued week after week. Once, when the academic dean asked him what he enjoyed most about teaching, the answer was easy. "Section two. The honors class," said Bruce. The dean looked puzzled. Then he said, "We don't have an honors class anymore. We stopped doing that two years ago. We found that it's better to disperse the honors students among all the classes." Bruce's palms began to sweat. He excused himself and went to the registrar and asked for the list of section two honors students. "We don't have an honors class," he was told. "All the sections are the same."

Bruce became really concerned now. He went to check his grade book, because grades are always the test, he reminded himself. He discovered that the section two grades were far better than those of sections one and three. He put the blue books of a recent test from section two on his desk, and beside them he put the blue books of section one. There was a big difference between them. Then he put the section three blue books on top of the section one books and pressed them down. Section two was higher than the combined sections one and three!

Bruce said he learned a profound lesson that day about the power of expectations and the power of unconditional love. The only difference between section two and sections one and three was his unvoiced expectations for what would happen in class. "If my unvoiced expectations could have such a powerful effect," he said, "what effect could my voiced expectations have as I learn to speak lovingly to students?"

A leader's expectations can have a profound influence on the growth of others. We have been learning this principle of the power of love in ministry in our opening studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul's critics had condemned him for his motives and conduct while he was in Thessalonica, for his quick departure from the city, and what they regarded as his irresponsible failure to return. He had either abandoned the Thessalonians, they charged, or he was too cowardly to go back. The apostle was driven to defend himself against this added defamation. If 2:1-16, the passage we looked at last week, was Paul's defense of his conduct when he was in Thessalonica, then 2:17 through 3:13, which we will study today, is his defense of his failure to return.

It is hard to imagine how anyone reading these verses could consider Paul to be stern and cold, as he is sometimes described. These verses overflow with the warmth of his heart and the depth of his love for the Thessalonians. He begins his defense in 2:17,

But we, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. (1 Thess 2:17, NASB)

Paul had left the Thessalonians reluctantly, not voluntarily. He had not run away. On the contrary, he had been "torn away" from them, as the New International Version renders it. The word was used of a parent who had been deprived of his children or a child who had been deprived of his parents. It was an unnatural and painful separation, one that Paul had not sought, but was done to him against his will. He hoped it would be temporary. In any event his absence was only physical. In his heart he never had left them.

Paul goes on to say that he made repeated efforts to return to them. Verse 18,

For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan thwarted us. (2:18)

When Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, he was ministering on his own. Doubtless he was feeling lonely and distant from the people he loved so much. Forget-

ting the danger that had driven him from Thessalonica and the cruelty he experienced in the city, he longed to return there. But when he tried, Satan stopped him.

“Thwarted” is an interesting word. It means, “cut into.” It was used of the breaking up of a road to make it impassable; it was also used of a runner cutting in in the middle of a race. We do not know how this Satanic interference expressed itself. Most likely it was the legal ban which city officials had imposed on Jason, Paul’s host while the apostle was in Thessalonica. These people had taken security from Jason before releasing Paul, with the threat of severe penalties if he returned.

So it was Satan who hindered Paul. Satan, the great opposer, is the adversary who puts obstacles in the path of the people of God to attempt to prevent the will of God from being accomplished in and through them. Don’t be surprised if you experience repeated frustration when you try to do something you know to be right. If you want to live a significant life you will face opposition and even hatred. The only way to avoid reproach is to be nothing, do nothing, and say nothing. Charles Briggs has written:

If your ambition is to avoid the troubles of life, the recipe is simple: shed your ambitions in every direction, cut the wings of every soaring purpose, and seek a little life with the fewest contacts and relations ... Tiny souls can dodge through life; bigger souls are blocked on every side. As soon as men and women begin to enlarge their lives, their resistances are multiplied.

The Bible is the only book that explains the origin and persistence of evil in the world. Why do we struggle so much in life? What are we up against? Jesus said it is the devil. Satan is a liar and murderer. His goal is destruction and his method deception. Here is how Paul puts it in Ephesians, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” It is not people who are the problem; it is the spiritual forces of evil that prevail in the world.

How did Paul know to attribute this blockage to Satan, while attributing others to God? The answer is, both are true. Although Satan thwarts us, God retains supreme authority. Recall that Satan had to ask God’s permission to afflict Job. It is encouraging to know that all Satanic opposition is permitted by God and used by him for good in our lives. Opposition is an effective method for training. Affliction, suffering, pain and heartache are often God’s way to get our attention.

These attacks were all the more painful to Paul because his inability to return to Thessalonica was not due to any indifference on his part. In the next verses he unconsciously gives them evidence of his longing for them by asking a number of rhetorical questions which express his love for them. Verse 19:

For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation?

Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy. (2:19-20)

Paul is saying that his joy in this world and his glory in the next were all tied up with the Thessalonians. He considered the maturing of these believers in Thessalonica and other places his most important work. He is saying, “I have invested my life in you and your growth into mature, whole people. This is the most important thing in the world. When the Lord Jesus comes, I will be thrilled at the changes in your life that I so longed to see come about.”

Paul’s repeated efforts to return to Thessalonica were frustrated by the lack of news about the church there. The suspense grew until he could stand it no longer. Something had to be done to relieve the tension. Since he could not go, he decided to send Timothy in his place (3:1),

Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain. (3:1-5)

This was a very real sacrifice on the part of the apostle. When he arrived in Athens, he immediately sent for Timothy to join him. Then Timothy arrived and told Paul that he had no news concerning the Thessalonians, and Paul immediately sent him to Thessalonica to make inquiries. Although that meant that Paul would be left alone again for the second time, he was willing to bear that loneliness if only he could get news through Timothy about the Thessalonians.

Twice Paul says that he could not stand the suspense any longer: “when we could endure it no longer” (3:1); “when I could endure it no longer” (3:5). The fact that there was no news from the Thessalonians was an intolerable suspense for Paul, so he sent Timothy to find out how they were, and to strengthen, encourage and cheer them up. He was concerned that their sufferings might lead them astray from Christ. Timothy would remind them that tribulation was a necessary part of their Christian calling. “When we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction,” says Paul. The inevitability of suffering was a regular part of Paul’s instruction to new converts.

When people tell me that life is hard, I reply, “Of course it is.” I find that answer is more satisfying than anything else I can say. Life is indeed difficult and de-

manding. The path which God takes us on at times seems to lead away from our good, causing us to think we have missed a turn and taken the wrong road. But that is because somewhere along the line we have been taught to believe that if we're on the right track, God's goodness will always translate into earthly good: that he will heal us, deliver us, exempt us from disease and pain; that we will have money in the bank, children who turn out well, and a comfortable life; that nobody will lose a business, fail in marriage, or live in poverty. Paul sent Timothy to correct this fantasy.

Remember Isaiah's words that it was the "Lord's will to crush his servant and cause him to suffer" (Isaiah 53:10). Jesus' bruising, and ours, are part of God's will. Our Lord was nailed to the cross; we can count on being nailed to the wall. It is helpful to see our struggles in that light—as being crucified with Christ. Our hearts want to cry out, "Come down from the cross and save yourself," but at that point we must remember Jesus' words, "Not my will but Thine be done."

God gives us over to such bruising because they are part of the process that make us into what he intends us to be. Suffering makes us sweeter and mellower. As we learn to let go of what we want, we lose the fear of losing out. We're not so easily provoked to wrath by harm or reproof. We learn to absorb abuse without retaliation; to accept reproof without defensiveness; to return a soft answer to cruel words. Hostility and accusation teach us to pray—to really pray—and this develops our relationship to God. It moves us closer to him and makes us more susceptible to his shaping. That is what Paul sent Timothy to tell the Thessalonians. They need not fear. They had a new source of strength. They could lean on God. He would take them through everything and use it for their benefit.

Paul could not wait to hear how they were doing. When Timothy brought back the good report, the apostle was beside himself with joy. Verse 6:

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you; for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we {really} live, if you stand firm in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith? (3:6-10)

Timothy came back with good news, but Paul had already left Athens. He was in Corinth now, so Timothy joined him there. To Paul's great relief, Timothy reported that his work had not been in vain. It stood solid and sure. The Thessalonians' faith was intact, their love was evident, and, best of all, their trust in God was secure. Further, they held cherished memories of the apostle

and longed to see him.

This information so overwhelmed the apostle, he could not contain himself. So he cries, in verse 7: "Why should *your* faith encourage *us*, you ask? Because our life is bound up in yours! *For now we can really live.*" The Jerusalem Bible says, "Now we can breathe again." One scholar translates it, "Now we have been given a new lease on life." Paul was filled with thankfulness and joy at this good news. This is how a father responds when he hears a good report of his children's welfare.

Paul is moved to prayer on behalf of the Thessalonians. He says that he prayed earnestly and continuously. That was because prayer was the main thing, the core, the spirit of all that he did. And it is for us as well when we are pushed beyond our limits, frightened out of our wits, and pressed out of our comfort zones. On such occasions, prayer is a reflex action.

But what Paul knew, and what we must realize is, that we are *always* needy people. We are inadequate, deficient, and desperately dependent on God. Without him we can do nothing—and prayer is the highest expression of that dependence. Paul's life, like the life of Jesus, was marked by continuous prayer, triggered by continuous need. Morning and evening, whether he was working on his tents or walking the streets of the city, his prayers flowed out of a heart of concern and love. The Thessalonians were seldom out of his thoughts, and whenever he thought of them he prayed.

Then, having referred to his earnest and continuous prayers, Paul breaks into prayer (verse 11),

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (3:11-13)

The apostle prays for three precise and particular things. First, he prays that God might clear the way for him to return; that God would make straight or level the way that Satan had cut up; and that God would remove the obstacles that Satan had thrown down. That prayer was answered about five years later, toward the end of Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-3).

Secondly, he prays that their love might increase for each other and reach unbelievers as well. Love is the measure of Christian maturity. Love is the sign to the unbelieving world that God is present.

The restaurant where our Tuesday morning men's Bible study meets closed down last week. On Friday afternoon, the woman who has waited on our tables for the last couple of years telephoned me. She told me that serving us on Tuesday mornings meant more to her than her job. "I'm not going to miss my job at all," she said, "But I'm really going to miss you guys on Tuesdays. When you find a new place, is there any way a

woman can come to your study?" Becky saw our men's love for one another. As she served us, she felt the warmth and care of the men for her, and she responded. That is the power of love in ministry.

Pastors at times talk about what a successful ministry looks like. But oftentimes they measure success by the number of members of their church, the size or design of their building, or how many programs they are operating. In the New Testament, however, success is gauged by how much people learn to love one other, forgive one another, listen to one another, support and pray for one another, and reach out to those in need around them.

Finally, the apostle prays that the Lord would establish their hearts in holiness, that they might continue to live righteously until the Lord comes.

What is the basis of Paul's emotional attachment to the Thessalonians? Why all this exaggerated language? What is this loving and longing all about? "...for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord." What does that mean? Why the unbearable suspense when there was no news, and overwhelming joy when the news was good? Why these fervent prayers, this concern and anxiety that indicate Paul's entire life was bound up with theirs? These are the questions I wrestled with as I studied this passage. The answer that kept coming to mind is that Paul's language is the language of parents. This is how parents feel when they are separated from their children. They are anxious about them when there is no news, and when the news is good, they are overwhelmed with joy. So, whether consciously or unconsciously, in this letter Paul is giving an example of what it means to be a true shepherd. Pastoral love is parental love; that is its quality.

As we look back on this section from chapters 2-3, which I have said has been such a wonderful model to me of effective ministry, we see that Paul has responded to his critics by defending his ministry while he was with them, and explaining his failure to return to Thessalonica. Describing his ministry, he uses the metaphors of a steward and a parent. Like a steward he was faithful to guard and dispense the gospel; like a mother and father he was gentle in caring for his converts and diligent in educating them. From these two metaphors we discern the two major responsibilities of pastoral ministry, two indispensable qualities demanded of everyone who is engaged in ministry:

First, there is *our commitment to the word of God*. It was Paul's firm assurance that his message came from God. He did not invent it. He was a steward entrusted with it to guard it and proclaim it, and he must above all else be faithful. This is where every Christian ministry begins, with the conviction that we have been called to handle God's word. It is that word, working powerfully

in those who believe, that changes lives. Our task is to study it, expound it, apply it, and obey it.

Secondly, there is *our commitment to the people of God*. Paul expressed his deep love for the Thessalonians by likening himself to their parents. He felt and acted towards them like they were his own children, which indeed they were, since he had introduced them to Christ. So he fed them and taught them. He earned his own living so he would not be a burden to them; he was concerned to see them grow into maturity; and he was gentle and sacrificial toward them.

In these verses, Paul lays open his heart of love for the Thessalonians. He had departed from them with great reluctance. In fact, he was torn away from them against his will. He tried to visit them, but all his attempts were thwarted. As he awaited news from them, he found the suspense unbearable, and so at great personal cost he sent Timothy to encourage them and find out how they were. When Timothy came back with the good news, he could hardly contain his joy. And all the time he was separated from them he had been pouring his heart out in prayer for them. Paul's life was inextricably bound up with his Thessalonian converts.

As Christians, our commitment in ministry is to these two things—truth and love. These are the two indispensable characteristics of all true ministry. Truth and love, especially in combination, edify the church.

But this is a rare combination in the church. Some leaders are powerful in championing the truth. They can smell heresy a mile away. Their nose begins to twitch, and the smell of battle gets them going. They roll up their sleeves, flex their muscles and they are in for a fight. While their commitment to the truth is commendable, I wish there was a little more love about them.

Others fail on the opposite side. They are tremendous advocates of love, but they are timid in their defense of the truth. "Come," they say, "let us love one another. It doesn't matter what you believe. Doctrine divides. Let us drown our doctrinal differences in an ocean of brotherly love."

Truth is hard to hear at times if it isn't softened by love. But love is soft if it isn't strengthened by truth. How can we develop a balance between the two? The answer is the Holy Spirit. Jesus called him the "Spirit of truth." It is he who illumines our minds and assures our hearts. Truth, and its understanding, come from him. But, the first fruit of the Spirit is love. So wherever the Spirit is and reigns, truth and love reign with him.

My prayer for us as a body of Christians is that we will learn the balance between truth and love, and put into practice, amongst ourselves and in our dealings with others, the lessons we have learned.

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A PASSION FOR PURITY

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 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12
 Fifth Message
 Gary Vanderet
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We are going to talk about sex this morning. Sex, one of the great mysteries of life, is a subject that is of great interest to everyone. Now, despite what the popular media say, it was God who invented sex; it was not Playboy magazine. And the Bible says that sex is very, very good. Genesis 2 declares that in the beginning, God placed a man and a woman into a garden and gave them the privilege of uninhibited sexual freedom.

There are two striking statements in that chapter of the first book in the Bible. The first is this: God said that "the two shall become one flesh." The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6 that that expression, "becoming one flesh," is an idiom for sexual intercourse. Sex, therefore, is a gift of God. The second striking statement is this: "the man and the woman were naked and not ashamed." They were positively unashamed in their nakedness. The Bible makes a good case for fig leaves outside of marriage, but within marriage, what God expects is uninhibited freedom in the area of sexual relationships. It was God who created lovemaking.

But there is something very wrong with sex as it is portrayed today. Rock groups, television shows, movies, and the media in general encourage all kinds of sexual activity that offer no satisfaction. "What's love got to do with it?" asks singer Tina Turner in one popular song that, like so many others, completely disconnects sex from relationships and love. I read a statistic that I cannot confirm, but it appears accurate, that says that less than six per cent of the sexual acts portrayed on television and in the movies take place between husbands and wives. That means that ninety-four per cent of all sex that we see portrayed takes place outside of marriage, the context which God planned for lovemaking.

We come today to the fourth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, and to an abrupt change of topic. In chapters 1-3, the apostle has been looking back to the events of his visit to Thessalonica and defending himself against the accusations of his critics. In chapters 4-5 he looks to the present and future of the Thessalonian church and addresses certain practical problems which were troubling the church. He changes his style from narrative to exhortation, from an explanation of his own behavior to instructions regarding theirs.

In this passage Paul makes it crystal clear that it is God's will that Christians be holy. God's will has more to do with our morality than it does with his direction in our lives. In fact, I believe that ninety-nine per cent of

God's will is revealed in the Bible. God's will has to do with our behavior. What we don't know, about God will take care of in other ways; we don't need to worry about that. God will get us to the right place at the right time. It is much more important to be the right kind of person. God's will, therefore, centers mostly on behavior.

Here is what Paul has to say. Verse 1 of chapter 4:

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; (1 Thess 4:1-3, NASB)

The word that is translated "sanctification" is almost the same as the word "holiness," which comes later on in this passage. We often think of holiness as grimness. Holy people have a reputation for being dismal and dull. They frown at anything that is fun or pleasurable. They look like they have been soaked in embalming fluid. But that is a caricature. The Old Testament speaks about "the beauty of holiness," that inner attractiveness that is apparent when people function as they were intended. Holy is really "wholeness"—becoming people who are admirable, strong, trustworthy, loving, compassionate and, particularly in this context, pure. Wholeness includes moral purity.

Paul says that it is God's will that we avoid sexual immorality. We don't have to be in the dark and guess at what is right and wrong. We can know. A cartoon in one of the Christian leadership journals pictured a clergyman talking to his wife. The caption read, "I still believe in sin. I just don't know any longer what qualifies." That's the problem with the world as it is today. We still believe in sin, but we don't know what qualifies any more. Relativism reigns in our world today. Abraham Edel, in his book *Ethical Judgments*, puts it this way:

It all depends on where you are;
 It all depends on when you are;
 It all depends on what you feel;
 It all depends on how you feel;
 It all depends on how you're raised;
 It all depends on what is praised.
 What's right today is wrong tomorrow;
 Joy in France and England sorrow.

It all depends on point of view,
Australia or Timbuktu;
In Rome do as the Romans do;
If tastes just happen to agree;
Then you have morality.
But when you have conflicting trends;
It all depends, it all depends.

That is the relativism that is subtly taught in the schools and spread in the media. And the world wonders why we struggle with morality!

But Paul reveals in this passage what qualifies as sin. Sexual immorality is sin. If we want to be holy, if we want to put our bodies to their intended purpose, if we want to do God's will, then we need to take the apostle's words seriously—and he says we should avoid sexual immorality.

But what is sexual immorality? The term that Paul uses is the word from which we get the word "fornication." It is the Greek word, *porneia*, which originally meant "to buy or sell." Over time it came to refer to the cheap kind of sex that one buys or sells. In the New Testament, it refers to any sex outside of marriage: sexual intercourse between two unmarried people, between a married and a single person (also called adultery in the Bible), and homosexuality. Today, the world views homosexuality as the moral equivalent of being left handed. It says that homosexuals were created a little different. We don't have time to deal with that topic, but the Bible is very clear about homosexuality. The Old Testament says a man should not lie with a man like he does with a woman. In the Book of Romans, Paul says that homosexuality is a distortion of nature; it is a perversion. While it is not the worst sin in the world, the apostle's point there is that it is one of the most undignified things one can do with one's body.

Now it is God's will for us to "abstain" from these things. The word means, "to stand off from." Some things are so toxic you should not even want to sniff the bottle. But why does God limit sex to marriage when we feel such powerful urges within us? Why must it be disciplined, curtailed and reserved only for marriage? Paul goes on to give some answers to these questions.

The text suggests at least three reasons. First, *sexual immorality defiles the body*. Verse 4:

that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (4:4-5)

Paul exhorts us to learn to control our own bodies. But that's not easy, is it? Our bodies have certain hormones that have a profound effect on how we behave. At puberty, new hormones pour into our bloodstream. These, together with other sexual changes, create powerful drives within us. Now these "urges to merge," as someone has described them, are God-given, but they need to be controlled. The world, however, says that sexual appetites should be treated just like other appe-

tites, such as hunger and thirst, and fulfilled whenever the opportunity affords.

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul elaborates on this word about controlling our bodies. He begins by quoting a saying of the Corinthians (verse 12):

"Everything is permissible for me"—but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"—but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor 6:12, NIV)

In other words, everything is lawful for us, but something used out of context can become our master. Verse 13:

"Food is for the stomach, and the stomach for food"—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Cor 6:13, NIV)

The Corinthians were saying that sexual urges are very much like a desire for food. Today, the commercial says that if you get a "Mac attack," eat a hamburger. The Corinthians said, and our world today agrees, if you have a sexual attack, satisfy it. But Paul says no. That is what magicians call a categorical error. It's like comparing apples and oranges. It is true that the stomach was made for food, but it is not true that the body was made for sexual intercourse outside of marriage. The body is made for the Lord.

That was a shock to the Greeks and Romans of Paul's day. They regarded the body as immaterial. They trivialized it. The only thing that mattered, they said, was ideas. They treated the body in one of two ways. They either became stoics, and disciplined their bodies severely, ruthlessly controlling all their desires; or they became Epicureans, and satisfied all their desires. To them, it didn't matter whether one was a monk or a drunk; the body was unimportant. Not so, says Paul. God loves your body. It may be lumpy, you may still have a chest (although the middle drawer is sticking out), but God still loves it, and he wants to fill it and flood it and put it to its intended use.

Before we go back to the letter to the Thessalonians, let's read the rest of this passage from Corinthians. Verse 14:

By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. You see God has an eternal purpose for our bodies. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is

in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Cor 6:14-20, NIV)

This is the same argument as that of 1 Thessalonians 4. God wants your body for himself alone; but sex outside of marriage prostitutes our bodies.

Returning to 1 Thessalonians now, Paul's second point is that *sexual immorality defrauds others*. Verse 6:

and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. (4:6)

We often hear it argued that an act of sexual immorality between two consenting adults doesn't hurt anyone, so why get uptight about it? But the apostle says that sex outside of marriage always hurts someone. Someone is defiled, someone is injured. Paul will go to say that there is a uniting that takes place in the sex act, and breaking that relationship always involves a tearing. Adultery always destroys. It breaks up marriages and leaves scars.

When that happens, of course, children suffer most. They are the victims of sexual immorality. This was graphically illustrated in an account that I read of a conversation of a sixth grade teacher with her class in a school in an upper middle class neighborhood in California. She gave the students a creative writing assignment, asking them to complete a sentence that began with the words, "I wish..." She expected them to ask for material things, like pets, bicycles, or vacations, but twenty of her thirty students made references to their disintegrating families. I will read a few of them: "I wish my parents wouldn't fight." "I wish my father would come back." "I wish my mother didn't have a boyfriend." "I wish I could get straight A's so my father would love me." "I wish I had one mom and one dad so that kids wouldn't make fun of me. I have three moms and dads and they botch up my life." I do not share this to make anyone feel guilty, but merely to emphasize the apostle's point that sexual immorality defrauds others.

Homosexuality degrades and defiles our humanity. They may deny it, but the gay community is anything but gay! Addiction to pornography is not without its scars, either. It separates the sex act from a relationship. You can't have a relationship with a *Playboy* magazine. Photographs are nothing but dots on a page; no commitment and no responsibility are involved. One of the worst things about pornography is that it causes men to regard women as objects to be used and abused.

The third thing that Paul says is that *sexual immorality will destroy us in the end*. We defile our bodies, defraud our brothers and sisters, and destroy ourselves. Notice how he puts it, in verse 6:

and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

Sexual immorality exacts a heavy price. Sin always destroys! The New Testament indicates the judgment of God is revealed in his simply letting people have their way. He takes his restraining hand off them and they suffer the due consequences of their error in their own bodies.

For corroboration of this, read Paul's words in the first chapter of Romans. Referring to certain people who no longer were thankful (although they knew about God they chose not to believe in him), Paul says, in verses 24-28:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. (Rom 1:24-28, NIV)

That is what Paul calls the "wrath of God": God simply takes his hands off us and lets us have our own way. At once our lives begin to deteriorate. Our bodies disintegrate; our souls come apart. We lose our sense of humanity and become degraded. We find that sex no longer is our servant, but our master. Sophocles, who lived a little before Paul, said this of his own life: "My sexual passions are an angry and insane master."

I am sure there are some people here this morning who no longer participate in sex acts because they want to, but because they have to. If that is true of you, know that, in God's design, his judgment is always redemptive. His purpose is to bring us back to him. He is Immanuel, "God with us." Whether God is with us in our walk with him, or whether he is with us in his judgment, he is still with us. He will not leave us alone. The flip side of the truth that God will not leave us or forsake us is that he will not leave us alone, either. He will harass us with his love until we are willing to listen to him, take him seriously, repent of our sin and return to him. And when we repent, there is immediate forgiveness and restoration. He is waiting, just as he waited in Revelation, for the church to repent. He was knocking at the door, waiting for sounds of life in that church, waiting for someone to open the door and let him in. God's judgment is always redemptive.

It is quite apparent that we need help in this area. How do we control our sexual urges? Some would say, "Just say no!" But unfortunately, that does not work. It

doesn't work in the fight against drugs, and it doesn't work in handling our sexual drives. People who have trouble with substance abuse know that they cannot simply say no. They are in the hands of an insane master. So what can we do?

There is something about us that cannot be contained or even explained, some deep urge within us to be more than we are, something that keeps us from being satisfied with material things. That is why we can go from one thing to another and never find the possession that fills us up. We are forced to admit that the most important thing in life is not things. There has to be something else to fill us.

That something is this: We were made for God and we find satisfaction only in him. That is the truth about us as human beings.

Spirituality and sexuality are inextricably linked. These deep urges we have to merge are really urges to merge with God. These deep longings, unsatisfied desires and monumental passions that we have within us are passions for God. Lovemaking is merely a small representation of that greater urge.

That is why we will never be satisfied, even within marriage. Our sexual struggles and appetites don't end after we get married, because the urge is too great. It is an urge for God, a hunger for him, a heart crying out to his call. He is saying to us, "Seek my face, seek my face." As David puts it, "When your heart says to me, Seek my face, I will seek your face." That is God's deep calling to our deep. These subterranean urges that we have for something more are really an urge to merge with God. And that is why these figures about Christ "in" us and we "in" Christ are the answer to our longings.

So if we really want to tackle our sex drive, we must work on our relationship with God. We must study his word. Through it we come to the Living Word who loves us, and learn to respond back to his love with love, worship and devotion. All of our hungers are really God saying to us, "Come a little closer. I want to love you. I want to satisfy you." This does not mean that we won't struggle with sexual urges anymore. It would be nice if we could cross the goal line, spike the ball, and be done with it, but it doesn't work that way. And here is another thing: age doesn't take the struggle away. We find rest and satisfaction only when our deepest longings are being met by God.

Paul concludes with a word about "excelling still more" (verse 7):

For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you. Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write

to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, (4:7-10)

I was struck by that phrase, "excel still more" (it is repeated in verse 1). In other words, it is a matter of progress. It is not that we will suddenly be able to master every illicit thought and every sexual urge. But there can be progress if we put our roots down into God.

I have always wondered why David took five stones into battle against Goliath. Faith would lead us to believe that he needed only one. While some people say he gathered five stones because Goliath had four brothers, I am inclined to believe he thought that Goliath might not go down with the first stone.

Sometimes when we go out to defeat Goliath, we miss and he wins. But God gives us grace to get up, dust ourselves off and continue on. By faith we can know that he is working inside of us. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that is through faith *and patience* that we inherit the promises.

Some of you are probably thinking that it's too late for you. You are thinking, "I have already trashed my life. I have so much guilt and remorse over the past that there is no hope for me." If that is how you feel, let me remind you of that dear woman in John 8. The religious leaders caught her in bed with the wrong man, and they brought her before Jesus. As you think about your situation, put yourself in her place. You are standing there, before the Lord of lords, unkempt and ashamed. Everything looks ugly and hopeless. But as you look into his eyes, he appears to be on your side. You hear him say to you, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." His words anticipate the cross. As you look at him, all your guilt melts away.

The cross speaks of the sinner's unconditional acceptance. Jesus paid the price for sin so that justice could be satisfied and judgment averted. And, like that woman, we can be saved not only from sin's guilt, but from its power. Her chains fell off, and she was free. We can hear Jesus say, "Everything is going to be all right." We can begin again, "not defiled in ruin," but, as Paul would say, "purified virgins."

God's mercies are new every morning. Every day marks a new beginning. His lovingkindness endures forever. His faithfulness is great. It is that grace that enables us to forget the past and take the first step as though the past never happened. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. It is all paid for. If we repent and accept his forgiveness, every day can mark a new beginning for us, just as it did for that woman who was dragged before him on that day, only to walk away later, forgiven and cleansed, unto newness of life.

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THAT GREAT GETTIN' UP MORNING

Catalog No. 1012
 1 Thess 4:13-18
 Sixth Message
 Gary Vanderet
 October 1st, 1995

Benjamin Franklin said that there are two certainties in life, death and taxes. While it may be possible to dodge the IRS, no one evades the Grim Reaper. No one gets out of this life alive. George Bernard Shaw noted, "the statistics on death are very impressive: one out of every one people dies."

We have but two choices in this matter of death: face it or try to forget it. Some who think about death do so only superficially. A certain young woman once told the wife of C. S. Lewis that she did not worry about death, because by the time she got old, she said, science would have done something about it. But that, of course, is merely an effort to evade reality. Science has not and will not do anything about death. Death is a certainty that we have to face up to.

Pascal once compared the human race to a group of people in a room who have been condemned to death. Every day one person is executed in the presence of the others, reminding everyone that their time would come. That is the terror we face when tragedy brings death close to us. One of these days, our own time will come. Yet, we are so preoccupied with our health that we act as if we aren't going to die. But we are. We can jog and avoid cholesterol and do all the things that count for good health, but the only result is that we will end up healthy looking corpses!

A related problem is the death of our loved ones. My father died when I was 11 months old. My mother died shortly before Kathy became pregnant with our first child, around 17 years ago. We have experienced a number of deaths in this body in recent years. Some of you have lost your spouses, some of you your children. You have found yourselves asking, "What has happened to them? Are they all right? Will we see them again?"

This is the issue that Paul deals with in the passage which we will look at from 1 Thessalonians this morning. The Thessalonians had a theological question for Paul, too. Evidently he had taught them that the Lord Jesus was going to reappear and take his people home to himself. They seemed to think that event was so imminent that some of them had given up their jobs (this is why Paul wrote what he did in verses 11-12 of chapter 4), while others were totally unprepared for the experience of mourning and bereavement. Relatives or friends of theirs had died before Jesus came back. They had not anticipated this; it took them by surprise and greatly disturbed them. Their questions were along

these lines: How would the Christian dead fare when Jesus came for his own? Would they be at a disadvantage? Would they miss the blessing of the second coming? Was it possible they were lost?

These are the concerns that Paul addresses in this passage, beginning with verse 13 of chapter 4,

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:13-18, NASB)

The text opens with this striking statement: "that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope." Christians do not grieve like those "who have no hope." Christians are not stoics. We don't believe we can suppress all our longings and heartaches. Our Lord wept when he took on our humanity. He was a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," as Isaiah put it. He wept unashamedly at the tomb of Lazarus. If the perfect Man could not walk through this life without being deeply touched by our infirmities, how can we expect to go through life without being hurt? We will grieve. George MacDonald said that sometimes "tears are the only cure for weeping." It's all right to cry. It's all right to have our hearts broken. It's not non-Christian. Larry Crabb said, "An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity, but of realism." We were created to live in a better world than this, and until that better world comes along we will groan for what we do not have.

What Paul forbids is not grief, but hopeless grief, not all mourning, but mourning like the rest of men "who have no hope." Faith is always the cure for a troubled heart. When we get anxious and troubled, Jesus' response is, "Believe in me." But he did not leave it there. We have to have something to believe in, something to

count on. So what follows are the things we should believe to keep our hearts from being troubled. Paul says there are a number of unassailable facts that are just as certain as our death, and it is those that give us hope. Verse 14,

For if [that could be translated "since." It is not really a contingency as we know it] we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (4:14)

The first fact is that Jesus died and rose again. The evidence for his resurrection is as good as for any event in history that no one questions. Because the historical data is so good, no one questions today the fact that Jesus lived. And no one questions the fact that he died, or how he died. The other night, my son Stephen was doing his history homework, and on the page was a timeline, with a cross marking Jesus' crucifixion. Nobody questions that fact. But people do question the resurrection. And it is not because the evidence is bad. They dismiss the resurrection simply because they have an anti-supernatural bias. It is a philosophical or a moral problem for them. It has nothing to do with history. The evidence for Jesus' death and resurrection is extremely good.

Paul wrote this letter around AD 50. Jesus died sometime around AD 30. Twenty years after it was reported that Jesus rose from the dead, Paul is saying that the resurrection happened. If the opponents of the gospel wanted to put an end to the notion that Jesus rose from the dead, they could have done it immediately. They could have produced the body. They could have produced people who had seen him placed in the grave and kept there. They could have stopped this rumor. As a matter of fact, they tried to, but they couldn't. The facts were unassailable. Jesus rose from the dead.

Elvis Presley died about twenty years ago, yet there are rumors circulating all the time that he is alive. Producing his body, however, would soon put a stop to that.

Paul said he knew more than five hundred people who saw Jesus walking around. They spoke to him. Their stories could be checked out. The evidence was unimpeachable.

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the Christian faith. According to Paul, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then "our preaching is useless and our faith is in vain, and we are to be pitied above all men." We might as well give up our Christian faith. Let's just shut down the church buildings and make museums of them. Let's give our pastors pink slips and get on with the business of making money and going for all the gusto, because this is all there is. But Paul says in a number of places that Jesus did rise from the dead. The point he is making is that there is a connection between Jesus' death and resurrection and ours. If God did not abandon Jesus to death, he will not abandon the Christian dead either. He will raise them as he raised him.

The second fact (it is in that same verse that Paul alludes to) is that since Jesus did rise from the dead, believers who have died have fallen asleep: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus."

Paul refers to death in this passage as "sleeping." In fact, in three successive verses he refers to people who have died as having "fallen asleep." This is not a new idea. Sleep as a euphemism for death is embedded in the Old Testament from the beginning. The authors write about the patriarchs "lying down with their fathers." Daniel, referring to those who sleep in the ground, said they will rise. One of the most helpful stories in the Scriptures is the incident in which Jairus implored Jesus to save his daughter's life. By the time the Lord got to the little girl's house she was dead. Luke, who was a physician, writes that her "spirit had left her." She was dead. When Jesus walked into the room, the professional wailers were gathered around the bed, carrying on. Jesus said, "She's just asleep." But they laughed at him. He made them all leave the room, and then he said to the girl, "*Talitha kum!*" which is Aramaic for, "Little girl, get up," And she got up! Luke says her spirit came back into her and she got up.

This is a little picture of what the Lord is going to do in a big way when he comes back. He is going to say, "Get up! Get up!" and everyone in Christ is going to get up. Jesus will come back with a loud command. That's the word Paul uses here. It is a military term for "to call to attention." The angel is going to play "Reveille," and everyone is going to get up. Death for those in Christ is just like falling sleep. One of these days our Lord is going to come back and say, "It's time to get up," and those who are dead in Christ will get up.

The word that is used here for sleep is the word from which we get our term for cemetery. It is the word "koi-meo," which means "to lie down." A cemetery is a "koi-meterion," a place where people lie down. The word for resurrection is "anastasis." "Stasis" means "stand," and "ana" is "up." Stand up!

This text raises a number of questions about what happens to the body when we die, since the New Testament makes it clear that when that happens, the first person we will see is the Lord Jesus. What happens to the body? What happens to the soul? Is the soul immediately in God's presence? Since Paul says nobody wants to be a disembodied spirit, and we can't imagine ourselves walking around heaven in a kind of presence without a body, what is going to happen? People have all kinds of theories as to how this is worked out. Does the soul sleep for a period and then wake up? Perhaps the soul goes to be with the Lord. But is there is an intermediate body, a spare body that you wear until you get your other body, like the temporary spare tire that comes with your car? I confess I don't know how the Lord is going to accomplish all of this. When Paul talks about sleep, he is referring to the body sleeping. It is the body that rests; the spirit goes immediately into the

Lord's presence. How he is going to work this out I leave with him.

Lambert Dolphin, who for many years was a physicist with Stanford Research Institute, is a brilliant man. (Usually I don't understand half of what he says!) I have heard him talk about the relativity and elasticity of time. He says that most people think of eternity as an endless sequence of time, but that isn't so. Physicists know that time is simply matter in motion. And since there is no matter in a spiritual state, there can be no time; there is a total absence of time; everything is "now." Therefore, when you die, for you the second coming occurs at that moment. Adam and Eve will be just getting there. And Paul, too. Everyone is united at once, because everything is happening "now."

Now I don't pretend to understand all of this. All I can say is that God lives outside of time, and I trust him. He will take care of the details. Whether the soul sleeps or there is an intermediate body, I'll leave that up to him. What I do know is that one of these days, all of us who love the Lord Jesus are going to be joined together in him.

The third fact is that when Jesus comes back, he is going to bring his loved ones with him. Chapter 4, verse 15,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. (4:15-17)

As we said earlier, one of the questions which the Thessalonians raised had to do with those who had already died and gone to be with the Lord. They were concerned about what had happened to them. Paul assures them they had never been separated from Christ. It was not a possibility. They sleep in him, they will rise with him, and they will come with him as well. Christ and his people belong to each other, inseparably, indissolubly. This would be new, encouraging information to these believers. Such confidence had they in the imminent return of Christ, they thought he might come back in their lifetime. And Paul included himself in that group. Paul has died, of course, and many generations have passed, but the fact of the Lord's coming is no less certain. There may well be some of us alive when the Lord comes back. No matter, we can be assured that neither the Christian dead nor the Christian living will be excluded or disadvantaged in any way.

Paul says that those who have preceded us in death,

those who have gone on to be with the Lord, will come back with Jesus, and they will be given their resurrected bodies. "Then those who are alive shall be caught up" [the word actually means "to snatch."] We will be snatched up to meet them in the air.

And then finally, the fourth fact is that we will all be together forever. We will be with the Lord and our loved ones. Family reunions here on earth are often disappointing affairs. That is because of the presence of sin—but there will be no sin in heaven. How tremendously encouraging, that we will be spend eternity with our believing spouses who have died, and our children who have perished, our grandparents and parents who prayed for us. We will be with them forever. All of our aspirations for loving relationships here on earth will be fulfilled in heaven. That is why Jesus said that going to heaven is like going to our father's house. Oftentimes here on earth, going home is not quite what we would like it to be. But one day we will finally go home in a state of sinlessness, and there will be a perfect reunion. We will be our Lord and the people we love forever.

One of these days, we are going to be in the Father's house. That is the Christian's certain destiny. We are going to be together forever. We will see, in their redeemed bodies, our loved ones who have gone on before us. One day we are going to step into eternity, like Enoch did, and pass from this life to the next. Death, the thing that we dread so much, will be a mere transition. And the Lord will be there to greet us and gather us into the Father's house, where there is warmth and security and nothing to fear.

C. S. Lewis, in his final children's book, *The Last Battle*, describes it this way:

"There was a railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the shadowlands—dead. The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia have only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter one of the Great story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

That is why Paul concludes this passage with these words, in verse 18:

"Therefore comfort one another with these words."

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BACK TO THE FUTURE

Catalog No. 1013

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Seventh Message

Gary Vanderet

October 8th, 1995

There is a strong predictive element in both of the apostle Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Many people find prophecy intriguing, but it is easy to become preoccupied with the future, either out of mere curiosity, or perhaps even dread. Wars and rumors of wars persist. We are living in very uncertain times.

The current preoccupation with end-time scenarios and timetables that go beyond what the Bible reveals is a cause for concern. Such is not the emphasis of Scripture. I enjoy "theologizing" as much as anyone, but it is important to distinguish between what we know for certain and what is rank speculation. We need to remember that in both the Old and New Testaments, the predictive element was given, first, to authenticate the fact that the writer was speaking for God; but, second, the specifics were often quite vague.

Some people find that unsettling. They want to know precisely how everything is going to turn out so they can draw it up on a chart. But the Bible does not allow for that. We have Jesus' word for corroboration. Following his resurrection, the disciples asked him, "Is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" His reply, both to them and to us, was, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons the Father has set by his own authority." Their responsibility, he told them, was to evangelize the nations, beginning with Israel.

Jesus went further. He himself did not know the answer to their question, he said; only the Father knew that. Laying aside his omniscience, the Son of Man said he did not know the day of his coming. So much for our present-day predictors! Here is what Jesus actually said to the disciples, "The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." That was the dilemma of the OT prophets; they did not know about the first coming of Christ. Peter makes that quite clear in these words from the first chapter of his letter: "The prophets ...sought intently and with the greatest care [they didn't even understand their own writings] trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pet 1:10-11, NIV).

Now what the prophets did not understand about the first coming of Jesus, we do not understand about his second coming. I think it is a sad thing when we Christians allow issues that are unclear to cause divisions among us. Some believe Jesus will come to rapture the

church seven years before his second coming. Others believe he will come in the middle of what is called the tribulation period (the seven years which precede the second coming). Yet others say that the rapture of the church and the second coming are the same event.

I believe we should think through these issues and come to our own conclusions, based on our understanding of the texts, but they should never, ever divide us as Christians. What Scripture emphasizes is the kind of character we ought to have as result of our knowledge that the Lord is coming back. That is Peter's conclusion. He says as much at the end of his second letter: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, *what kind of people ought you to be?*" That is the emphasis of the apostle.

Ruth Bell's Graham's poem is apt in this regard:

*Why argue and fight and worry how the world ends?
Pray for the best, prepare for the worst, and take whatever
God sends.*

Our walk with the Lord should mirror somewhat Israel's life in the wilderness. Every morning when they got up, the first thing they did was look at the cloud. If it had lifted, they would start packing up their belongings and prepare to move. When the cloud moved, they would follow it through the day. They had no idea where they were going to be that night. But when they had followed the cloud through the wilderness, at the end of their day they could know that they had followed the course. They had arrived at where God wanted them.

Many Christians don't like to live with that kind of uncertainty. We prefer our human uncertainty to what appears to be divine uncertainty. We prefer to rely on ourselves and our own planning and scheming rather than keep our eyes on the Lord. We want a plan to follow rather than a person to trust. Yet Scripture instructs us to keep following the Lord, to keep our eyes on him. We must not look away from him and drift to other things. If we keep looking at him, he will get us where he wants us to be. And one of these days he will come back. We can know that for certain. When that will be and how it will take place, we do not know. We have to live with that uncertainty.

Now, because Jesus is coming, Christians have cer-

tain responsibilities, and it is these that Paul addresses in this passage from 1 Thessalonians, beginning at 5:1:

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. (1 Thess 5:1, NASB)

The idiom, “times and epochs,” is used in a number of places in Scripture. “Times” refers to a date on the calendar; “epochs” to the circumstances surrounding that date. Thanksgiving falls on November 23rd this year. That is the date on the calendar. For each of us, a number of circumstances surround that event: the gathering of the family, the turkey, the dressing, cutting down the Christmas tree, shopping, etc. The events that surround the date are the seasons.

The point which the apostle is making to the Thessalonians is this: if you are thinking of marking a date on the calendar, you can’t do that. He explains why, in verse 2:

For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; (5:2-4)

The Thessalonians were asking Paul about times and epochs, just as the apostles had asked Jesus earlier. They wanted to make preparations for the day of judgment. But Paul, like Jesus, declares that the solution to their problem does not lie in knowing the date. Nobody knew or could know it.

Evidently, during his visit to Thessalonica, Paul had taught them about the “day of the Lord.” No doubt he had explained from the Old Testament that it would be a day of judgment. The term, “the day,” or “the day of the Lord,” occurs in a number of places in the OT. The prophets referred to it as the time when the Lord would have his day. Man is having his day right now. He is allowed to do as pretty much as he pleases—hurt other people, destroy their own lives, etc. But the story is not an idiot’s tale. One of these days, God is going to have his day. His day will come! He will appear, the heavens will disappear, the earth and everything in it will be burned up, and God will set about making a new heaven and new earth. That is how the prophets looked at it. And when his day comes, it will be a day when he is manifest as God in all of his glory—“God undisguised,” as C. S. Lewis put it.

The people in Amos’ day were saying the things that we say at times today, things like “Why doesn’t God do something about the mess in our world?” “Why doesn’t God do something about child pornographers, child molesters and wife batterers?” “Why doesn’t he do something?” But Amos responded to the people of his day, “I don’t think you want that to happen, because when God comes, he will not only deal with those forms of sin, he will judge sin right across the board.

You who are asking God to come back and set things right are not finding your security in God. You are going to experience judgment as well.” Here are the exact words of the prophet, “It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, [and after he escaped from that] as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.”

God is waiting. The world, like a time bomb, is ticking its way toward oblivion. God is delaying, not because he is indifferent or impotent, but because he does not want anyone to perish. His timetable is determined by his love for the world, not by its rotation or the number of times it circles the sun. He is waiting, waiting, waiting for us to announce the gospel to others so that they can brought in. That is what Peter says.

So that is the great and terrible day of the Lord, as Amos describes it. And it is going to happen. There is no doubt about.

C. S. Lewis describes it this way:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what is the good of saying you are on his side then, when you see the whole universe melting down like a dream. And something else, something that never entered your head to conceive comes crashing in - something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. For this time it will be God without disguise. Something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use then saying that you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we have already chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now today, this moment is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever.

The apostle uses two metaphors to illustrate how the Lord will come. First, he says, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” It will be unexpected. Burglars do not give advance notice of their plan to rob a house. It is the same with the “day of the Lord.” Second, it will come like labor pains: “While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety’ [they imagine they are entirely secure], destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.” Christ’s coming will be sudden and unexpected (like a thief in the night), and sudden and unavoidable (like labor at the end of pregnancy). In the first case there will be no warning, in the second, no escape.

Jesus said that it would much like the days of Noah. Then, people were eating, drinking and getting married. There is nothing wrong with these activities, except that these people were partying their way through life, thinking about what life could provide but not about what it meant, where they came from or where they were headed. They were not thinking seriously

about spiritual things. Suddenly the flood came and took them all away. Jesus said that is the way it will be when he comes back. People will be taken by surprise.

But Paul says, “you are not in darkness.” Jesus will come like a thief to those who are unprepared. The way to catch a thief is stay up, be alert and keep all the lights on. That is Paul’s argument. Believers are not groping around in darkness. We are in the know. We know Jesus is coming back. The rest of the word is saying God will never intervene, that he has no interest in this world, but we know better.

And why do we know better? Verse 5;

for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; (5:5)

This idioms “sons of light” and “sons of day” are used throughout the NT of people who are characterized by a certain thing. They have the inherent characteristics of the thing from whence they sprang. They come from the light, so they have light. They are sons of God, so they are like God. Paul characterizes believers as those who do not belong to the darkness. So, let’s not be like those who are in the dark, unaware that our Lord is coming back.

How then should we live? Here is what Paul says, in verse 6:

so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. (5:6-7)

Christians are not to party their way through life, living trivial existences. We certainly are fun loving, and we have every reason to enjoy life, but at the same time we need to be serious about it. We need to be thinking about where we came from, what we are here for, and where we are going. Our purpose in life is not merely make money, acquire possessions or retire and live in affluence and idleness. We are here to “seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” Paul is saying that if we remember that everything we have is going to burn up one day—our real estate, cars, boats, computers, all the things that we spend our time and money amassing—we will have a different perspective. Now it’s not wrong to have any of these things, but if we are preoccupied with them, then we really don’t understand the meaning of life. We are investing ourselves in treasure that is going to burn up.

Last week, a wildfire destroyed dozens of homes in Marin County. The television news interviewed a man whose home was burned to rubble. He was sobbing uncontrollably, and all he could say was, “It’s all gone. Everything I had is gone.” While we certainly grieve with those whose lives have been disrupted, how sad it is to have invested everything in possessions that may be stolen or burned up—and which will certainly be burned up one day when the Lord returns.

People who live in the day have a different set of val-

ues. They are characterized by faith, love and hope. Notice how Paul puts it, in verse 8:

But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. (5:8)

As the apostle said at the beginning of this book, every Christian is a believer, a lover and a hoper. It’s very simple. We are to believe God, and love people, with a sure hope that one day we will inherit completely what has been promised.

Verse 9:

For God has not destined us for wrath, [He is talking about the future wrath of God that falls upon those who are not safe in Christ] but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake [i.e. living] or asleep [i.e. dead], we may live together with Him. (5:9-10)

This goes back to the passage in chapter 4 that we looked at last week. There, Paul referred to certain Christians who had died as being asleep, and to others who were awake, i.e. that they might be alive when the Lord came back, Some of you may actually be alive when Jesus returns. In view of the fact that he is coming back, how should we live? We should keep clinging on to God, trusting him, believing him, relying on him, and keep loving people. Knowing that the Lord is coming back gives us a whole new set of values.

A number of years ago, Tony Campolo wrote a book called *Who Switched The Price Tags?* He shared a story about pranksters who broke into a clothing store in the middle of the night and switched all the price tags. Next morning customers found shirts that normally sold for \$29.95 had \$150 price tags, while suits that sold for \$300 had \$99 price tags. A number of hours went by before someone realized what had happened. Some people were getting great buys while others were being ripped off, because they had no idea of the proper value of the items they were buying.

That is our problem today: We live in a world where the price tags have all been changed. That is what Paul is saying in this passage. If we realize that everything that we are investing our lives in on this earth is temporal and transient, that one of these days it is all going to burn up, that will change the way we look at everything. It will change the way we spend our time. It will change the energy we put into certain activities. We will realize that most of what we are doing is not going to last. It’s all passing and transient.

There is a story told about a stockbroker who found a bottle with a genie inside. When the genie gave him one request, the astute stockbroker asked for a copy of a newspaper one year hence. He opened to the stock market reports, rubbing his hands as he contemplated the fortune he was going to make. When he looked at the adjoining page, however, he saw a photograph of himself. He glanced at the headline and saw that he had

opened to the obituaries. That tends to put things in perspective, doesn't it? That is what the Lord is teaching us in this passage.

Supposing you got a letter from Nordstrom inviting you to a free shopping spree for one day. For twelve hours you dashed back and forth, piling things into your car—shoes, clothes, perfume, everything you wanted. But at the end of the day, you had a cardiac arrest and died. You had worked too hard. This happens all the time. It is not quite as obvious or dramatic, of course, but it happens nonetheless. People go on a shopping spree over their whole lives, amassing a fortune, and then they drop dead.

Once we understand the nature of matters, our way of evaluating things changes. We start seeing people as the most important commodity on the face of the earth. What are we investing in? In eternal commodities or things that will be destroyed? Some of you are considering a change of job. You are looking at a position that offers upward mobility and more money. But taking it will mean uprooting and disrupting your family. If money is the primary reason you are considering that move, is it worth it? Money will not make you happy. You will not be one bit happier with that pay raise.

Maybe God does want you to uproot and move, but if the move is determined simply because you are going to make more money, then I would urge you to think twice.

That is the new perspective that is given to us here. We begin to realize that this life isn't all there is. Our Lord is coming back! And he is going to set everything right. All of our aches and pains, all our hungers and longings, all our legitimate desires will be fulfilled. We will have bodies that are equal to the demands of the Spirit. We will be with our loved ones who have gone on before. We will spend eternity with the Lord who died for us. That changes everything.

And that is why Paul closes with the same words as he did in the last section:

Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (5:11)

First century Christians saluted one another with the greeting, "Maranatha!" (the Lord is coming). I know that for many of you, life is hard. But I want to encourage you with the same word that our brothers and sisters used two thousand years ago: Maranatha! Do not lose heart. The Lord is coming back. Count on it.

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LIFE IN THE FAMILY

Catalog No. 1014

1 Thess 5:12-28

Eighth Message

Gary Vanderet

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Soren Kierkegaard once told a tale of a make-believe country where the only inhabitants were ducks. One Sunday morning, all the ducks went to church. They waddled down the aisle, got into their pews, and squatted. The duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck Bible and read, "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" All the ducks yelled "Amen!", and they waddled home.

This story is a good reminder to me of why we study the Bible. Most of us are Biblically educated beyond our character. That is because we sometimes confuse the means with the end. The reason we study the Bible is not to become educated, however. Learning is not the goal. The purpose is not information, but transformation. The truth is supposed to make us more like Christ.

Non-Christians sometimes have a better grasp of this concept. They don't know much about theology, and they are unable to pinpoint what they think is wrong with it, but they are disappointed when Christians lie, fail to pay their bills, cheat on their taxes, don't keep their word, freeload shamelessly, and desert their mates. They recognize there is something wrong with that kind of Christianity. They know, sometimes better than Christians, that believers bear the image of Christ, so we ought to act as Christ acted.

That is why in almost every book in the Old and New Testaments alike there is a practical word pointing out how to make the truth part of our lives. The apostle Paul invariably utilizes the theology he develops in the earlier parts of his letters to demonstrate how it works out in life. Every one of his letters ends with pointed, practical applications of the truth.

That is certainly the case with the book of 1 Thessalonians. From 4:1 to 5:11, Paul deals with some of the practical concerns of the Thessalonian believers. In our final study this morning, verses 12-28 of chapter 5, the apostle helps the Thessalonians understand how the gospel affects every aspect of their lives. He begins with a word on Christian leadership. Verse 12:

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate [or know] 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. (1 Thess 5:12-13, NASB)

The phrase, "have charge over you," from the NASB

version, literally is, "to stand in front of you." Thus it would be better rendered, "those who are in front," or "those who are up front." "Those who have charge over you," could give a false impression. Christian leadership has nothing to do with being "over" people, lording over them and telling them what to do. On the contrary, leadership in the church is a position of service. It is about loving and serving others and modeling truth.

Jesus made that quite clear to his disciples when James and John persuaded their mother to ask him if they could sit at his right and left hand in the coming kingdom. This request so angered the other disciples that Jesus was forced to remind them that in his kingdom, if they wanted to be first, they had to learn to be last. Leaders had to be slaves of all, he said, because "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

So Jesus is our model for leadership. He did not go around bossing people and demanding they do what he said. His was a leadership of servanthood. He told the disciples that in the world, people think about leadership in terms of how many subordinates they have under them, but it was not to be so among them. They must think in terms of being under those they served. In fact, autocratic, self-centered leadership is condemned in the NT in the person of Diotrephes, of whom John said, "he loved to be first."

Paul uses a wonderful figure in 1 Corinthians 4 to describe how one should think of a pastor: "Let a man regard us as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." The word for servants there is not Paul's usual term. Literally, the word means under-rowers, i.e. the slaves who pulled the sweeps in the ancient seagoing vessels. Slave labor was the power that kept the galleys going. In Paul's metaphor, leaders who make the galleys go, so to speak, are merely under-rowers. They are part of the crew, seated below the decks in the lower seats, pulling on their oars just like everyone else. Christian leaders do not set either the course or the cadence. That is the Captain's job. It his task to determine the heading and call the stroke.

What a far cry from the usual picture of the pastor sitting on the poop deck, resplendent in full regalia, telescope in one hand and tiller in the other. He imagines he is the only one who knows where the church is going; everyone else is down below, sweating over the oars. But pastors do not call the shots and control the ship. That is the Lord's task. The direction a church

goes, the speed with which it develops, and the size to which it grows are his prerogatives. Our job is to fix our eyes on Christ, and row. According to Paul, that is the way leaders should regard themselves, as under-rowers.

Paul further instructs how believers should relate to their leaders. First, he says, get to know them. That word appreciate in verse 12 is really the verb “to know.” Get to know them. They are ordinary people, having the same flaws and problems as others. They have difficulties at times in their marriages; they struggle with their children; they get worried and anxious at times.

Secondly, the apostle says, we should “esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” I weary of the media’s dishonest portrayal of clergymen as wimps, bores and maniacs. They certainly don’t esteem those in ministry very highly. While it is true that at times leaders are reaping what they have sown, Paul says we should value them because of their work, which is to give instruction about how to live life.

In that same passage from 1 Corinthians 4, Paul used a second metaphor, that of a steward. The apostle was referring to a butler, whose job it was to rummage around the pantry and bring out bread and wine for family meals. A pastor’s job is to go into the pantry of God himself and bring out the goodies of his word on which others can feed. That is the pastor’s work—imparting truth. Ministers are to some extent like John the Baptist: they are voices in the wilderness. While a multitude of voices may claim to have what the world needs, the work of Christian leaders is to impart the truth of the word of God, instructing the flock on how to live lives that are pleasing to God.

That is hard work. The word that Paul uses to describe it referred to manual occupations. “Labor” means, “to toil, strive or struggle.” The picture is one of rippling muscles and dripping sweat. Someone has said that pastors are “six days are invisible and one day incomprehensible,” but that’s not true. The work of a pastor is hard. It takes a toll on his body and on his family life. We need to esteem them highly and encourage them in their task.

Finally, says Paul, “live in peace with one another.” Leaders are not perfect; they are going to make mistakes. At times they may exercise bad judgment. Leaders have different personalities and different spiritual gifts. Ministries and schedules differ from one pastor to another. And we should not be tempted to create division over individual leaders.

These then are Paul’s exhortations concerning how to relate to leadership in the church.

In the next two verses the apostle deals with our relationships with one another. You will note that these commands are addressed to everyone in the church, not just leaders. Everyone is involved in this ministry. Verse 14:

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. (5:14-15)

The first command is to correct wrong: “admonish the unruly.” If you see someone violating Scripture, do something about it. Move in lovingly and graciously and help them get back in line. The “unruly” in Thessalonica probably referred to those who had quit their jobs and were sitting around waiting for Jesus to come back. When you see a brother who is out of line, don’t criticize him; move alongside and help him. Talk to him about his sin and gently reprove him.

Paul continues: “encourage the fainthearted”—those who are timid, anxious, intimidated or overwhelmed by what is going on in their lives. And, “help the weak,” those who are guilty, who feel the weight of their past sin, or feel insecure or inadequate to meet the demands of life. “Help them,” says Paul. Actually, the word is “cleave.” Hold on to them. Cling to them. Put your arm around them. Call them on the phone or encourage them with a note. Spend time with them. Don’t leave them in their loneliness. Pray with them. The Christian life is a battle, and people are being wounded. We need to bandage their wounds and get them on their feet and walking again. We are all weak. Any one of us can be unruly, fainthearted, or “small souled”; that is what that word literally means. We fail in our faith, we are crushed by the demands of life, we feel overwhelmed in our task of parenting or trying to make our marriages work. We need to help each other.

And finally, we need to be “patient with all men.” The word patient is the Greek word, *makrothumia*. *Makro* means “long,” *thumos* means “heat.” So the word literally means “long before we get heated.” At times we say someone has a “short fuse.” This is the opposite—“long-fused.” We should not give up on each other. A marriage need not necessarily be over even though the picture looks dark and dreary. By God’s grace, any situation can be turned around. So Paul exhorts us to be patient with each other.

“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.” Don’t retaliate. Refuse to fight back. Arguments begin when someone says a harsh word and another person retaliates. Before long an ugly scene develops and a lot of damage is done. Sometimes we can’t even remember what started it all. Paul says we should avoid this, and the way to do it is by being patient with all.

Next, the apostle instructs on how to relate to our circumstances. Verse 16:

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (5:16-18)

“Rejoice always.” Be cheerful. Don’t let life get you

down. Don't be glum and sour about life. Don't get resentful and bitter because life has dealt you a blow. It is God who determines the events of our lives. There are people here this morning whose mates have deserted them, whose children have betrayed them, whose parents have wrongfully used them. God is the one who is behind all the circumstances of your lives, and he will use these hard things to make you what you long to be. The hurt and pain and tears are making you a more beautiful person, enabling you to face even harder things in life. You are going to be tougher and sweeter, because these are the things that enable you to grow.

That is why James says, "Consider it all joy...when you encounter various trials." Or as Philips paraphrases it: "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends." God is working to make you the kind of person he wants you to be. He is teaching you to give up what you desire, to lose your fear of losing, to make you easier to get along with, to make you like the Lord Jesus. Someone has said that God wants to squeeze us like grapes to make sweet wine. The pressure we experience is the fingers of God to effect that purpose. So rejoice. Let the process continue. Don't fight back and get resentful. Allow the suffering to complete its good work.

The words of the song "Be Ye Glad," are helpful here:

*Now from your dungeon a rumor is stirring,
though you've heard it again and again;
Ah, but this time your cell keys are turning;
And outside there are faces of friends.
Though your body is weary from wasting,
and your eyes show the sorrow you've had;
Oh, the love that your heart is now tasting,
has opened the gates, Be ye glad!
Be ye glad, Oh, Be ye glad;
Every debt that you've ever had,
Has been paid up in full
By the grace of the Lord;
Be ye glad, be ye glad, be ye glad.*

Or, as Paul puts it, "rejoice always."

And, "pray without ceasing." That is how we draw on these resources of God—by maintaining a worshipful relationship with him. Pray about everything. Pray wherever you go. We ought to have protracted times of prayer when we set aside times to be alone with God. From those times comes an attitude of praying wherever we go, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

Describing his understanding of this verse, Civil War General Stonewall Jackson said, "I never seal a letter without putting a word of prayer under the seal. I never receive a dispatch from the post without a brief sending of my thoughts upward. I never meet my troops without a moment's petition on those who go out and those who come in. Everything calls me to prayer."

Then, says the apostle, "in everything give thanks."

Don't dwell on the negatives, but center on what God is doing, and be thankful, "for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." We tend to think of God's will in terms of great activities that he has in mind for us, but Paul says that God's will involves that quiet response of thankfulness to every circumstance. Give thanks for God's adequacy. Give thanks for his presence. Give thanks for his love.

Next, in verses 19-22, the apostle talks about the Christian's attitude toward the word of God:

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. (5:19-22)

The New Testament was not yet written when Paul penned these words. Actually, 1 Thessalonians was the first or second book of the NT to be written. In the interim, there were prophets who received direct revelation from God. First Corinthians 14 describes this. People would be seated in a meeting like this, and a word of revelation would come to a prophet who would proclaim God's word to the congregation. Here Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit." When the prophets are prophesying, listen to what they have to say. But don't be gullible or naive. Test the spirits to see if they are true. Examine the teaching to see if it is consistent with the OT revelation. In Corinth, others who had gifts of discernment could test a prophet's words. Today we have the written word, but Paul would still tell us not to quench the Spirit. When the Holy Spirit speaks to us about a passage or verse of Scripture, we should listen to him and not resist him.

I find that the prompting of the Spirit comes in two ways in my life: the Spirit tells me to stop doing something that is wrong, or he encourages me to do something that is right. At times when I am reading my Bible in my office the Spirit will gently but powerfully bring to mind something that I need to apologize for or confess to my wife or a brother. At other times I feel prompted to write a note of encouragement to someone. I think Paul is telling us to respond to those promptings.

Secondly, says Paul, we should test the spirits. When you hear someone preach the word, whether it is in this pulpit, or on radio or television, don't just take his word for it, check it out yourself. Examine the word to see if it is true. The pastor's task is to say what the apostles have said. If we are not doing that, if we are contradicting their teaching, then we are preaching heresy. You have the responsibility to make that judgment.

Paul concludes his letter with a beautiful benediction. Verse 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. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (5:23-24)

I am very thankful that it is not my responsibility to turn the crank so that you will obey what the apostle says. The Bible says that God is at work in us “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” He who began the good work in you will complete it. There will be failures along the way, of course. We will struggle, we won’t get it right all the time, but God is at work performing this sanctification process of our whole person—and he will not stop until it is completed. When he comes back we will see him as he is and we will be like him.

Verse 25:

Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. (5:25-26)

What a wonderful word! Paul says let your verbal greeting be made stronger with a physical gesture of love. By the middle of the second century, this had become a liturgical practice during communion.

Verse 27:

I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. (5:27)

We have obeyed this command over the past few months.

Verse 28:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (5:28)

Paul concludes his letter in the same way he began it, praying that the grace of Jesus Christ be with the Thesalonians. This is not just a religious slogan. Grace is the heart of the gospel, and it is the heart of God.

That is my prayer too for all of us this morning as we conclude our studies in this very personal letter of the great apostle.

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