

June 13, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Pursuing Holiness in Love and Labor

1 Thessalonians 4:9 – 12

I want you to notice again that Paul's burden for the Thessalonians is all expressed within the context of the return of Christ. Time and time again he reminds his readers of the Lord's imminent return. In chapter one he tells them that to embrace the gospel means that you take a gospel stance and *'...wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come'*. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 In chapter two he reminds them that one of his highest joys and the vindication of his ministry would be to see them stand in the presence of the Lord when He returned *'...For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy'*. 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

And in chapter three his prayer is that the Thessalonians would be ready for the coming of the Lord Jesus. *'...and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints'*. 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 And now in chapter four he points them again to the return of Christ by giving them some solid details of that day. *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words'*. 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18

Christ's return is meant to act as a great encouragement to us – an incentive to spur us on to love and good deeds – an encouragement to live a gospel-centered, Christ-conscious, God-pleasing life that looks ahead to the reward. And sandwiched in between all these exhortations are all the ways in which to do that best. Between the exhortation at the end of chapter three and the explanation at the end of chapter four, Paul focuses on just how to walk in the light of the fact that Jesus is coming back.

And he characterizes our walk as the pursuit of holiness – without which no one will see the Lord – because this is the will of God for our lives. That is we live lives that please God – He is the one who defines the parameters of our existence; and our striving for holiness means that we work hard at delighting ourselves in Him and living to do what honors Him and brings Him glory. Having come to Christ, we are now set apart for Him – holy unto God; so that all our considerations and thoughts and decisions revolve around what pleases Him – not firstly what pleases us.

Pursuing Holiness in Purity

And the first thing Paul targets is our personal purity. He says what pleases God is that we abstain from sexual immorality and all improper sexual desires – what he calls the **passion of lust**. We noted last week that it isn't sexual desire that Paul is talking about. Sexual desire serves the marriage bond and creates a unique intimacy between a man and a woman. Sex as God intended in the bonds of marriage is beautiful, pure and holy because it reflects the intimacy and relationship of Christ and His church. **All other sexual activity outside those boundaries, dishonors God, diminishes His glory, and mars the image of Christ in us.**

Pursuing Holiness in Love

Now Paul continues to encourage them in the pursuit of holiness by focussing on two other areas – love and work. In verses nine and ten he says: *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,* 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 This echoes his prayer for them in chapter three which we read: *'...and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father...'* 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13

Here Paul is praying for the experience and testimony of love to increase and abound – literally here **increase** means to 'have more than enough' and **abound** means to 'overflow'. **So he is really asking God to make the saints to be so filled up with the love of Christ that at every bump, love spills out.** And that abounding and increasing in love is the means through which our hearts are established in holiness. The overflow of love from hearts that have been made glad in God in one of the keys to holiness in the life of the believer. When we come to Christ and He fills our hearts with His love and His Holy Spirit indwells us – a powerful change takes place. Instead of living our lives to please ourselves – we have this inner compulsion to please Him. Literally we are compelled by love to obedience to the one we love. **And what pleases God is that His love that was poured out on us spills over onto others.**

It was this love that marked the early church. Tertullian, a second-century leader in the church noted what the pagans were saying about the Christians: **'But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. See, they say about us, how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves would sooner kill.** This love of the brethren is one sure sign of the genuineness of your faith. The apostle John tells us *'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death'*. 1 John 3:14

The word of God is crystal clear about this – if you are saved, you love the brothers – you love those for whom Christ died. There are no conditions attached to that. But I have talked to many people who claim to love God, but they don't really care for His people, the church. In fact I just talked to a man this week who wanted to engage me in all kinds of discussions about Scripture, claimed he was a Christian, and yet when I asked him where he went to church, he said, 'Oh I don't go to church – there are too many people there with fake smiles.' In other words, **'I love God, it is His people I can't stand.'**

Jonathan Edwards wrote about this: **"A common argument of many nominal Christians is that they love Jesus but don't care for the church. The teaching of 1 John exposes the flaws of this argument, revealing it to be an unbiblical dichotomy. All who are saved by God possess the Spirit, which links them to all other people who possess the Spirit. The local church, of course, is not perfect, and some have had difficult experiences with churches they have attended. But when God saves a person, He gives them a love for His people. His people are the church."** Jonathan Edwards

Holiness in the believer's life is a condition for eternal life. **And abounding and increasing in love is the means through which our hearts are established in holiness.** It is as we love one another with the love that God has poured out in our hearts through Calvary, and we reach out in that love to other unlovely, rebellious sinners that God establishes our hearts blameless in holiness. That is, through His love He strengthens and confirms the purposes of our hearts so that they are blameless in regards to Him.

Pursuing Holiness in Labor

And then Paul turns to the arena of work: *and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.* 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 We need to have a proper perspective on work so that we demonstrate and display the glory of God through our labor. Most of us have grown up with a fallen view of work – that it is a necessary evil and we have to work to eat so we'd better work. But most people work just for the weekend – or the golden years of retirement when we don't have to work. We've bought into the idea that labor is something less than desirable – and if you can avoid it, so much the better. In fact in our country today, there are hundreds of thousands of people who do all they can to avoid work and rely on the government to pay for it. But in the beginning, it was not so.

In the beginning, God created man, put him in a garden, and put him to work: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.* Genesis 2:15 Labor is a God-given gift and we despise it at our peril. God's command to Adam was a command to work: *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."* Genesis 1:27-28 I understand that to subdue and have dominion is a charge to man to exercise his subordinate lordship over the earth by shaping it and controlling it for good purposes – in other words – labor. **God intended for us to be engaged in productive, fulfilling labor for our good and His glory, and to work is a reflection of God in our lives.** After all, He is the one who set the standard – He was working in creation to bring it all about, and He is working in time to bring His purposes to fulfillment.

And one of the reasons we were created was so that we would be engaged in some work. Ephesians tells us that *'...we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them'*. Ephesians 2:10 And at least some of those works include our labor. That is, God has work for us to do while we are waiting for His Son to return. **So work is God-ordained.**

There are three biblical reasons I believe that God ordained work. The first is that **we work to provide for our needs**. In the beginning, Adam and Eve didn't have to work to eat or provide for their needs. God provided food for them from the trees – all they had to do was pick it. They did work, God says they did, but they didn't have to work to provide for their needs. They didn't have to commute to the city to make money to pay the mortgage or the car payment or the insurance payment or the school tuition. God provided all they needed.

But that all changed with the entrance of sin into the world. *'And to Adam he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'* Genesis 3:17-19 The curse under which we live today, is not work – the curse is that now we battle weariness, and pain, and thistles and thorns and sweat, in our work. And the burden is doubled because where once our living was provided by God – now we must by our work provide for our needs. Proverbs tells us: *Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.* Proverbs 12:11 So the curse says: If you want to eat – you will sweat. The promise says: If you sweat – you will eat.

The second reason we work is to **provide for the needs of those who cannot provide for themselves**. There are those whose sweat and work have not earned them enough to provide for their own needs and need the supply from those whose work has provided an abundance. In 1 Timothy Paul speaks to the provision of those who have for those who do not have: *But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.* 1 Timothy 5:8 In Acts Paul refers to his own work and says: *'In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."* Acts 20:35 And then in Ephesians he says: *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.* Ephesians 4:28

Early on in church history, Christians became known as those who provided for the needs of those who could not provide for themselves. Christians started the first "Meals on Wheels." By the year 250, they were feeding more than 1500 of the hungry and destitute in Rome every day. When Emperor Julian ("the Apostate") wanted to revive pagan religion in the mid-300s, he gave a most helpful insight into how the church spread. This opponent of the faith said that Christianity "has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render them."

Tertullian, writing in the second century said: *Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. These gifts are . . . not spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines or banished to the islands or shut up in the prisons...* Clearly, one reason we work is to provide for the needs of those who cannot provide for themselves.

Finally, I believe our **work is meant to be a bridge for the gospel**. Paul tells the Thessalonians: *'...work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.* In our work, we are in the world, rubbing shoulders with unbelievers. If we view work as the world views work, our testimony of Christ is muted and distorted. If we are working with the weekend in view or with retirement in the offing, if we are dragging in on Monday and rushing out on Friday, what are we doing that is different – set apart – from everyone else in the world? But if we are working with the view that this is for God's glory – if we work to provide for our needs as well as for those who cannot provide for their own – then the world sees something of Christ in how we conduct ourselves at work and bridges for the gospel are built.

Peter tells us to *'Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation'*. 1 Peter 2:12 I take that to mean, at the very least, that the way in which we obey the commandment to work is meant to point to God, and build a bridge for the gospel to the unbelievers in our work world. Paul told the Corinthians: *Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* 1 Corinthians 10:31 Christians ought to be the best workers in any business – **because ultimately all our working should resound to His glory and grace.**

Pursue holiness – in purity, in love and in labor.

Our gracious God and Savior,

Grant that we would pursue holiness in purity, in love and in our labor. May the sure knowledge of Your soon return encourage us to love and good deeds. Let the testimony of our faith be displayed in our love for one another. May it overflow and abound in the church and in the world. Let that Calvary love that captured our hearts spill over on the lost around us and bring them to saving faith. Grant that our labor would always be with Your glory and name in view so that the watching world would see and glorify God. Don't let us settle for the world's view of work, but grant that all our labor would resound to Your glory and grace. Give us, we pray, hearts that are so full of thanksgiving for Your great mercy that we refuse to live to please ourselves but delight ourselves in You as those who have been made glad in God and living to make others glad in You, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.