

July 18, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Always Seek to do Good to One Another

1 Thessalonians 5:12 – 15

As we get close to the end of this letter, let me remind you that Paul was writing this to **encourage the Thessalonians to live in the light of Christ's return**. Over all his admonitions and commands and exhortations and loving encouragement he raises the banner of the Day of the Lord. Everything looks ahead to that day – which is coming suddenly upon the whole world, but not unexpectedly on those who are His. One of the major thrusts of this letter is to prepare the church of God for His return. For those who do not know Christ the Day of the Lord will be like a thief – unexpected and unwelcome – dark and terrifying. But for those who have embraced the gospel – those who know Christ and are expecting Him it will be a day of complete joy and exultation. If you are here this morning and you do not know Christ, I pray that you would be shaken out of your complacency and awakened to faith in Him. If you are a marginal Christian – you've been sort of casual about your faith – you made a profession at one time but you are not really exercising that faith – I pray that this word would penetrate the hard callous that has grown over your heart and bring heartfelt repentance and real faith.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, **we are preparing for His return by continually putting our trust in God**. We trust Him to be enough. We trust that delighting ourselves in Him is more fulfilling and satisfying than the fleeting pleasure and momentary satisfaction of sin. We trust that He is enough, even if we should lose houses, or cars or friends or loved ones. We trust that nothing is too hard for Him – nothing is beyond His power to control – no one is beyond the reach of His grace – He is not surprised by anything, rather He ordains all things for His own glory and purposes – and His purpose will be accomplished.

Daily we make the choice **to delight ourselves in God** and not in other things. That is, we count His love toward us and our love toward Him as the highest value in this life and in the next. It means that we allow our love for Him to keep us from the deadly loves that sin offers – that we consider His love so valuable – so treasured – so incredibly desired that we would be inconsolable at the thought of losing even a moment of the sense of His presence through sin.

And **we fill our thoughts with the great promises of God** who saved us from the wrath to come and will one day replace our broken and sin-sick bodies with perfect ones and take us to be with Him forever. We are rehearsing the gospel daily so that we won't be sucked into living like the world and fritter our time away in empty pursuits. And we inject our souls with the hope that is to come so that the hope of eternal glory with Christ will protect our minds against the temptation to sin.

And then last week we saw in the parable of the nobleman and his servants that **good servants of Christ understand three things: all they have is given to them by God – everything they have been given is to be invested for the king – and one day there will be an accounting**. That is, we need to ponder the question, what have we done with what God has given us – because one day He is going to ask, 'What have you done with my mina'?

So Paul ends this letter with a series of commands, exhortations and admonishments intended to inspire and incite us to live holy lives. **What he is describing is a manner of life that produces ready saints**. This is what the church life looks like – and he starts with our attitude toward the leadership: *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work*. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a Notice the verbs he uses – **respect and esteem**. And note too, that respect and esteem are related to the office not the person. I mention this because God has a way of using people that we would otherwise not respect or esteem to work holiness in our being. In God's economy, he chooses the weak things to confound the strong, the foolish things to confound the wise and in so doing demonstrates His sovereign will and pleasure by doing the impossible. We must understand that it is God and not us that sets leaders over His church for His own purposes and we disparage and dishonor them to our own hurt. God has given your pastors, elders, for your good and your help – not because we are anything special – not that we are better or wiser – but because He is God. We have been given the charge to labor among you, to be the authority in your life and to instruct you.

And you have been given the charge to respect and esteem. Listen to how Hebrews puts it: *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.* Hebrews 13:17 Speaking personally, I would rather not have that responsibility. Notice that your leaders are supposed to keep watch over your souls with the understanding that one day we will give an account for how we did. That is a terrifying prospect – especially since I know most of you fairly well. Plus the fact that I have a hard enough time keeping watch over my own soul. But that is my job – yours is to extend respect and esteem so that we might carry out our charge with joy and not grief. Not for our benefit – but yours – notice that the grief is related to the loss of profit for you.

And so it is we are continually admonishing you. Admonish is not a negative word. It is the Greek word *noutheteo*, which means to warn, to exhort, **so as** to instruct. It is to point out the way that leads to life and warn you to stay away from the way that leads to death. It carries the thought that if you keep going the way you are headed, you are going to have problems – you need to turn and go the other direction. It is teaching with an element of warning, an element of correction, an element of moving those under our care toward holy living. And it is teaching the whole counsel of God from His word. It is putting our lives under the shining of the word of God and letting it expose, correct, heal, and restore.

So I admonish you this morning from the word of God – respect and esteem those who are over you. And one of the ways that you exhibit that respect and esteem is to not quarrel amongst yourselves. *Be at peace among yourselves.* 1 Thessalonians 5:13b Paul says. Nothing is more frustrating and toxic than an atmosphere of dissension, quarreling and murmuring (criticism under your breath). **It is hard to shepherd with joy when the sheep are butting heads.** Peace is the hallmark of a healthy church, and by that definition I must say that we are pretty healthy here at Summit. It was not always so, and some of you who have come within the last ten years or so have no idea of the price we paid for the peace we enjoy. But I want to admonish you that we cannot take that for granted. We need to be vigilant so that the peace endures. Peter reminds us that since we are looking for and expecting the Lord's return, we should be *'...diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless...'* 2 Peter 3:14 That means we work hard at doing those things that make for peace.

All of these have been exhortations for us with respect to the leadership. **Now Paul give us some exhortation with respect to one another:** *And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.* 1 Thessalonians 5:14 Apparently in the church there are those who are idle, faint-hearted, weak and irritating. One of the things this points up is the fact that the church is as Henry Ward Beecher once said, *'...not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones'*. Charles Morrison wrote that *'...The Christian church is a society of sinners...it is the only society in the world, membership in which is based upon the single qualification that the candidate shall be unworthy of membership'*. Like you, I have heard the complaint from countless people, seeking to justify their rebellion against God, that they don't go to church because the church is full of hypocrites. Our reply ought to be, 'That's great! You qualify!.'

First of all he says to **admonish the idle.** This word idle means disorderly or unruly, and is used of soldiers who were insubordinate or out of ranks. This word was most often used in Greek society of those who did not show up for work. And the job of everyone in the church, not just the leadership, is to admonish them. These are those who are fringe saints – they come to church often enough to be counted, but they are moving in their own direction. One preacher noted that these are usually the ones who sit in back. But of course we don't want to make any generalizations here. Wherever they sit, they are just not with it. They don't want to get too involved, it might restrict them too much. They don't want accountability and often they are just AWOL. And we are supposed to admonish them – *noutheteo* them – literally, **'put some sense into them'**. **We are to link that kind of behavior in the household of God with stories like Jesus told of those who look like servants but prove to be wicked hypocrites in the end.**

We are also to **encourage the fainthearted.** That means we are to comfort them, to speak to them by way of admonition and incentive. The KJV puts it this way **'Comfort the feeble-minded'** and it means encourage those who are too weak or wishy-washy to have any real purpose. To help and encourage those who are overcome discouragement. It includes those who are so depressed or despondent that they are tempted to give up. Typically these are the worriers, they fear the unknown, they don't take risks and they are always looking for security. Literally the word means, **'small-souled'**. Their view of God is so restricted and small that their aspirations have contracted to fit their view. They don't have the strength for new challenges; they are afraid of opposition and are easily discouraged.

We are to come alongside these fainthearted people and encourage them. They need large doses of encouragement from God's word. They need to hear again and again, **'Don't worry about anything, pray about everything'**. They need to hear over and over that nothing is impossible with God. What they need is a relationship that encourages them in God. We need to expand their view of God in a very personal way so that they become lion-hearted, not fainthearted.

Then Paul says we are to **help the weak**. That is to support those who are weak, infirm, feeble. The sense of the phrase is to hold them tightly to keep them from drifting away from the fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 8 through 10 and Romans 14 – 15 Paul talks about those who are 'weak in the faith'. That is, their faith is not strong and robust enough to experience all the liberty and freedom that belongs to them in Christ. Their weak faith creates a hyper sensitivity to sin so that they see things as sin that are not really sin at all. And so their response is to pull back, and those who are stronger in the faith are to help them, support them, not push them into areas of faith they are not ready to handle.

This also has implications of moral weakness. That is those who are weak morally and susceptible to temptation and sin. These are those who find it difficult to obey God and keep falling into the same sin over and over. You pick them up, dust them off, and in a short time they are falling again. Interestingly enough, this is the same word James uses in chapter 5 when he says, *'Is anyone among you sick [or weak] ? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord ; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick [weak], and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.* James 5:14-15 Those who are weak need those who are strong to hold them up and pray for them and work through to repentance with them.

This is what Paul writes to the churches in Galatia: *Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness ; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ* Galatians 6:1-2 Weak brethren should inspire compassion not judgment in the hearts of those who are strong. Because they are weak they need some burden bearers to come alongside and help them through to strength and maturity.

Then Paul says **be patient with them all**. The word is **makrothumeo**, and it means to be of a long spirit, not to lose heart, to persevere patiently and bravely in enduring misfortunes and troubles, to be patient in bearing the offenses and injuries of others, to be mild and slow in avenging, to be longsuffering, slow to anger, slow to punish. In short, it encompasses all the virtues of patience that I lack. My natural inclination is not to be patient with idle or the fainthearted or the weak. Sometimes they do need a good spanking – but that isn't our job. Paul doesn't say, beat the idle, punish the fainthearted or give the weak a good licking. He says persevere patiently with them and not to lose heart in admonishing them, encouraging them and wrapping the arms of love around them.

You might ask, 'How patient am I supposed to be with these people'? And the answer is, 'Just as patient as the Lord is with you'. The testimony of God's patience toward us is highlighted in the book of Exodus *"The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth* Exodus 34:6 And Peter tells us that *The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.* 2 Peter 3:9 How patient? That patient. **[Keith]**

Finally Paul writes *See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.* 1 Thessalonians 5:15 Quite honestly, very often my first response when someone does me wrong is to repay in kind. As if that will somehow balance the scales of justice, or teach them a lesson. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that a godly response to those who pay us with evil is exactly opposite of what our natural inclination would be. Whether the one who does it is in the family of God or outside the family of God, our reaction should be to seek to do good. The word seek here means to run after the good, to pursue it, to seek after it eagerly. That is not a common response when we are wronged.

Paul explains this further in the letter to the Romans: *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* Romans 12:17-21

There is within our hearts a ready desire to take our pound of flesh. We don't want to wait for God. He's too slow, He may not exact sufficient revenge, we're not sure He will give the other guy what he deserves and He may even let him off the hook. Look what happened to the woman caught in adultery – He let her go! But revenge is just bitterness that has been nourished and cherished in our hearts, and nursing bitterness, harboring a grudge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other guy to die. When we take revenge for insults or oversights or any other thing, we leave no room for God.

We are to run after the good, to pursue the good, to seek after it eagerly. This means that we take time to consider what we can do for one another. The Bible clarifies what that good is: We are to *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor* Romans 12:10

pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Romans 14:19

accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. Romans 15:7

have the same care for one another. 1 Corinthians 12:25

through love serve one another. Galatians 5:13

Bear one another's burdens Galatians 6:2

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32

regard one another as more important than yourselves Philippians 2:3

encourage one another and build up one another 1 Thessalonians 5:11

stimulate one another to love and good deeds Hebrews 10:24

Paul also makes it clear that we are to do good to everyone – not just those in the church: *always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.* Just as we intentionally pursue doing good to those in the church – we are intentional about the good we do to those outside. This is what fulfills the greatest commandments: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. While we ought to be those whose theme and passion and highest love is God and those who are His, we also need to be extending ourselves to the world around us. Doing good to others means that we have their best interests at heart and demonstrates the love of Christ to them.

And if love is the accurate estimation and adequate supply of another's need, then what the world around us needs most of all is Jesus. John Piper wrote: *“Love is helping people toward God...Love is helping people toward the greatest beauty and the highest value and the deepest satisfaction and the most lasting joy and the biggest reward and the most wonderful friendship and the most overwhelming worship.”* John Piper, Let the Nations Be Glad! In other words to really pursue doing good to others is to help them toward God. Peter says it like this: *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

The good we are to do to everyone has the glory of God in view. That is, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the motivating factor with respect to our relationships in the world. Whether we are visiting orphans or widows in their distress, or feeding the hungry or helping the poor in their poverty, or providing medical help to the sick, the goal is to help them toward God. Doing good that doesn't help people toward God is self-serving and worthless. As a church we are engaged in doing good not only here at home, but around the world in places like China and Kenya, and the goal of all our doing is to help people toward God. This is the stance of those who are living in the light of Christ's return.

Our gracious God and Father,

Help us to trust in Your promises, welcome Your warnings, obey Your commands, and respond to Your grace. Teach us to delight ourselves in You and inject our souls with the gospel's great hope. Remind us that all we have is from Your hands to be stewarded with care so that at Your coming we will have cause to rejoice and not be ashamed. Grant that all our days would be lived in the light of Your return. Give us willing hearts to respect and esteem with joy those You have granted authority over us in the church. Grant us wisdom to admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak and the compassion to be patient with all. May our days be characterized by pursuing doing good to one another and to everyone so that we might help them toward You. As we look for and expect Your soon return, let us be known as a people with no other aim but that of a burning passion for You and the good and salvation of all men, we pray in the powerful and saving name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.