

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 6

The Ministry in Thessalonica – Part 2

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

1. Briefly summarize the *point* Paul makes in vv. 1-12. Why does he rehearse so *carefully* the original meeting he had with the believers in Thessalonica?

Paul rehearses his original meeting (and subsequent time) with the Thessalonians: he notes the shameful treatment he had just received in Philippi, which emboldened him and his team to preach even more forcefully in Thessalonica. He reminds them that his team did not come with a message of deceit or trickery or self-glorification; instead, they came with a message entrusted to them by God and preached it in its fullness. And, although he and his team were bold in proclaiming the gospel to them, he maintained a careful touch over them, not wanting to drive the message home through debate, but to love them and to meet their primary spiritual need. Additionally, Paul reminds them that he did not take any monetary support from them, but worked on his own, so that the church would remember his motives as pure. Paul does this because he wants the Thessalonians to remember their good relationship *and trust Paul* as he continues to disciple them, answering their questions and helping them to grow in grace as the letter unfolds.

2. (a) In v. 13, what *phrase* does Paul use to describe the message that his team brought to the city? How specifically did the Thessalonians *receive* that message?

Paul calls the message “*the word of God,*” not the “*word of men.*” Paul believed that his message was *directly* from the very mouth of God, a message that had been verbally delivered to him, and which he then delivered to them. It was not a message he had “made up” on his own and had come to town to convince them of. Rather, it was a *divine* message, one that had come from the mind of God himself, established in his decree, and now made known in the person and work of Christ. The Thessalonians, Paul says, received that message as the word of God; they believed that what Paul was delivering was an actual message from God, and Paul reminds them of that fact (see 2c below).

- (b) Why would Paul's gospel seem so *foreign* to the Jews in the city? How would it have been foreign to the *Gentiles* in the city?

The Jews of the First Century (especially in the Diaspora) held a wide range of views about God, all based on a “traditional” rendering of the Hebrew Bible. Their view of God himself, God's plans for Israel, the nature and work of the Messiah, etc. were all “constructed” over time through the process of interpretation and application. So, for Paul to come and make statements that would (often!) contradict their view of God and his Messiah, it would seem very “foreign” to their minds. The picture of the Christ that Paul proclaimed, namely, that Jesus, the crucified carpenter from Galilee was, in fact, the true Son of God, fully divine and fully human, who had been raised from the dead and was now seated at the right hand of God himself, would be *utterly opposite* of what they were expecting. They believed the Christ would be a *political savior*, resurrecting the old Solomonic Israel and drawing all of the dispersed Jews back into Judea under a new monarch holding back all oppressors; Paul's view was so very different that it would be extraordinarily hard for them to “unlearn” centuries of interpretation. For the non-Jews (i.e., the Gentiles), the gospel would simply be *bizarre*: the concept of a crucified man being a “savior” from sin (a concept foreign to them in and of itself) would seem preposterous. After all, the “real” need in the mind and heart of a Gentile was for peace and prosperity in life, and to suggest that a crucified carpenter could bring such peace was beyond imagination.

(c) So, what does Paul mean when he says that they accepted his message “as the word of God?”

The Thessalonians, both Jews and Gentiles, heard the message of Paul as a *divinely inspired* word from the Creator God. They did not see it as simply a form of “philosophy” that they could embrace, but (rather) a divine message that demanded an entirely different worldview. Paul insists that the Thessalonians needed to remember that what they believed (originally, from his team) was not just another “idea,” but an actual message from God himself; they had believed *the truth* coming through Paul from Almighty God, and this message had radically transformed them. Old ways of thinking and understanding the world were swept away in its power, and Paul wants the Thessalonians to remember this power as they move forward.

(d) Why do we call the Scriptures (i.e., the Bible) *the Word of God*? From Ephesians 6:17, Hebrews 4:12, and 2 Timothy 3:16, list some of the *main features* of this Word in written form.

Christians who embrace *sola Scriptura* (and this is key!) believe that the 66 books contained in the Old and New Testaments are *divinely inspired words directly from God through human agents* (i.e., through the means of human authors). They are the “Word of God” because they are *his* words given to us; the communication of the Creator God to the world, designed to come through the *inspiration* given to human authors to communicate *divine* truths to the world, in a way understandable by men. These words are “*breathed out by God*” (*theopneustos*; 2 Timothy 3:6), literally “from the mouth of God,” so they are *his* words (i.e., his thoughts) expressed verbally. They are (metaphorically) the “*sword of the Spirit*” (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12); the instrument *he uses* by which truth is divided from untruth, so that men may know what is *divinely* true over against that which is *humanly* false. It is a *means* that God has ordained in the world to bring truth into a world filled with lies, and the core of that word is the message of the Christ (see 2e below).

(e) Compare Matthew 15:6 to Mark 7:13, Luke 8:11, Acts 6:7, Romans 9:6, and 1 Corinthians 14:36. What *else* does the Word of God refer to in these situations? How does that apply *here*?

Another definition of the “*the word of God*” in the New Testament is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the *kerygma*: the *proclamation* of the message of the Christ over against the “traditional” view of the Messiah found in the world. The Jews had certain “traditional” understandings of the nature and work of their Messiah (see 2b above), but the apostles had received from Jesus (and his Spirit) the *divinely inspired truth* regarding his nature. The gospel represented the *actual* nature of the Christ *and what his work demanded from those to whom he came*. Paul had brought this “word of God” to the Thessalonians, and they had received it as such. They *knew*, in their belief and faith, that Jesus was the Christ and that his death, burial, and resurrection were the means of atonement provided by God for sinners; their view of the Christ had been *radically altered* from the “traditional” view that they had *prior* to faith in Jesus. Paul reminds them of this truth; it is at the *core* of the church, and Paul wants to make sure they don’t forget.

3. (a) From v. 14, which *churches* did Paul believe the Thessalonians were also imitating? Who *led* them?

Paul mentions the churches “*in Judea*,” churches established in Jerusalem, Samaria, Galilee, and (probably) even into Syria in the north (i.e., Antioch). These would be the *original churches* established by the apostles in the earliest days of the Church Age, the *primitive* churches that were made up of Jewish converts in the days just after Pentecost (and outlined in Acts 1-12). James, the half-brother of Jesus, is mentioned as the head of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15, so it is possible that many of these churches find their leadership in him and others like him throughout the area. Ironically, these churches were situated where all Jews believed they should reside in a new Solomonic kingdom established under the Messiah. The churches there, however, embraced a radically different view of the Christ, and were caused to suffer under that reality, by Jews still waiting for their political savior.

(b) How was the experience of the Jewish Christians in Thessalonica *similar* to that of the believers in Judea? Why was that a *comfort* to the Thessalonians in their struggles?

The Jewish Christians in Thessalonica probably experienced the same kinds of ostracism and persecution *from other Jews* just like the Jews in Judea. The reaction of unconverted Jews to the Jesus-followers in the synagogue was severe, and the Thessalonians had received similar reactions themselves. The comfort would be in knowing that others had experienced similar things: to know that someone else can *empathize* with your pain helps you to survive through that pain. This, of course, is a key tenet of the church, a *gathering* of believers designed to come together under the word, be encouraged and strengthened by it in faith, and to share burdens with one another as everyone treads a similar path, even if that path is persecution. Paul wants them to remember that they received the same word as the Jews in Judea, and were experiencing the same backlash (one that was *totally expected*); thus, their experience was *normal*, and they could bear it just as their Judean brothers and sisters were.

4. (a) From vv. 15-16, list the ways that the Jews *hindered* the word of God down through their history.

The Jewish people (i.e., the Israelites) had hindered the revelation God had given them down through time (i.e., through their man-made traditions) in a number of ways: 1) they killed Jesus, the one who came to them with signs demonstrating that he was the one they had been looking for (but their traditions were too blind to see); 2) they killed the prophets, men sent by God to teach them and warn them how their traditions and idolatries had caused them to veer from the truth; 3) they drove “us” out, probably a reference to those (like Paul and his team) who had come bringing the message of truth and hope, but were opposed at every turn and even physically abused; and 4) they oppose all mankind by hindering the message going out into the world (see 4b below). The Israelites had consistently rejected the truth given to them by God of their real need and the true nature of the antidote to that need, the true Messiah, who had come to them in Jesus Christ. Once he had come, and given that he didn’t “fit” their narrative, they actively worked to stop his message, and to persecute those who had the audacity to believe what they considered to be false. In other words, their *traditions* became more important than truth itself.

(b) How do the Jews continue to “*displease God?*” How do they “*oppose all mankind?*”

The Jews continue to displease God by hindering the message going out *even to non-Jews* (i.e., to Gentiles). The idea that God could actually be calling non-Israelites into his promises, promises that were extended *only to them* (so they believed!) was the height of arrogance on the part of those preaching such a message (i.e., Paul and his team). Thus they opposed “*all mankind*” because they actively worked to stop the message of the gospel to going out to the whole world (i.e., beyond the borders of Judaism).

(c) What does Paul mean when he says that the Jews “*fill up the measure of their sins*” (v. 16)?

To “*fill up the measure of their sin*” is another way of saying that the actions of the Jews in opposing the gospel is the *completion* of their rejection of the Christ and the rejection of the message that God had been sending to them for centuries. Their rejection of Jesus began long before he arrived: they had ignored the words of Scripture and the clear implications of a need for a savior from a law they could never keep. They inherently *knew* that they would need an “alien” righteousness, but they continued to insist on their own self-righteousness. When the Christ, then, did arrive, with a message of atonement based on trust *in him*, they rejected that message (and its messenger) by killing him, thus *completing* their rejection of what God had been telling them all along. Thus, now, as they continue to try and “stamp out” the message he brought (and the objective truth of his resurrection under it), they “fill up” their sinfulness; they have reached the *pinnacle* of their rejection of God himself. In other words, the blatant attempt of the Jews to stop the gospel message through intimidation and persecution only goes to show, Paul claims, just how far down in rebellion that Jews have sunk. The Thessalonians are to remember this as they face such persecution: the stronger the reaction against the message, the more likely that message is to be true!

(d) How has “*wrath*” now come upon the Jews who have rejected their Christ in Jesus?

The wrath of God has now come upon the Jews in that they have been 1) rejected by God in favor of those who have embraced his Son, both Jews and Gentiles, and 2) scattered by God away from their native land and away from their center of worship. Although the temple has not yet been destroyed in Jerusalem and the Jews “officially” scattered, the Final Diaspora of the Jews is not long in coming, and Paul knows that the proper response of God to rejection by his own people is to scatter them away and embrace a new people born by him through faith in his Son.