

An Introduction

First Things

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5:9
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This morning, I want to encourage you to turn in your Bibles to the New Testament to the book of 1 Thessalonians. Now what we know as the book of 1 Thessalonians hopefully is going to become one of those places in your Bible over the next couple of months that when you open it up it just naturally falls therein. For the next few months, we're going to walk through what we know as the book of 1 Thessalonians for several reasons, one of which is this: you and I live in a world where there is so much discussion, debate, dissension, and if you allow me to use it as an adjective, denomination. In other words, we live in a world today that when you say the term Christianity it honestly means so many different things to so many different people whether it is convictions, beliefs, philosophies, expressions, etc. And so as we walk through 1 Thessalonians, we're going to discover that there are oftentimes that humanity both individually and corporately either twist, changes, or adds to what God originally spoke and, secondly, when we discover that we're in that position, we need to allow ourselves to return to that which the Lord originally constructed.

1 Thessalonians. If you look back chronologically, is the very first communication that the Lord gave the early church from the pen of the Apostle Paul. I want you to imagine this. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead for about two decades. The early church has formed, it is beginning to not only establish itself as an entity but it's beginning to go forth into all the known world with the gospel. It is then in what we know as the book of Acts 17 that the Lord inspires the Apostle Paul to write a message to a local church in Greece by the name of Thessalonica. That message we still possess today. Today, as we begin 1 Thessalonians, we're just going to read the first verse of the first chapter but don't fret, in just a moment we're going to hit a couple of verses in all five chapters. But I want you to notice how seemingly benign it begins. It says,

1 Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It kind of begins, as most of the letters of the Apostle Paul begin, it just introduces who's there, where they're headed, and the power of the Lord that is undergirding the adventure. What's important, though, for our study today, as we kind of take that 30 thousand foot

view of the book of 1 Thessalonians, is it just what's addressed but what's absent? You know, sometimes when it comes to communication, it's not what is said, it is what is not said. Sometimes it's not what is addressed but what is not addressed. So for the next few moments, if you'll allow me just to walk through five what today are very, shall we say, debatable issues, points of discussion among "the umbrella of Christianity" which are not found in the book of 1 Thessalonians and here is why: because what we're about to discuss came later because man began to interject his ideology, his philosophy, he began to, shall we say, insert his opinion rather than that which had been established for now two decades in the early church. If you've ever been one of those who said, "Why can't we just get back to being the church as it used to be and why can't we all just get on the same page," then this is the study for you.

Five things that you will not find in the first letter that God gave us through the Apostle Paul. The first one is this: you will not find any tension between respective groups. In other words, there are different local churches but you don't have one that believes one thing and another that believes on another. In fact, if you think about today, we address oftentimes how there's so many differing opinions, so many different segments and beliefs and such, and yet if you go back 2,000 years ago, there's really only two main competing ideologies and, boy, were they starkly different. On one side, you had the Jews. The Jews had grown up in the synagogue worshiping on the Sabbath day, abstaining from certain foods on certain days, going to Jerusalem for this feast and that celebration, that had the prophecies for hundreds of years that the Messiah would come. Their dietary laws were what we might call kosher and/or levitical. Then on the other side of the equation, you've got the Gentiles. Most of them grew up in a world of polygamy, grew up in a world of pluralism where paganism reigned supreme. In other words, there was such a difference of lifestyle, you've got the pagans on one side and you've got the pious on the other, you've got the fleshly and the carnal on one end, and you've got the holy and the righteous on the other. It's two completely diametric groups, is it not, yet somehow for the first 20 years of the church everybody is getting along. In fact, what we know as 1 Thessalonians comes in chapter 17 of the book of Acts. The only main issue that we find is a couple chapters earlier in verse 15 where the Jews and the Gentiles get together and they say, "Okay, this is really difficult. You used to worship at the pagan temples. We're used to the synagogue. Now all of a sudden we've got to be in a church together. Can we work this out?"

Do you know what's interesting what they decided? The Jews asked us Gentiles just one very simple favor: could there be some specifics that you would not participate in? Would you please not eat meat with blood in it, animals that have been strangled, and just flee fornication, that's all we asking. Now you do realize the 10 Commandments are three times as long as that simple ask, and yet today if you were to sit me down and say, "Could you discuss the differences between the respective belief systems of Christianity," I could waste at least 12-18 hours of your life and here in Acts 15, just three simple things. In other words, this dissension that we see among "professing Christians" today was not how we originally started.

The second thing that you will not find in the book of 1 Thessalonians, and I find this very humorous because of where we are today in this respective location, is there's no teaching on baptism. Now you and I today find ourselves in a Baptist church, in fact, in a few hours this afternoon I will actually teach a course that we started quarterly here entitled "Baptists 101: Who are we and why do we exist?" And so you would think in a church whose name has Baptist in it, you would think that baptism would be a key priority, be important, but, no, it's completely absent. Nobody talks about baptism at all in 1 Thessalonians. Do you know why? Because it had already been established. Today, if you get in a debate or discussion about baptism, it typically revolves around who can be baptized and how do you do it. Do you know what you discover in the book of Acts 2? Three thousand souls get saved and they're baptized. Do you know what you find in Acts 8? There's an Ethiopian eunuch who talks with Philip in the desert and he is baptized. In Acts 9, the Apostle Paul gets saved on the road to Damascus, three days later Ananias comes to him, the scales fall off and he is baptized. In Acts 10, the Gentiles under the leadership of Cornelius, the same Holy Spirit falls on them as did the Jews and afterwards they get baptized. Do you know what you discover every single time? The who was someone who willingly, consciously professed Jesus Christ as their Savior and the how is everything got wet. Today, there's a lot of different ways that people are baptized. There's a whole lot of different stages of life as well.

Why is it not addressed in 1 Thessalonians? Because nobody had come up with the differences yet because the early church only saw it as one expression of the faith. Getting a little tense in here, is it not? Here's the third thing: there's no talk of tongues. Now you may not have friends and you may not run in the same circles I do, but I know a lot of friends who think that if you don't speak in tongues or interpret tongues, you may not be as spiritual as they are. There's other folks that claim if you don't have tongues or speak in tongues, you may genuinely not be saved. There's a whole lot of discussion today particularly in the last 150 years about what do we do with this thing known as "tongues"?

Do you know in 1 Corinthians 14 we have a whole chapter dedicated to it because we messed it up that bad? But do you know what you find out in chapter 14? It says that tongues are for a sign. You go back into chapter 1 of 1 Corinthians, do you know what it says? That signs are designed for the Jews. In other words, the first 20 years of what we might call the early church, the reason there is no infighting, there is no discussion, there is no debate, is because you saw it occasionally among the Jewish congregations but not so much among the Gentiles. Think about this. Everybody's getting along. Nobody's arguing about who or how somebody gets baptized and the issue of tongues that was so controversial in Corinth and even in our culture today, is just not present.

The fourth thing is this: a temptation for the law. You say, "What do you mean a temptation for the law?" Remember Acts 15 that I just alluded to when the Jews and the Gentiles all got together? Do you know how that chapter begins? It says that they were debating does somebody need to have "the Jewish circumcision" in order to be saved? Here's what the discussion, the debate is: can you be saved and be a Gentile? Can you be saved and not go to Torah school? Can you be saved and not be circumcised? Can you be

saved and not celebrate the feasts? And yet today there is such a temptation because in the Old Testament you've got a bunch of priests but you don't in the New Testament. In the Old Testament you worship on a certain day when the sun goes down but not any other day, but not so much in the New Testament. In the Old Testament under Jewish law you ate certain foods and praised God. Thank you for Acts 10, God said, "Rise up, kill, Peter, and eat what is before you." In other words, there is a temptation even today to go back and to constrict and to bind ourselves under the law that according to Galatians 3 was a schoolmaster to teach us what we were incapable of actually fulfilling and following.

And last but not least, do you know what you discover in 1 Thessalonians? The timidity of the gospel does not exist. Today, you and I, and I'm just going to call it out because I observe it and I see it, our culture, if I could use one adjective to describe our culture is that we are entitled. We are entitled to have what we want, when we want it, where we want it, and why we want it. And yet you discover that in the early church for the first 20 years as we read in Acts 17, there were no what we might call fair weather Christians and, by the way, can I just say none of you are today as well. There were none of those that said, "Oh, it's just a little convenient. It's not quite appropriate. It's too hard for me." What do you find in the book of Acts? That there were times where they had to make a decision, do we keep talking about Jesus or do we go to prison? And they went to prison and they allowed their lives to be persecuted, they allowed their fortunes to be taken, they even allowed at times for the very breath in their lungs to be removed of this side of heaven. In Acts 17, right there in the midst of what we know as the chronology of 1 Thessalonians it says, "And these are those that turned the world upside down."

So think about this for a moment. Today, if you were to ask the question what does our cultural Christianity look like, there's a lot of division on who meets with who, who we baptize, how we baptize them, who speaks in tongues, who doesn't speak in tongues, do you do the Sabbath day worship, do you not do the Sabbath day, and a lot of us are just flat entitled. None of that is present in 1 Thessalonians. None of it at all. Why? Because the mere presence of it in our lives and culture means that we have turned and twisted and added to what God originally told us to do.

So today as we turn back to chapter 1 of 1 Thessalonians, in a very quick manner, very concise but hopefully thorough, I want to walk through five very specific things that are addressed in 1 Thessalonians. Now we're going to unpack these in great detail over the course of the next weeks and months, but the primary thing, the very first thing that is dealt with in chapter 1 is what we know as salvation. Verse 9 and 10 it says,

9 For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;
10 And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

Now what's so important about these two verses in the very first chapter that God gives us from the pen of the Apostle Paul, is that when salvation is described in verse 9, it is

being described as turning from the idols of our life to serve the living and the true God. Now most of us today would say, "Well, I don't have any metallic or clay items in my house that I burn incense to or that I bow down and worship." However, according to 1 John 5, an idol by definition is anything that takes the place of God or gets in the way of you seeing God. Can I summarize it? Really what verse 9 is saying is this, that you turn from your sin. You know, in Romans 3 it says "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." If there's something in your life that either takes the place of God or gets in the way of God, guess what? You have come short of the glory of God. And yet today we must realize that if we're going to teach and preach and talk about salvation, you've got to be saved from something. In other words, we discover that you cannot possess salvation unless you are saved from your sin.

And look in verse 10, "from the wrath which is to come." That may not be comfortable in today's entitled society but can I tell you what 1 Thessalonians 1:9 and 10 is saying is that when Jesus Christ saved you, he saved you from your sin and the hell that is to come. No pun intended, it's literal. Jesus talked about hell twice as much as he did heaven and today you can go listen and watch some of the most famous "communicators of Christianity" and they will rarely, if ever, use the word sin or hell in any of their presentations. And yet the very first thing that God gives us is, "Don't forget it was your sin that put you in this place and it was hell that you were headed to." In other words, it's a very fresh reminder that salvation isn't about feeling better about ourselves or having "purpose" in our life, salvation is being saved from our sin and a devil's hell for all of eternity.

The second thing in chapter 2, if you'll fast forward with me, is that you and I, once we're saved, we're called to a life of service. Verses 10 through 12 says,

10 Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: 11 As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children, 12 That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

Now I want you to notice what Paul says. We came to exhort, we came to charge, we came to encourage. What you do not find in chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians is the Apostle Paul showing up to a church going, "You know what? I sure do like you people, but it's just not quite the worship style that I prefer." Oh, I've done done meddling now. In other words, you and I today live in a consumer-based culture that has seeped into our churches. It's about what I like, what I prefer, my preferences, whatever it may be, and unfortunately we live in a world that we will plug in until it no longer feels good and then we will "plug out." But what did the Apostle Paul say? "I came to give. I came to charge. I came to serve." What we must understand is that first century biblical Christianity is not about what pleases my flesh or makes me happy, it's what can I give to make you the person that God needs you and desires you to be. In other words, the first thing God told us about this Christianity is we're saved from sin from hell, and when we gather together we should not have the mindset what can I get but what can I give. It's a completely

different concept than most of what is proclaimed and advocated in our modern-day Western culture today.

The third thing we discover at the end of chapter 2 is a concept that we often refer to as spiritual warfare. It says in verse 18,

18 Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again;
but Satan hindered us.

Verse 5 of chapter 3,

5 For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith,
lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in
vain.

Several years ago, there was a "Christian research entity" that was surveying people who claimed to be born again Christians. A frightening discovery that, and this was several years ago so I'm sure it's "worse now," that roughly 40% of people who claimed to be born again Christians did not believe that whom we know as Satan or the devil was a real entity but he was just a figment of imagination or just, shall we say, one to blame bad and/or evil upon. Do you notice what happens in chapter 2, verse 18? Paul calls him out by name, "Satan hindered us." Then he says in chapter 3, verse 5, "lest the tempter tempt you." One of the greatest travesties of our contemporary Christian culture is this ideology that if you love Jesus everything's gonna go the way that you scripted in life. We call it the prosperity gospel, this health, this wealth, that because I love Jesus everything's going to work out the way I desire and the way I want. I've got news for you: the first Christians 20 years after the resurrection, Satan is hindering them and he's tempting them to "quit, give up that which God has started in their life." In fact, every single passage that you find in the New Testament that talks about this concept of spiritual warfare, that we are in a battle that cannot be seen with our eyes or heard with our ears, is actually written to those that already believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Not the lost world but the saved world. Today, I jokingly used the word "entitled" numerous times and I've done so strategically on purpose because somehow we've bought into this idea that biblical Christianity means the life that I scripted without deviation. There are times that when you are living for the Lord, he, Satan is gonna show up and he's gonna mess up your life. He's going to hinder you. He's going to tempt you.

He was called out by name and his main, shall we say, descriptor, temptation is described in 1 Thessalonians which leads to the fourth thing. We've discovered what salvation is, that we're called to serve not to consume, that Satan is real and he is active and he wants to hinder us, the fourth thing is what we call sanctification and that's a big Bible word that means to be set apart, to be different, that your life should look different than the world that is around you. Look in chapter 3, verse 13. It says,

13 To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

There's that word "holy," to be distinct, to be different. I'm going to share with you a biblical expression that unfortunately doesn't garner much applause in today's culture: God has not and does not desire for your life to necessarily be happy but holy, and we live in a world today that says if it doesn't make me happy, I'm out. If I don't enjoy it, I'm out. God has called us to holiness, not necessarily happiness.

Notice what it says in verse 3 of chapter 4,

3 For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication:

But how many times do we hear somebody say, "But you don't understand. I like being with that person because that person makes me happy"? Well, they may make you happy but that does not make that union holy. It says avoid that which is of an intimate relationship that is not ordained by God. Even if they celebrate it and parade it, it's not holy.

Verse 6,

6 That no man go beyond and defraud his brother

There's a whole list, we'll get to this in a few weeks, where it talks about that we should not just desire the happiness of economic or prosperity gain at the expense of those that are around us. I've heard people joke about taking advantage of others and say, "Well, you don't understand, that's just good business." It might make you happy but it doesn't make you holy. You see, God's call is of holiness.

Now think about these four clear addresses, that we are saved from our sin and hell, we are called to give and not to have the perspective of getting, that Satan is real and wants to tempt and hinder us, and that we've been called to live holy whether it makes us happy and/or not. So what's the fifth and the final thing? Beginning in chapter 4, verse 13, most of the end of what we know as 1 Thessalonians is dealing with the Second Coming. That's right, in fact, it's alluded to back in chapter 1, verse 9 and 10, this famous passage that there's coming a day where those who are alive in Christ, dead in Christ, will be caught up together to be with the Lord and that he will come eventually with us to reign over the earth. Chapter 4:13 through chapter 5:9 is dealing with what we know as the Second Coming and I've got news for you: for every passage that you find in your Bible that talks about what we proverbially call the First Coming, you will find eight about the Second Coming. Jesus talked a whole lot more about the one day when he would come with his saints to reign than he did his earthly ministry preparing us to understand the gravity of our sin and our need to be saved.

One of the issues that we struggle with is that this old world has so consumed us that we have created, for lack of better terms, our own heaven on earth. I close with this. Some years ago, a friend of mine invited me to speak and preach at a respective local church. It was one of those special invites and he said, "Jeff, I know this is kind of your wheelhouse, this is kind of what you do, I want you to come and talk about the Second Coming. I want you to talk about the book of Revelation. I want you to address it in a concise but thorough biblical manner." As oftentimes happens in a Baptist church, there was a meal that was prepared in advance. You know the standard issue, if you don't know the standard issue, a Baptist meal is pot roast, potatoes and carrots, but that's what it was. We were in a home. The pastor and some of the staff were there. There were some lay leaders from the church. The lady that hosted this dinner, the lady who prepared this meal was so cordial, so kind, so generous in her labor and her efforts. I'll never forget toward the end of the meal, you could just tell her countenance was different. She said, "Jeff, are you really coming tonight to talk about the Second Coming?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "It's been a privilege to have you in my home. It's been a privilege to cook this meal." She said, "But I want you to know I'm not going to be there tonight." I said, "What? Is there a problem?" And I'll never forget what came out of her mouth. She goes, "You know, I'm gonna be honest with you, I don't want to hear about it because I kind of like things the way they are."

Now I want you to let that just kind of settle in for just a moment. You know that you're not doing things the way the first century church did when you're more interested in prolonging your existence on earth than you are residing in the glories of heaven for all of eternity, and one of the biggest struggles that we've got in our contemporary Christianity, sure there is debate and discussion about the who and the how and the what and the expressions, but I think all of us would be willing to admit today we struggle, particularly in this culture, about we so want to make this existence better but that which cannot compare is awaiting for us. The book of 1 Thessalonians almost 20% of it deals with Jesus coming to deliver us from this present evil world and yet how many of us will make eternal life-long decisions based on just a few more months or years on this "terrestrial" ball?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe this morning as we come to this time in the service, maybe you're that individual who the Spirit of God took the word of God and really got your attention and you realized that amidst the rhetoric and the communication that you've missed the most important piece, that salvation piece, that your sins have not been confessed and saved by Jesus Christ and your eternity is not heaven but much the opposite. The Bible says in Romans 10:13 whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Maybe today is the day as we begin a journey through the first things that God shared with us, maybe today at whatever age or stage of your life you deal with the first thing that needs to happen today and that you are forgiven of your sins and you are saved. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Notice it doesn't talk about becoming a Baptist. It doesn't talk about joining a church. It doesn't talk about starting this and stopping that. It just says calling on the name of the Lord. Maybe today you're that one who needs to call out. It's not that you say a certain phrase or a certain set of words in a certain order that I or somebody else might say. This is your

heart's cry but maybe your heart's cry would go a little something like this. "Lord Jesus, today I confess that I have sinned. Lord, I have been places I should not have been. I have done things I should not have done. God, I have spoken words that should have never left my lips. And God, you know the thoughts that have been between my ears and, Lord, your word says that the result or the wages of my sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So today, God, I believe that I have a sin problem that only Jesus can solve. God, today I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf, he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe he died a sacrificial death paying the price and the penalty for my sin on his cross. And God, today I believe that when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, he made it possible for my sin to be forgiven and for my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have the answers to all the issues and the problems and the difficulties of this life but there's one thing I know for sure, Jesus Christ is the only one who can save me from my sin problem. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, maybe today in this place you're that person who cried out to the Lord. In just a moment, we're going to stand and sing and we've got a whole team set aside, a room set aside, we would love the opportunity if you would just step out and step forward, we'd love the privilege of praying with you and for you about whatever decision whether that decision for salvation or maybe today you say, "Pastor, I'm already saved but I need to follow in believer's baptism." Or maybe you've already got that covered and say, "I need to be a part of this incredible, Bible-focused, foundational church." Whatever decision, we're here for you. But maybe today you say, "You know what, pastor, I've got all that covered. I don't need to step out and step forward." But maybe today as you make your way to Bible study, as you make your way to your Sunday school class, maybe the Holy Spirit is showing you the areas of your life that have become more like the world than they have the word.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, whatever it is that you have spoken to our lives through your word, may we simply respond appropriately. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.