

December 6, 2020
Sunday Evening Service
Series: 1 Thessalonians
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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IDENTIFIED WITH CHRIST 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Joel Osteen's book, "Your Best Life Now," has been around for almost twenty years now. But it really was not a new idea or sudden inspiration that took the world by surprise. It is just more "health, wealth, and prosperity" gospel. It is nothing more than self-help, pop-psychology that throws in an occasional reference to God and a Bible verse to make it look like it is a great truth from heaven. Essentially the message is, "God helps those who think well of themselves."

It appears from this letter that Paul wrote to new Christians in Thessalonica that he was totally unaware of the "think well and live a wonderful life" theology. This letter, like most of Paul's letters, presents two certain realities which followers of Christ do well to acknowledge and by which we should plan to live.

The first reality is that we become followers of Christ, not by thinking positively but by being inundated by the supernatural message of salvation. By grace, God the Holy Spirit overwhelms us with the saving message of the gospel, we confess and repent of sin, God forgives us, and we are miraculously born again. That is a very positive reality. It is the beginning of a wonderful life in Christ. That is our best life now.

The second reality is that because we are now indwelt by God the Holy Spirit, and because we desire to live like Christ, the sinful world in which we must live will treat us like they treated Christ. In a very real way, that is a negative reality. No one likes to be persecuted. Psychiatrists and commonsense have a diagnosis for people like that which concludes that they need help. But rejection, mockery, segregation, and physical and relational persecution are to

be expected for those who want to live like Christ. That too is your best life now – but certainly not the kind that Joel Osteen sells.

This text from Paul's letter to believers living in ancient Thessalonica offers important lessons that are valuable for us as we try to live the Christian ("like Christ") kind of life. It is a most wonderful life because it flows out of the supernatural Word of God. It is a difficult life because Satan's world relates to us just like it related to the true King, Jesus Christ.

A Positive Reality (vv.13-14a).

A very positive reality is that Christ's followers receive the Word of God (v.13). The person who does not receive the Word of God will never be a follower of Christ, regardless of what he or she might claim. The messengers of the Word are very thankful because those sinners received the message. *And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us (v.13a).*

This is not the first time we have heard how we should be thankful to God for His regenerating of sinners. Paul mentioned this idea at the beginning of the letter. *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers (1 Thessalonians 1:2).* Are messengers of the gospel thankful for the people and how they responded to the gospel? Yes. But on a deeper level we are thankful to God because it was His supernatural work that brought the change into the pagans' lives. We are not miraculously born again because we are so smart or because we work so diligently doing "good things."

Therefore, the thankfulness is connected with the people's response to the messengers' message. They *received* it, they took it to themselves, they embraced it, they owned it. It was not a matter of hearing and tacitly agreeing or even agreeing in principle. Being born again is not a matter of agreeing that confessing sin is a good idea. A person is born again when the Word of God impacts them uniquely as only the Word of God can do.

That means that a very important part of the process was that the people heard the Word of God from "us," that is Paul, Silas, and Timothy (1:1). Do you wonder how those messengers shared the

Word of God? Was it one-on-one conversation with folks at the local coffee shop? That is a possibility (maybe not the coffee part). Did they share the good news in small groups of discussion? That is possible, maybe even likely.

But, the messengers definitely told the people the good news through preaching and teaching. We know this because Luke recorded how they engaged in that very practice. *And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ" (Acts 17:2-3).*

Notice the word *reasoned* in verse two. That Greek word is translated in the New Testament as "to dispute" (6 times) and "to preach" (2 times). Then we find the word *proclaim* in verse three. That is the special Greek word *katangelo* which literally means "according to (*kata*) the news sent from God (*angelo*)." Our English translation means to proclaim the gospel, to preach, to declare the good news.

Preaching, teaching, proclaiming the Word of God is the ministry of the messenger of the gospel. Ten times in *Acts* we learn that Paul went everywhere preaching, proclaiming, arguing for the good news of the Scriptures (*reasoned*). Also ten times in *Acts* we see that Paul went everywhere preaching (*proclaim*). Preaching God's Word is essential in the founding, building, and maintaining of Christ's Church.

We live in a very dangerous, deceptive age where the preaching of the Scriptures is minimized, exchanged for dialogue, avoided because it makes the modern listener uncomfortable. But notice that we should be thankful that sinners grasped the character of the message. Paul was thankful because people in Thessalonica *accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers (v.13).*

Is the Bible the Word of God? That is still the motivating question: Is the Bible the very word of God or is it the words of men? An affirmative answer to that question will be demonstrated by a life of faithful, dependable service to Christ in His Body the Church. An uncertain or negative answer will be obvious in weak, self-centered cultural religion that will not endure the smallest inconveniences.

The Bible is the Word of God. But it is also true that God used mere human instruments to communicate His message, the Scripture. God used men to record the words. Peter wrote, *Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).* But being carried along, those men wrote what God breathed out. We rest assured that *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).*

Because the Scripture is the breath of God, *it is at work in you believers (v.13b).* The Greek word for *work* in this verse means just that. It means that the Bible is busy at work, making something happen. The Word of God energizes us which has an effect in us. The work of the Bible is producing confession, repentance, and sanctification.

On one hand, this emphasizes the importance of preaching the Bible. Why does the New Testament so strongly emphasize public preaching of God's Word? Paul tells us, *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28).* Because the Scripture is so powerful to mature everyone who receives it into the image of Christ, Paul challenged Pastor Timothy, *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Timothy 4:1-2).*

In telling the gospel messenger to preach the Word, Paul used the Greek word *keirusso* which originally meant to declare the king's message faithfully, clearly, and accurately. Sixty times this great word describes the work of John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, the messengers of the gospel throughout the New Testament. Why is this public proclamation of the Bible so important? God has ordained that He does something special, a supernatural work, through the preaching of His Word.

That truth leads us to two sober warnings. First, to ignore the preaching of God's Word, to exchange it for human wisdom and experience, to treat it lightly has to bring negative, maybe spiritually

deadly results. A brief overview of what has happened to individuals, churches, and whole cultures throughout history reveals the result of people de-emphasizing the Bible.

A second sober warning is that to take up the responsibility of engaging in a supernatural task week after week is a frightening prospect. Paul put it like this: *For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:16)!*

An additional sobering thought is that in the accurate preaching of the Bible, God Himself literally speaks to the listener through the messenger. If the messenger has any fear of God, that is a very sobering reality, a part of the positive reality of embracing the gospel.

Another positive reality is that Christ's followers look similar (v.14a). That is because there is a process of imitation taking place. That is what Paul referred to when he wrote, *For you, brothers, became imitators (v.14a)*. Again, he had already addressed this idea in the letter when he wrote, *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord . . . (1 Thessalonians 1:6)*.

Often the Bible admonishes us to imitate. We are to imitate the messenger as the messenger imitates Christ (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1). We are to imitate God like children imitate their fathers (Ephesians 5:1). We are to imitate those who inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:12). The word requires us to consciously pattern our lives after other people who are patterning their lives after Christ.

To that end, the new Christians in Thessalonica were taking on the characteristics of the Churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea (v.14b) which must make them all look the same. The churches are the assemblies of God, the assemblies in Christ Jesus. These assemblies are specifically identified because there were a lot of different kinds of assemblies, recognized assemblies like trade guilds, assemblies with which 1st century Roman citizens would be familiar.

We are uniquely the assemblies of God in Christ. Through the preaching of His Word and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, God calls His people together. We are unlike other assemblies because we belong to God and are only assembled in Christ. Therefore, it is foolish for us to pattern our assembly, our gathering together, after the assemblies of the world.

The pastor of the church is not a CEO. The operation of the church is not like the assembly of clubs or earthly organizations. The purpose of the church is not to entertain like the assemblies of the world do. The other day I saw a sign that invites people to attend a "Jingle Jazz" event at a local church. That is a happy, fun time of secular Christmas music and entertainment where for a couple of minutes at the end a speaker sneaks in the good news of the gospel. The assemblies of God in Christ are not to be entertainers.

Because we are all brought into the Church the same way, and because we are in the same process of sanctification, local assemblies should appear to be similar in many ways. We should look like we are set free from sin. Our lives ought to be characterized by being eternally focused. Our lives and corporate meetings should look like we are exalting God and serving Christ by ministering to others. This is a good life. A far better life than being enslaved to sin.

A Negative Reality (vv.14b-16).

While it is true that followers of Christ begin to look alike, it is also true that they suffer alike (vv.14b-15a). We will suffer the "same" things. *For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews (v.14b), who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out (v.15a)*. As in the previous section, Paul already mentioned this truth in 1:6. *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:6)*.

Because God calls sinners out of Satan's assembly into the assembly of Christ, they are instantly loyal to King Jesus. The world is offended by that because the separation makes the world look bad. See the story in Acts 17 about what happened when Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica. The Jews responded by persecuting the believers: *But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities (Acts 17:5-6a)*.

Furthermore, those persecutors accused the preachers of proclaiming sedition. They were shouting, "These men who have

turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and **they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.**” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things (Acts 17:6b-8). Actually, their accusation was true. When God puts us in Christ’s kingdom at salvation, we forsake the Prince of this world (Satan) and we take up complete loyalty to King Jesus.

Paul warned the new believers that the same people who persecuted King Jesus will persecute His followers. On one hand, it was Jewish people who persecuted Jesus throughout His ministry and finally stirred up the people to force the Romans to kill Him. On the other hand, not all Jews were guilty. Especially during Paul’s ministry many Jewish people confessed their sins and came into Christ’s kingdom through the new birth.

In the very first days, the Church was being built on Jewish people who were born again. But the devout Jewish religionists from Jerusalem dogged Paul’s steps and continually stirred up Jews and Gentiles alike to oppose the gospel. It is simply a reminder that sinners who hate Christ will also hate Christ’s followers.

Therefore, we who embrace Christ will suffer like Christ did. Paul warned the new Christians that they would receive persecution *from the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out (vv.14b-15a)*. The Lord Jesus suffered to death. It was God-denying, apostate Jews who were responsible for Jesus’ death. The same kind of people had killed the prophets in the Old Testament times.

Jesus reminded this kind of people in His day: *“Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar” (Matthew 23:31-35).*

Jesus wept because of their attitude. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Luke 13:34).*

Nothing changed after Jesus turned the gospel ministry over to His messengers. Stephen reminded the Jews, *Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered (Acts 7:52)*. The converts throughout the first century were driven out like Paul and the team were driven out of city after city. Indeed, human history is the story of one human persecuting, murdering another person made in God’s image because of hatred against God the Creator. The problem actually began with the second generation of the human race when Cain killed Abel for obeying God. *We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous (1 John 3:12).*

If you are paying attention to events, movements, and trends in your own society, you are aware of the great divide. Many people, talking heads, speak of the great political divide. That is actually only one manifestation of the divide. The great divide is over divergent world views. There are essentially only two in our culture. There is the Christian world view that believes the Bible and that matters of life are clearly explained by God and His work. There is the secular world view that denies God and tries to explain problems and crime through deficient human reason.

The secular world view has replaced God with self which leads one of their chief prophets, Jeremy Rifkin, to write: “We no longer feel ourselves to be guests in someone else’s home and therefore obliged to make our behavior conform with a set of preexisting cosmic rules. We make the rules. We establish the parameters of reality. We create the world, and because we do, we no longer feel beholden to outside forces. We no longer have to justify our behavior, for we are now the architects of the universe. We are responsible for nothing outside ourselves, for we are the kingdom, the power and the glory forever.” (Quoted by Scott David Allen, *Why Social Justice is not Biblical Justice*,” Grand Rapids: Credo, 2020, 59.)

People who think like that will not tolerate people like us who die to the “self-god” in order to live for King Jesus. But we do not have to retaliate. God promises that the resistors of Christ will be judged (vv.15b-16). They must be because persecutors displease God. They *displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—(15b-16a)*. Self-righteous people who replace God with themselves displease God. They reject their Creator. Then they despise everyone who does not agree with their rebellion.

As a result, according to God’s assessment, they oppose all humanity. On one hand, it becomes obvious as their actions and the rules they force on others literally destroy humanity. There are many examples of where this kind of rebellion against God leads. This is the wicked foundation of Hitler’s Nazism that made great strides in wiping out the entire Jewish race, killing 6 million in prison camps. This is the heart of Mao Tse Tung whose genocide killed 45 million of his own people. It is the motivation of Pol Pot who reshaped Cambodia by killing 2 million of the citizens.

And this is the dark heart of the abortion industry that is responsible for the death of over 55 million innocent babies and are anxiously looking forward to killing more by expanding the laws.

On the other hand, the worst opposition to humanity comes from those who impede the gospel. God desires for everyone to hear the good news of salvation. Wicked sinners, slaves to sin, pawns of Satan are motivated to stop the spread of the gospel. It is easy for us to become almost sinful in our anger about the damage these people are doing and will do even in our own nation. But we should not fret. God, the great Avenger, is in charge.

God warns that the persecutors are filling up the measure of sin. They impede the gospel *so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God’s wrath has come upon them at last (v.16b)!* They are filling up the measure of their sins. Often a cup pictures God’s predetermined level of wrath. Jerusalem would drink the cup of God’s wrath until God takes away their “cup of staggering” (Isaiah 51:17, 22). It is a “cup of horror and indignation” (Ezekiel 23:33). Jesus often spoke of the cup of God’s wrath against sin that He had to drink (Luke 22:42).

One day the cup reaches capacity and God pours out His wrath. He will pour out wrath on individuals, such as those who oppose the gospel. In the last days, God will pour out His wrath on those who receive the mark of the beast. *He also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb (Revelation 14:10)*. He does and will pour out His wrath on specific nations, and ultimately against the entire world. God pouring out His wrath on such people is inevitable. *But God’s wrath has come upon them at last (v.16b)!*

We all come to salvation through Christ the same way. We who come to Christ take on His characteristics and look very similar to each other in lifestyle. We who come to Christ will in similar ways be persecuted and rejected for being like Him. But those who persecute, those who oppose the gospel will all be alike as they drink dry the cup of God’s wrath.