



1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 5:20–24

November 6, 2013

Introduction

As Paul is drawing this epistle to a close, he recognized that the impact of his personal ministry among the Thessalonians would only have a limited effect. They needed something more. Their sanctification in the Lord was not wholly dependent upon Paul. What they needed was God and His word. This is the subject of verses 20–24. If we want to grow in sanctification, we also must hold fast to the truths of Scripture.

Exhortations Regarding Other Christian Responsibilities (5:12–22)

We have been examining several responsibilities involving a believer's relationship toward God. These responsibilities culminate and ultimately rest upon the foundation of the word of God.

Responsibilities toward God (vv. 16–22)

Of the eight responsibilities in these verses, we have already seen four: 1) rejoice always; 2) pray without ceasing; 3) give thanks in everything; and 4) don't quench the Spirit. The final four are all interrelated and involve our examination and evaluation of all things.

Do Not Despise Prophecies (v. 20)

Prophecies in this context refers to the New Testament gift of prophecy that was available in the early church (1 Cor 12:10). This gift was important for the early church because they did not have a completed New Testament as we have today. Remember that 1 Thessalonians was one of the first New Testament books to be written, following James and possibly Galatians. God's solution for overcoming this lack of written New Testament revelation in the early church was to provide them with prophets who could verbally declare His word. The book of 1 Corinthians is the only one that deals with this gift at length, in part because there were so many abuses taking place. But from verse 20, we understand that this gift was widely available throughout many, if not all early church congregations. The instruction given here is not to despise these prophecies. In effect, Paul is saying not to despise God's

words! After the New Testament was completed, the gift of prophecy was no longer necessary and it passed off the scene (1 Cor 13:8–10; Eph 2:20). Today this instruction still has relevance for us. Every word of the New Testament was essentially a prophecy (word from the Lord) at the time it was written. We should not despise these written prophecies today!

On the surface, this may sound like an easy thing to accomplish. However, there are many professing believers who will approach the Bible with a pair of scissors, trimming away certain parts they find distasteful. So ask yourself: do you despise the teachings of the Bible? Do you believe God’s word when it talks about the certainty of future judgment? Submission in the home and at church? Obeying the government? Homosexuality as a sin? Abortion as murder? The borrower being slave to the lender? A literal six-day creation of the universe? We cannot treat the Bible as a selective shopping experience. It is profitable for us in its entirety from cover to cover.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

~2 Tim 3:16–17 NIV

Test All Things (v. 21a)

Verse 21 begins with the contrastive word *de* (δέ) in the Greek. So in effect, the verse could be rendered this way: “but test all things...” Paul is not completely changing subjects here. However, he has now expanded to a wider sphere than just prophecies. He is saying that we should test *all things* — including, but not limited to, prophecies. With regard to prophecies themselves, Paul told the Corinthian church that when a prophet spoke the others were to listen and judge whether that prophecy was from the Lord (1 Cor 14:29). But this verse extends beyond prophetic utterances and involves all things generally. This includes things that are spiritual in nature — sermons, Bible studies, evangelistic conversations, etc. It can also include anything else we encounter — instruction at school, conversations with coworkers, TV programs, commercials, movies, political speeches, interactions with family members, etc. Everything we see, hear, or experience should be tested against the perfect standard of God’s word. Notice the results:

Hold Fast to What is Good (v. 21b)

The first outcome of this kind of testing is that we should cling to that

which is good. These are things that pass the test and should be retained faithfully, adhered to firmly, and embraced wholeheartedly. So how do we know what is good? Try this as a starting point:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

~Phil 4:8 NIV

Abstain from Every Form of Evil (v. 22)

The second result of testing all things should be us avoiding every form of evil. The KJV gives the impression that we are only talking about external impressions that look bad but are not necessarily wrong: “abstain from all appearance of evil.” But the word for “evil” is not talking about mere appearances. It speaks of things which are *inherently* bad, wicked, worthless, degenerate, or base. Whether or not it *looks* bad is not the issue. If it *is* evil, avoid it. If it *is* a bad teaching from someone claiming to teach the Bible, get rid of it!

Our culture is filled with “things,” and there are many more forms of evil than there are of good. Some of these things pertain directly to “prophecies” in the sense of modern-day Bible teachings. Beyond that there is a whole slew of other things that we should weigh carefully as believers. When we learn to do this as Christians, we will be following in close step with the Bereans (Acts 17:11; cf. 1 John 4:1).

Paul’s Prayer for the Thessalonians (vv. 23–24)

Paul’s goal in all of these responsibilities is that believers would be wholly sanctified in their entire person until the Lord’s coming. When Jesus returns at the Rapture, Paul does not want any believer to have cause for blame or fault that could stain their account. We do recognize the tension here in that none of us is truly blameless or perfect while in our corrupted bodies, which are still disposed toward sinful things. But that should not dissuade us from this lofty goal. The whole purpose of progressive sanctification is that we are becoming ever more Christ-like. As long as we are making progress in the right direction, we are in a good spot.

But we are not left to fend for ourselves in striving for this goal. We have the promise of God (v. 24) that He Himself will bring this to pass! Thank God that our sanctification is not entirely dependent upon us. If that were the case we would most certainly fail! But God is faithful

toward each and every believer, and will sanctify us thoroughly until the day we are called home — whether that be in death or the Rapture. This should be a great comfort for all who believe!

The Constitution of Man

While the issue of man’s constitution is not the main point of verse 23, the issue is often raised because of the three-fold terminology Paul uses in describing man — spirit, soul, and body. Two views have been suggested in defining man’s constitution. He is either a trichotomy, made of three parts: body, soul, and spirit; or he is a dichotomy, made of two parts: the material (body) and the immaterial (soul/spirit). Each of these positions has strong proponents, but these notes will reflect the current author’s position: trichotomy.

Body

Both views agree that the first component of man is a physical/material body. Man’s body was formed from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7) and made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). This “image of God” is carried by every human being, male and female.

While there is little debate surrounding man’s physical body, the same is not the case when we move to the terms soul and spirit. There are several passages where these two terms seem to be used somewhat interchangeably to refer to the same things. However, two important verses should be noted: 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12. It is not the Scripture writer’s intent in either verse to directly teach a trichotomy view. However, the clear implication of these texts is that there is a three-fold division to each and every human being.

Soul

The second component of man is a soul. This is produced by the union of a body and a spirit (Gen 2:7). The soul in effect stands for the person. It relates to the body through the brain and at times through the sensory organs as well. Biblically, the soul expresses man’s individuality as a human being. Soul can at times also stand for human life in an abstract sense. When a person dies his/her soul departs from the body and is ushered into heaven or hades.

Spirit

Man’s spirit is the seat of human personality. It consists of several facets including: rationality or intelligence, self-determination, and

disposition. Thus, the spirit is basically the image of God. It is the part of man that enables him to interact with God on a spiritual level. But even though man's personality resides in his spirit, it relates to the body through the soul. Thus the soul is what bridges the connection between the body and the spirit. We also know because of the Fall that mankind is spiritually dead, or unresponsive to the things of God without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in salvation. This explains why sanctification, or the cultivation of one's spiritual life, is chiefly concerned with the status of one's spirit (cf. Rom 12:2). While every human being has a spirit, not everyone can grow spiritually because the unbeliever's spirit is dead to the things of God.

The Propagation of Souls

How do new human souls and spirits come about? There have been three theories suggested: pre-existence, creationism, and traducianism.

Pre-Existence

This view holds that all human souls were created by God at the beginning of time. They exist in a conscious state prior to being born, at which time they are placed into a human body by God. This is done because of some past sin, for which they are condemned to live out a life in a sinful human body. This view was taught in the Apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon* (8:19–20) and is also supported by Philo, The Jewish Talmud and Kabbalah, Origen, and Justin Martyr. It was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in the 6th century. Among other problems this view lacks empirical evidence and fails to account for the origin of sin in Genesis 3. Orthodox Christians today have squarely rejected this view.

Creationism

This view is held commonly by the majority of Reformed theologians. It holds that the soul and spirit of a human are directly created by God and placed into a new body. Thus the body is created by the parents, but the soul and spirit are created by God. The problem with this view is that it makes God directly responsible for the creation of sinful souls. It also destroys the physical unity of the human race. This view asserts that only the body is passed on through genetic lines. And yet the race descended from Adam as people, not simply bodies. In addition, Creationism cannot account for psychological likeness between parents and children.

Traducianism

While most reformed theologians hold to creationism, some have also espoused the traducian position. The term comes from the Latin term *tradux* meaning “to sprout or shoot.” This view teaches that parents generate persons (i.e. body, soul, and spirit) by physical procreation. This seems to be the biblical view for three reasons:

- 1) It preserves the unity of the human race. When Seth was born, Scripture says that Adam passed on his likeness to his son, according to his image (Gen 5:3). This shows that God’s image is passed on to the human race through procreation, and procreation produces persons, not simply bodies.
- 2) It preserves inherited depravity. The moral pollution of sin is transmitted through human bloodlines. Since both material and immaterial aspects are procreated, this pollution affects man’s total personality — body (Rom 8:10), mind (Rom 8:5–7), will (John 8:34), and heart (Jer 17:9) — from the moment of conception (Psalm 51:5).
- 3) It preserves the hypostatic union and the sinlessness of Christ. When the body of Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb, no new person was produced because no procreation had taken place. There were not two persons dwelling in the body of Christ, as some heretics have suggested. There are two natures (the divine and the human) in the *one* person of Christ. Traducianism also protects Jesus from being imputed with the sin of Adam (Rom 5:12). Since sin is only passed on through the *union* of a man and a woman, the Word could therefore take on human flesh (John 1:14) through the virgin birth (Matt 1:23–25) without the problem of imputed sin.
- 4) It preserves God’s seventh day rest. God ended His program of creation on the sixth day (Gen 2:2). Creationism would have this be an ongoing program of soul creation throughout human history.

Conclusion

Paul’s desire is that the Thessalonians and all who would read this letter would be sanctified in their whole person — body, soul, and spirit. As we learn to follow the truths of God’s word and live according to His plan, we can be assured that He who began a good work in us will complete it until the day of Christ’s return! (Phil 1:6). ~AWB