

Holiness Within and Without: A Narrative Sermon

I Thess. 1:1-10; 2:13

Brent D. Hulett

There was something special about the city of Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul believed. Because of its location on the main International Highway called the Egnatian Road, people were required to go through that town to travel from the East to the West. It possessed a famous harbor which became a strategic converging point of culture and commerce. It was a perfect place for Paul to plant the new Church of Jesus Christ. And he did just that.

The church began to grow and produce fruit. This cosmopolitan church began to reach out to areas that many other churches were unable to do. They caught on to what the Church was to do. It was one of those churches that young pastors would love to be assigned to as their first church.

External Christians

It seemed on the outside that the church was doing everything that a growing body of believers was supposed to do. The first chapter of I Thessalonians describes all that they were doing right:

1. They applied their Christian faith in their daily lives to produce spiritual fruit (1 Th 1:3).
2. They were chosen by God (1 Th 1:4).
3. They imitated the lifestyle of the apostles and became model Christians (1 Th 1:6-7).
4. They shared the gospel with others in their city and in other countries (1 Th 1:8).
5. They turned from their sins and served God (1 Th 1:9).
6. They lived by the Word of God (1 Th 2:13).
7. They were persecuted because they loved Christ (1 Th 2:14).

For all obvious purposes the Church at Thessalonica was a great church. But in I Thessalonians 3:10 the rosy smell of their spiritual father's letter came to a quick end—as would an unexpected punch in the stomach. Paul writes: “*Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.*”

I can imagine the readers looking up from the parchment letter and wondering what Paul was getting to: “Why is he giving us so much positive attention?” “What is Paul getting to?” “What’s so bad with the good things we are doing?” “If we are doing so well as a church, what’s the problem?”

I wonder if they were beginning to allow their good works to become a proud ecclesiastical robe that protected them from dealing with the very nature of who they were and how they treated each other at a very personal level?

I wonder if there was a sense of completeness or accomplishment coming from this uptown, cosmopolitan church that created a false sense of spiritual life?

Internal and External Holiness

Paul didn’t beat around the bush—he was brutally up front with his people. At first glance, Paul

described the need for inward purity with two very odd and diverse examples:

"It is God's will that you be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (4:3-5).
"... No one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him" (4:6).

At first reading, my first response was, "What shallow descriptors of what it does *not* mean to live a holy life?" Why not give examples of what this Christian church probably dealt with? Why deal with issues of impure thoughts? Uncommittedness? Prayerlessness?

But the "aha" moment occurred when I understood the ultimate result of each of these sins. You see when Paul chose sexual immorality and sexual undiscipline as an example, he speaks of an area of our lives which resides at the very darkest and most secretive of our base nature: our sex life. Our choice to sin in the sexual arena meant a crime against our very self—the body that God created in his own image. It is a strategic destruction of our very soul. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "*Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body*" (*I Cor. 6:8*). When we sin against our self, we are defiling the very temple in which God has ordained to dwell.

Paul then gives the opposite example of defrauding our brother. Paul has now gone from the most personal to the most public: taking advantage of one another. Our choice to sin against our brother or sister by *secretly* taking advantage of him stabs at the very nature of our Godly relationship with other Children of God and causing *public* shame. When we sin against our brother's trust, we sever the very social nature of a Christ-community, in which only God's holiness can be fully exemplified.

What Is God's Point?

God is pinpointing the extremes of who we ultimately are, and who we are ultimately sinning against. He then pronounces radical grace. God is saying, "I want to purify your most inward and personal life. I want to make holy the very secretive of your inward being . . . the very essence of who you really are and can be."

God is saying, "I want to sanctify your relationships to others. I want to make holy the Godly formation of the community of Christ. I want to create for you relationships that form maturity and fruitfulness."

Listen: God is focusing the cross-hairs of holiness on the very base nature of our relationship to ourselves and to others, to illustrate that the grace of God can pervade the very deepest of relationships and not just affect only surface godly platitudes.

Moving To Holiness Within and Without

Our question at this juncture is: How do we receive today, what the Thessalonians needed yesterday?

First we must allow the Holy Spirit to recreate us into His own image until our very body becomes a living example of Christ-likeness. We must allow God to mold us until there is ultimate integrity towards one's self.

I wonder what would happen if we took serious the admonition to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to our Lord and Savior? I wonder what would happen if we daily recommitted our passions, recommitted our private thoughts, and recommitted our pleasures to the glory of God.

Secondly, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to purify the very motives that determine your relationship with others. I wonder what would happen if we loved each other so intensely that graceful

acceptance became the covenant by which we related to each other? I wonder what would happen if we trusted each other so deeply until total openness was no longer a liability, but an impetus to stand as sentinels over each other's weaknesses? I wonder what would happen if we shared in such responsible relationships that spiritual accountability became the ultimate expression of our purest love for each other.

Paul's Concluding Benediction

To this wonderment, the gray-haired aging Paul gave the heart-felt benediction to a people stripped of all their outward appearances of churchly activity, and in a passionate voice that only a spiritual father could intone, said: *"May God himself, the God of Peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you, is faithful and He will do it"* (1 Thess 5:23-24).