

You've Got Mail: A Journey Through A Few of Paul's Letters
OBEDIENT – A Letter to the Church in Thessalonica
Janes United Methodist Church
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I Thessalonians 1: 1 (NIV) - *“To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.”*

Thessalonica was the capital and a city of about 200,000 in the Roman province of Macedonia. More importantly, it was located along the Roman highway which ran from Rome to the Orient; therefore, men and women from countless nations, with countless beliefs and faiths, filled the city. For many, Christianity was seen as a threat. Paul had established the first church there in A.D. 50 but we are told in Acts 17 that he had to escape the city because his life was threatened.

Paul is writing the Thessalonians about a year later in A.D. 51...



...having heard that there are problems including false teachings, disobedience, misconceptions about Jesus' second coming, persecution, and failure to avoid the diverse surrounding cultures, many which stood in opposition to what Christ taught. Paul writes II Thessalonians only a year after his first letter as the issues in the church continued.

One of Paul's major themes in his letters to the Thessalonians is OBEDIENCE.

I Thessalonians 4: 1-8 (NKJV) - ***“Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in***

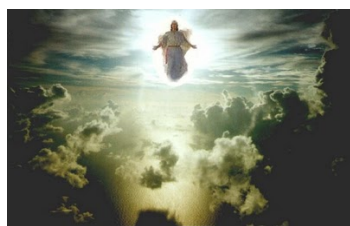
holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.”

I like the Message version of this scripture – I Thessalonians 4: 1-8 (The Message) – *“One final word, friends. We ask you—urge is more like it—that you keep on doing what we told you to do to please God, not in a dogged religious plod, but in a living, spirited dance. You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master Jesus. God wants you to live a pure life. Keep yourselves from sexual promiscuity. Learn to appreciate and give dignity to your body, not abusing it, as is so common among those who know nothing of God. Don't run roughshod over the concerns of your brothers and sisters. Their concerns are God's concerns, and he will take care of them. We've warned you about this before. God hasn't invited us into a disorderly, unkempt life but into something holy and beautiful—as beautiful on the inside as the outside. If you disregard this advice, you're not offending your neighbors; you're rejecting God, who is making you a gift of his Holy Spirit.”*

God's Word tells us, in Deuteronomy 5:32, *“You must obey all the commands of the Lord your God, following his instructions in every detail. Stay on the path that the Lord your God has commanded you to follow...”* James 1:22, *“And remember, [God's Word] is a message to obey, not just to listen to.”*

We are called as Christians to obedience...As Dr. E.H. Henderson wrote, ***“To disobey Him is the ultimate treason. To say, ‘No, Lord,’ is a contradiction in terms. He is not Lord when He is told ‘No’!”***

A bit later in his letter, Paul talks to the Thessalonians about Jesus' return. I Thessalonians 5: 1-6 (NKJV) – ***“But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.”***



The Message translation puts it this way, *“Since we're creatures of Day, let's act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation.”*

Paul wants the Thessalonians to understand that Christ may return at any moment...*“like a thief in the night”*...and each of us are to be ready...for *“sudden destruction”* will come upon those who are not ready, who live *“in darkness”*...

Paul writes, *“But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day.”*

We are called to live as children of light...creatures of the day...it is the light, Christ, which should define us...

Remember, Paul wrote, back in chapter 4, *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification...”*

The dictionary defines sanctification as *“to make holy”*...*“to set apart”*...

Paul explains that *“the will of God”* is our sanctification...to be made holy...set apart...so that we will be ready when Christ returns *“like a thief in the night”*

1 Thessalonians 5:23 - *“And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification...”

Paul is telling the church in Thessalonica: (1) Christ will come like a *“thief in the night”*; (2) In order to be ready for that moment that Christ returns we must live as children of the light; (3) God wants us to be sanctified, set apart...God wants us to become like His Son, Jesus so that we will be found blameless

We are called to be obedient...Paul continues to describe what obedience looks like...

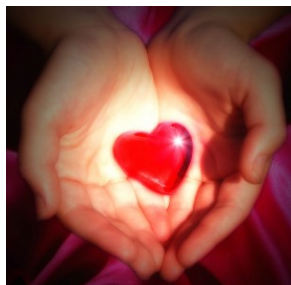
1 Thessalonians 5: 12-22 (NKJV) – *“And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”*

In II Thessalonians 3, Paul goes as far as telling the Christians in Thessalonica to withdraw from anyone who walks disorderly and does not obey God's Word.

Paul wants the Christians in Thessalonica, and us, to remember that *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification,”* that we become like His Son, Jesus. Paul wants us to remember that God desires you and I to be found *“blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”*...so let us live as *“children of the light”*...God is speaking through His servant Paul...and Paul is clear – I Thessalonians 4:8 – *“...he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.”*

I John 2: 3-6 – *“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”*

Obedience is the outward expression of your love for God.



I heard a tremendous testimony of obedience in Lynchburg, VA this past winter at the Men's Wildfire Weekend. Paul Teutul, Jr...



...from American Choppers, spoke. He shared how he met his wife, Rachel, and how during that time in his life, though he was seeking after God, he described his life as one who was *“living in the flesh.”* Paul lived in New York and Rachel lived in New Jersey, so soon after they began dating she moved in with him. They lived together for a year and a half. Paul says *“conviction”* finally took over. A friend invited Paul on a spiritual retreat and on that retreat, while praying, God convicted Paul...Paul describes the moment...*“I got so convicted about my intention with Rachel...God just hit me hard...God said, ‘That’s it...’...and I was convicted and I said, ‘I know*

that's it...Rachel has got to move out'...and God said, 'Yes, Rachel has got to move out'... We got Rachel an apartment...not too far away...we did the right thing...for nine months we lived apart...we kept it pure...and we got married..."



Henry Blackaby, in Experiencing God, writes, *"Some people want God to give them an assignment to do for Him. They vow they will do whatever He asks. But when God observes their lives, He notices they have not obeyed what He has already told them to do. When God gives you Ten Commandments, are you obeying them? When Jesus tells you to love your enemies, are you doing that? When Jesus tells your church to make disciples of all nations, are you doing all you know to obey Him? When God tells you through Scripture to live in unity with your Christian brothers and sisters, are you doing it? God doesn't give you His commands so you can choose the ones you want to obey and neglect the rest. He wants you to obey all His commands from your love relationship with Him. When He sees you are faithful and obedient in a little, He will trust you with more. The Holy Spirit will guide you daily to the specific commands God wants you to obey."*

A couple years ago I had such an experience. I decided to watch a movie so I picked up a comedy called *Bridesmaids*, the story of Annie, whose life is turned upside down when she takes on the Maid of Honor role in her best friend's wedding. This film won critical acclaim, some hailing it as the best comedy of 2011; it was even nominated for two golden globe awards.

I watched it. It was filled with sex, language, immorality, crude jokes and many other moments that were completely contrary to the faith I profess.

The next morning I was reading scripture for my devotion. In the Bible reading plan I am doing, the New Testament scripture for the morning was 2 Corinthians 7...the first verse I read, ***"Because we have these promises, dear friends, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And let us work toward complete holiness because we fear God."***

This was a moment of truth...



I had several choices...I could skip over this verse that hit me that morning as a coincidence, having nothing to do with the Holy Spirit convicting me about what I watched the evening before...I could reject the truth I had just read and rationalize or outright rebel against God, joining the surrounding culture, convincing myself that it wasn't that bad a movie, look at the awards it won, it taught a good message in the end...Or I could allow God's Word to convict me and obey, and in this case, confess and ask forgiveness.

Whenever I have obeyed God...spoken to the person God was convicting me to approach, left teaching to go to seminary and enter ministry, accepted an appointment to serve in Rising Sun, Maryland...traveled to Peru to work with children...Whenever I have been convicted of sin in my life and have confessed that sin, changed the behavior, allowed God to have control...Whenever I have obeyed God, I have been blessed.

Whenever you and I obey God we are blessed...but more importantly, God sees in those moments of obedience our love for Him...that our love is not simply words...

We must ask ourselves, as I'm sure the Thessalonians asked after receiving Paul's letters...Are we in obedience to God...following His guidelines, His rules...reading His Word and trying to live it out...seeking forgiveness when we "fall" and striving to be faithful disciples? Do we refuse to rationalize in order to justify behaviors that the world seems to accept, but God's Word is clearly against? Are we disobeying God, telling Him "no" when it comes to how God wants us to live, who God wants us to forgive, the direction God wants us to walk, the ministry in which God wants us to serve, the people whom God wants us to love?

At times obedience is difficult...it forces us to change behaviors...to swallow our pride...to lose friendships...to make difficult choices...and on our own strength we will fail often...

Jesus taught us in John 15:5 (NKJV) – *"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."*

Paul discovered this truth, where his strength came from, and wrote, Philippians 4:13 (NKJV), – ***"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."***

We are not alone in our struggles... We are not alone in our fight against temptation and the enemy that roams the earth... We are not alone on this journey unless we choose to be.

And don't ever forget when you fall that there is forgiveness... grace... One whose name you can call upon...

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May we pray like the psalmist, Psalm 119: 33-35 (NIV)...

*Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees,
that I may follow it to the end.
Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.
Direct me in the path of your commands,
for there I find delight.
Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.
Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word.
Fulfill your promise to your servant,
so that you may be feared.
Take away the disgrace I dread,
for your laws are good.
How I long for your precepts!
In your righteousness preserve my life.*