

Christian Life in Thessalonians

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a life of holiness, faith, love, joy, cheer, and prayer, as taught in the epistles of Thessalonians.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Topics: "Holiness", "Faithful Living"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the importance of personal holiness in the Christian life as taught in the letters to the Thessalonians. He highlights that true conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit, leading to a life founded on Scripture, characterized by faith, love, joy, prayer, and holiness. Simpson asserts that sanctification is not just an option but the will of God for all believers, and it involves a complete surrender of spirit, soul, and body to God. He encourages Christians to live out their faith practically, demonstrating the transformative power of a sanctified life in their communities. Ultimately, he calls believers to embrace their higher calling and trust in God's faithfulness to fulfill His promises.

Transcript

"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. Faithful is he that calls you, who also will do it." (1 Thes. 5: 23, 24).

We have traced the golden thread of Advent truth through the letters of St. Paul to his early converts at Thessalonica. It will be interesting next to trace the teaching of the Apostle in the same epistles concerning the true preparation for Christ's coming, -- personal holiness. Especially is it interesting to note the manner in which this prince of teachers introduced the subject to comparatively young disciples, for, as we have already seen, the Thessalonians were among his earliest converts, and the Thessalonian epistles were the first of his inspired letters. We shall see that no convert can be too young to be profoundly taught the doctrine of entire sanctification.

We sometimes find that a skillful scientist can restore, from a few fragments of fossil bones, the entire anatomy of some extinct animal that ages ago roamed the primitive earth. So from the few fragments of apostolic teaching that are left us we may reconstruct the ideal of Christian life in the Early Church, and find a high and perfect standard of Christian experience of holy living fitted to instruct, attract, and inspire us to holy imitation.

I. THE EXPERIENCE OF THESE THESSALONIAN CHRISTIANS BEGAN WITH A GENUINE HOLY GHOST CONVERSION

"Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; . . . And you became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost." (1 Thes. 1: 5, 6.) This was no mechanical revival gotten up by sensational excitement, but a powerful work of the Holy Spirit, producing conviction so deep and conversion so thorough that no affliction or persecution could intimidate them; but they joyfully faced the afflictions of the Gospel and took their stand on the side of Christ and His Apostle with boldness and unreserved decision. Their conversion was accompanied with much deep feeling, and especially with joy in the Holy Ghost and full assurance of faith. These men and women knew that they were saved, and they let everybody else know it, too. It is a great thing to be well saved and to have the strong, full tides of a deep spiritual work carry us from the outset to the high level of an out-and-out salvation.

II. THE THESSALONIAN CHRISTIANS HAD AN EXPERIENCE THAT WAS FOUNDED ON THE WORD OF GOD AND ESTABLISHED ON THOROUGHLY SCRIPTURAL LINES

"When you received the word of God which you heard of us," he reminds them, "you received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually works also in you that believe." (1 Thes. 2: 13.) Theirs was a Bible experience and a scriptural holiness. They had not accepted a system of theology or series of opinions from the teaching of Paul. But behind the messenger they had heard the Master's voice, and accepted, without hesitation or equivocation, the authority of the Word of God as the supreme law of their life. It is a great thing to have an experience founded directly upon the Scriptures. Don't get your theories of holiness from the best of human books or biographies. Go direct to the fountainhead, and let the first principle of your faith and obedience be, "Thus says the Lord." Then your convictions, your joys, your hopes, your impulses, and all your experience will be steadfast, abiding, and effectual. You will be saved from the drift and uncertainty of a mere emotional experience, and your life will become "steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord."

III. THE LIFE OF THE THESSALONIAN CHRISTIANS WAS A LIFE OF FAITH

So we find Paul praying for them that "God would fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness and the work of faith with power (2 Thes. 1: 11), and speaking of the Word of God which "effectually works also in you that believe." (1 Thes. 2: 13.) They had learned that the secret of a happy Christian experience is not emotional feeling, but simple faith, and that all the graces of the Spirit and the comfort of the Holy Ghost must be the work of faith. It is a great thing to get established on this solid ground and learn to walk by faith and not by sight.

IV. THE THESSALONIANS HAD ALSO BEEN TAUGHT THE LIFE OF LOVE

The Apostle reminds them with evident pleasure, that "when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and love, and that you have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. . . . And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you." (1 Thes. 3: 6-12.) They were not hard or formal Christians, but simple and affectionate children of one dear family, intensely devoted to Paul, their spiritual father, as he was to them; and loving one another with tender, simple-hearted affection. The deepest Christian life must always be a life of love. It is through

the cultivation of the natural and spiritual affections that the heart is opened for God's richest imparting of grace, and it is only in fellowship "with all saints" that we can know "the breadth and length, and depth, and height . . . of the love of Christ, which passes knowledge."

V. THE IDEAL LIFE OF THIS EPISTLE IS A LIFE OF JOY AND CHEER

"Rejoice evermore. . . . In every thing give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." This is the Apostle's ideal for them and doubtless they lived up to it. There is nothing that makes our Christian influence so effective as a spirit of cheerfulness, thankfulness, and holy gladness. A happy disposition and a shining face are a heritage of unspeakable blessing to the possessor and everybody with whom he comes in contact. And a taciturn, moody, discontented spirit and manner repel us like the nightshade and the east wind. The most wholesome, helpful people are the happy people. How we thank God for a few such friends! If you can't do anything else for God and a suffering world, be bright and glad and full of good cheer at least. God help us to "Rejoice evermore," and "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus." (1 Thes. 5: 16, 18.)

VI. THEIR LIFE WAS A LIFE OF PRAYER

"Pray without ceasing." (1 Thes. 5: 17.) There is a great difference between prayer and the life of prayer. Almost everyone prays, but very few pray without ceasing. This is the habit of devotion. This is the altar of incense ever burning in the Holy Place. This is the fragrance of a heart that lives in the presence of the Holy One, and breathes the very life of God. This is the deep undertone of a sanctified life. It is from this that the sweetness, the gladness, the holiness, and the helpfulness come. Lord, teach us the habit of prayer, the prayer that springs spontaneously from the heart, and which neither secular duty, satanic temptation, nor the waves of sorrow, can interrupt, but which is only stimulated by the things that try us, until every experience becomes transformed into an occasion for communion and fellowship with God.

VII. THE LIFE OF THE THESSALONIAN CHRISTIANS WAS A LIFE OF HOLINESS

This brings us to the heart of our subject, -- entire sanctification as taught in these epistles.

1. The Thessalonians were taught that sanctification was the will of God for them. "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification." (1 Thes. 4: 3.) With them the holy life was not an option, but an obligation. Sanctification was not the experience of a few exclusive and elite saints, but the normal standard of all Christian living, and the condition without which no man can see the Lord. This, indeed, is the only standard for every age and every Christian. "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid." God forbids you to continue in sin. God commands you to be holy, and He provides what He commands. At the same time there is a sweet modesty about the teaching of these epistles concerning holiness. There is no boasting of their own perfection, but it is held up as a standard to accept and press forward to something which, if not yet fully attained, is never to be lost sight of or lowered to suit their failures and imperfections. If they have not yet experienced it they are to be ever as the Methodist book of discipline expresses it. "groaning after it," and pressing forward until they have claimed it.

2. They were taught that sanctification is the work of God. "The very God of peace himself sanctify you," is the fine force of the original here. (1 Thes. 5: 23.) It is God's work, not ours. And this is still further strengthened by the next verse, "Faithful is he that calls you, who also will do it." It is part of the provision of grace, and God is bound to fulfill it to us in our experience if we will follow up our redemption rights and the full claims of the inheritance of faith. Just as Isaac's bride was provided with her wedding array and

only had to put it on to meet her lord, so it is granted to the Bride of Christ "that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." Christ is "made unto us wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." Let us accept the great provision of faith and put on the Lord Jesus.

3. God has provided entire sanctification for His people. "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly." The word "sanctify" has three meanings, -- to separate from, to dedicate to, and to fill with; and all these three are necessary to constitute entire sanctification.

There is a work of separation. There are things we cannot consecrate to God but must surrender and leave outside the camp, -- our sinful habits, our old self-life, the things which the light of the Holy Spirit will surely condemn if you let them in. There is but one inexorable course to take here. You cannot give them to God; you may not be able to cleanse yourself from them; but you can consent to be cleansed. You can pass the sentence of death on them. You can dare to say "No," to them. You can give God the right to destroy them, and it is here that the great decisive act is usually performed; and it is here that the coward heart usually fails. Is God speaking to you, my brother, my sister? Dare to obey. Dare to say to yourself a brave, eternal "No," and to God an everlasting "Yes"; and you will find that He has a way of making real the death warrant that you dare to sign.

Then comes the work of dedication. You give to God your surrendered life, your will and all the possibilities of your being. You choose to belong to Him. You say by one great act of your will, "I am henceforth not my own. I belong to Him." You hand yourself over in every power of your being to be His property, to obey His will and to live to please Him. This is consecration. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God."

But when all this is done you are still but an empty vessel. God has the vessel, but He must fill it with His own grace and goodness by the Holy Spirit and the life of Christ. And so the third and the chief stage of sanctification is union with Jesus and the incoming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the continual source of our new life with all its graces and victories. Hence it is a life of dependence on Him in which He is made unto us sanctification, and all the goodness and sweetness of our experience is but the fruit of the Spirit working in us love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. Thus sanctification is the work of the Spirit and the Life of Jesus and the gift of God's grace, and our part in it is to receive of His fullness grace for grace, and live out His life step by step as He dwells in us and walks in us.

How simple, how scriptural, and how complete is this philosophy of the life of holiness! Beloved, have you received it? Will you enter in? Will you separate yourself from all that His Word, His Spirit, and your own quickened conscience forbid? Will you dedicate yourself unreservedly to Him and count yourself His, and His alone, and begin to live on His fullness and walk in His Spirit?

But there is a further and fuller specification of entire sanctification in the next clause, "Your whole spirit and soul and body." Here we get a little inventory of the properties that we are handing over. It is a great empire, a human life. First, there is the spirit, our highest nature; that which knows right and wrong; that which knows God and enjoys His presence; that which is immortal and capable of union with the vine; that which may be either good or evil as it is possessed by God or Satan. This must be separated, dedicated and filled with the Holy Ghost.

Then there is the soul, the intellectual and emotional part; that which thinks, feels, loves; that which has its tastes, its passions, its desires. This must be separated from all that is impure, earthly, selfish. This must be dedicated to God to desire, to love, to think at His bidding and according to His will. And this must be filled by the Holy Ghost so that He shall control our thoughts, direct our affections, and possess and use all the powers of our mind and affections of our heart.

And then the body with all its members is counted in and must be held under the control of a sanctified will, and separated from every sordid, gross, sensual, and unnatural use, dedicated to God and filled with the life of Christ. This will lead to an individual and explicit transaction in which eyes, ears, lips, hands, feet, and heart, every member, will be turned over to Him and become the subject of His blessed indwelling. For He, too, has a body like our own, and He is the Head of the body. The body is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. He can take these members and cleanse them from unholy appetites and selfish indulgences, and even the humors and infirmities of disease. He can make them strong and pure through the touch of His life, and then give them double power to speak, to work, to walk on His errands and in the ministries of His love. This is entire sanctification, and oh, what a great and glorious possibility it is!

4. "Preserved blameless." Here again we come to an important doctrinal teaching. Our sanctification is not a crystallized and self-centered state, but a condition of constant dependence upon Him who is its Author and Finisher. We must be preserved moment by moment and "kept by his power through faith unto salvation." This introduces us to the life of abiding, and compels us to watch constantly and walk closely with our living Lord. But He is "able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy." He does not say that we are preserved spotless, for holiness is relative and none is absolutely holy but God. But we can be blameless. Your little child just beginning to write may make many a crooked scrawl, but if he is doing his best with a true heart and a watchful hand, you count him blameless and reward him because he did his best. And so we may walk worthy of God unto all pleasing, even though the eye of infinite holiness might discover many a flaw in our work.

It is a blessed thing to walk in the constant sense of His acceptance, and it is most depressing to be constantly condemning yourself and living in bondage and self-depreciation. It is possible to come to the place where we find out once for all that God expects nothing of us, and we are to expect nothing of ourselves. But taking Him as our all-sufficiency, and throwing upon Him the responsibility of our life, we just draw upon His boundless grace and live in His perfect love. This will lift us to a higher plane than all our morbid self-reproaches, which do not please Him and certainly only drag us down. Let us rise to the blameless life and dwell in the perfect love that casts out fear.

5. The holiness of the Thessalonian Christians was intensely practical. It was not a theory or a sentiment merely, but it led to such results as these, "You know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father does his children, That you would walk worthy of God, who has called you unto his kingdom and glory." (1 Thes. 2: 11, 12.) "You were examples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything." (1 Thes. 1: 7, 8.) What a beautiful testimony! What a splendid witness for God! This is better than all our preaching. Oh, for lives that will sound out the Gospel so widely and so wisely that our preaching will be needless?

The Thessalonian Christians lived their holiness. Their lives were not self-bound, but unselfish, and reached in blessing to the utmost confines of their influence, and so the truly sanctified disciple will always

be an active, useful, and missionary force. Is God enabling us to reproduce the ancient type, and to live this sweet and holy life of faith and love, of joy and gladness, of prayer and power, of practical goodness and missionary service, of entire sanctification in our spirit and soul and body unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ? "Faithful is he that calls you, who also will do it." He is calling you, my brother. He is calling you today. Like the old prophet who dropped his mantle on the shoulders of the young ploughman in the summer fields of Abel Meholah (and henceforth Elisha never could be the same again), the Holy Ghost is dropping on you the mantle of a higher calling. Rise to meet Him. Burn up, as Elisha, the things that hinder and hold you back. Lay yourself and everything on the altar and go forth to prove what God can do with a single consecrated life.

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