

Day 58, 1 Thessalonians 1

by David Servant

David Servant's sermon explores the nature of Christian identity, discipleship, and the concept of God's choice as presented in 1 Thessalonians 1.

Scripture: John 14:20, John 15:5, 1 Thessalonians 1:3-5

Topics: "Christian Identity", "Discipleship"

Description

David Servant delves into Paul's letters to the Thessalonian believers, highlighting the encouragement he provided to the young and persecuted church, emphasizing their identity as Christians 'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' He explains the spiritual connection believers have with God, enabling them to bear fruit and live in conformity to His will, as seen in the Thessalonian believers' faith, love, hope, joy, and service. Servant underscores the importance of discipleship, showcasing the example set by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, and the need for believers to observe and imitate those who reflect Christ.

Transcript

As I previously pointed out, Paul penned his letters to the Thessalonian believers while he was settled in Corinth for 18 months. He had established a church in Thessalonica some months before, but because of Jewish persecution (17:1-10), he didn't stay as long as he would have liked. So he wrote to encourage a young and persecuted church that consisted mostly of formerly-pagan Gentiles along with a spattering of Jews.

What is a Christian? Most fundamentally, it is someone who, as Paul wrote, is "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). This is exactly what Jesus taught His disciples, saying, "I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you" (John 14:20). Obviously, we are in Christ in a spiritual, not a physical, sense. How so?

Being creatures who are spirit, soul and body (1 Thes. 5:23), having had our spirits reborn by the Spirit, and now indwelt by His Spirit, we become one spirit with God. Amazing! That, of course, is what empowers us to live in conformity to His will. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The Thessalonian believers, although young in Christ, were already budding with good fruit, and Paul specifically mentioned their "work of faith" (faith always goes to work) as well as their love, hope, joy and service (1:3, 6, 9).

Take note how often, just in this short chapter, the concept of discipleship surfaces. Paul wrote of the example that he and Silvanus and Timothy had set before the Thessalonian believers, their subsequent imitation of that example, and finally their example to "all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1:5-7). The goal is to become like Christ, and that is learned best, not by listening to lectures, but by observing and imitating those who are like Him. Paul and his traveling companions did not just preach sermons to those who would listen in Thessalonica. They lived in close fellowship with them so their lifestyles could be observed.

Contrast that with the modern idea that pastors should remain a "professional distance" from their congregational members in order to "maintain respect" and "effectively influence them." Most parishioners have no idea how their pastor lives. They only see him behind the pulpit once a week, and perhaps share a few sentences with him as they shake his hand on the way out of the sanctuary. For true discipleship to occur, that must change, which is one reason the early churches consisted of small groups that met in homes, and discipleship was everyone's responsibility, not just the pastor's.

One final thought: Paul stated that the Thessalonians were "God's choice" (1:4). Does this prove that they were "unconditionally elected" before time began to be saved? No, nothing is said about an "unconditional choice," which is actually an oxymoron, since all choices are based on conditions. If God has "unconditionally elected" some to be saved, then there is no reason why He chose those whom He did, and people's salvation was determined purely by chance. Moreover, they aren't saved so much by grace as they are saved by luck!

The truth is, the Thessalonian Christians were conditionally chosen by God, as are all Christians, based on their faith which God foreknew (see 1 Pet. 1:1-2). However, Paul was not even talking in this chapter about any individuals being chosen by God, because what proved the Thessalonians were chosen by God, according to Paul, was the fact that his gospel came to them "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1:5). That is, it was supernaturally confirmed as being true by God Himself.

The Thessalonian Gentiles could be sure God had chosen even them for salvation, and not just Jews, because God confirmed His gospel to them. If Paul meant in 1:4 that God had unconditionally pre-selected only certain Thessalonians to be saved, we would have to wonder how God's supernatural confirmation that was performed in front of all the Thessalonians added credence to that fact.

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