

1 Thessalonians

I. Introduction

- A. **1 Thessalonians 2:13-16** . . . For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. [14] For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, [15] who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, [16] hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.
- B. Pray

II. 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

- A. [13a] For this reason we also constantly thank God that **when you received the word of God which you heard** from us . . .
1. Last Sunday I talked about the phrase “gospel of God,” which appears 8 times in the NT – including **1 Thessalonians 2:2**.
 - a. Here in **vs 13** we have the phrase “word of God,” which appears 5 times in the OT and 43 times in the NT – including twice here in **vs 13**.
 - b. And like the phrase “gospel of God,” it refers to all of scripture, not just the parts about salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.
 2. The second thing I want to point out is that Paul ties together **receiving** the word of God with **hearing** the word of God. And we know from **1&2 Thessalonians** as well as other places in the NT that hearing and receiving the word of God is equal to hearing and believing the word of God – which results in living according to the word of God.
 - a. In **John 20:30-31**, John speaks of this connection between hearing and receiving *or believing*. “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these **have been written so**

that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

- b. Paul states this truth in **Romans 10:17**, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”
 3. One of the lessons here is that there is great value in referencing specific passages in the word of God when conversing with or evangelizing unbelievers. Why? Because the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.
- B. **[13b]** you accepted [the word of God] not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God . . .
1. These believers not only listened to what Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy said about God, salvation, the Christ-like life, and the return of Christ, they believed that what they were hearing was from God, himself. And they verified their faith in God and His word by how they lived after believing in the word of God.
 2. Without question, many reject what we quote, read, or reference from God’s word – just as many do not believe what we say about God, salvation, the Christ-like life, and the return of Christ.
 3. Yet not all reject it – which is why we should be like the sower who went out to sow wherever he could; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty” (**Matthew 13:3-8**).
 4. Of those who hear what we have to say about God and His word, only some listen and believe. But since we don’t know who will do what, it is loving and wise to speak to as many as possible.
- C. **[13c]** which also performs its work in you who believe.
1. The word of God is not just words in a book or words coming out of our mouth. The word of God is living and active because the life of God is in them – just as the life of God is in Jesus Christ – who is the Word. And it is the life of God in the word of God that gives the word of God the power to transform those who receive the word of God and proceed to live accordingly.

2. The important truths here are that the power in the word of God comes from God himself, and it is God who uses His word as an instrument to bring His transforming power into the life of everyone who hears and believes.
3. These scriptures speak of the transforming power of God's word:
 - a. **Psalm 19:7-8**, "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. [8] The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes."
 - b. **Romans 1:16**, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."
 - c. **Hebrews 4:12**, "The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."
 - d. **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; [17] so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."
4. As I have already said, people can reject the word of God as coming from God, and when they do, they cut off its power to change them.
 - a. And though it is far more common for unbelievers to do this, it can be true of us as well. Even though we accept the word of God as God's word, we can ignore or resist or explain away certain parts of it, and in so doing lose out on its power to change and transform us in those areas of our lives.
 - b. This kind of rejection and resistance to God's word is enough of a problem among Christians that God addresses it in **Hebrews 4:1-2**, "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. [2] For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard."
5. And though **Philippians 2:12-13** doesn't say this outright, it infers that we – and not God or His word – are the problem when His word does not transform us.
 - a. **Philippians 2:12-13**, "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more

in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; [13] for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

- b. In these two verses we see the dual nature of the Christian life – God and His word working in us to accomplish His will in and through us, and we working out God’s will in our life by carefully and thoughtfully living according to what He says in His word.
 - c. Therefore, though God’s word is alive and active, it only transforms those who receive it and move forward in making an honest effort to live according to what it says.
- D. [14] For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they (*Jewish Christians in Judea*) did from the Jews . . .
- 1. The churches in Judea that Paul is referring to were churches mostly or totally made up of Jewish converts to Christianity. And like Paul in his pre-conversion days, many of the religious Jews persecuted Jewish converts in an effort to defend Judaism and stop the growth of Christianity. Therefore, these Judean converts were being persecuted by their own countrymen.
 - 2. In a similar way, the Thessalonian converts were being persecuted by their own countrymen. However, these converts looked to the Judean believers as examples of how to remain godly while being persecuted.
 - 3. Who do you look to as a current, living example of how to live the Christian life in today’s world? And if you cannot find a current example, do you read about past believers to learn from them?
- E. I want to take a few minutes and give you some church history in order to better understand what Paul says in **vs 15-16**. In Paul’s day, the religious Jews were committed to putting an end to Christianity, and one of their methods was to persecute the leaders of the movement (as they did the apostles) and their converts. Within the nation of Israel, they themselves persecuted the apostles and the converts. Outside Israel, they would stir up the locals to do the persecuting.
- 1. And this is what was happening in Thessalonica. The Jews were stirring up the local Thessalonians to persecute their own countrymen who were converting to Christianity.

- a. We read about this in **Acts 17:5-8**, But the Jews (*of Thessalonica*), becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring [Paul and Silvanus] out to the people. [6] When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; [7] and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar (*a reason that worked well with the locals but hide these Jewish persecutors true purpose – stop the spread of Christianity because it was contrary to Judaism*), saying that there is another king, Jesus." [8] [And so] They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things.
- b. And Luke shows the ongoing efforts of these Jews in **Acts 17:13**, But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.
2. We are living in times that are increasingly hostile to God, God's word, and Christianity in general. As a result, we are being faced with the temptation to modify or hide some of God's truths to avoid being seen as intolerant and judgmental of the ungodly behavior of the day. And we are being pressured to go along with those who are calling evil good. On top of that, we are labeled 'the evil ones' when we stand with God and God's word against flagrant and open ungodliness.
3. The sad reality is, the pressure to modify God's truth or avoid the persecution that comes for standing with God often comes from our own family or workplace or community or even our own church. Jesus warned of this in **Matthew 10:35-38**, "For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; [36] and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. [37] [Therefore] he who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. [38] And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me."
4. However, regardless of where the pressure comes from to call evil good, once we begin modifying or hiding parts of God's word to keep our approval rating with those pressuring us, we make it easier for

unbelievers and wayward Christians to ignore the convicting, reproofing, and correcting parts of God's word. And we make it easier for them to resist or reject the transforming power of God's word – and this has eternal consequences for all involved, including ourselves.

- F. [15] [these] (*Jewish persecutors*) both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They (*Jewish persecutors*) are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, [16a] hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they (*Gentiles*) may be saved; with the result that they (*Jewish persecutors*) always fill up the measure of their sins.
1. I suspect the Jewish persecutors believed they were defending the faith of their father, Abraham, and in so doing pleasing God. And yet, they were just as self-deceived and sinful in their actions as the Apostle Paul was when he was persecuting converts to Christianity.
 2. However – as Paul and history make clear – the persecution of Christians neither started nor ended with Paul and the Thessalonian believers. This has been going on for millennia. As Paul says here in vs 15-16, the Jews persecuted their own OT prophets, and they had the Lord Jesus put to death.
 3. And so Paul concludes this look at the history of Jews persecuting Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity by saying “they always fill up the measure of their sins.” In other words, they persecute to the uttermost by persecuting God's missionaries and ministers and God's people as completely and as far reaching as they can.
- G. [16b] But wrath has come upon them (*Jewish persecutors*) to the utmost.
1. Paul is not making this up or being excessive in his condemnation of his Jewish persecutors. He has taken this condemnation from the words of Jesus recorded in **Matthew 23:29-33**, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, [30] and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' [31] So you testify against yourselves (*because of your rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and your efforts to kill Him*), that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. [32] Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. [33] You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?”

2. However, even though Paul clearly condemns those who are persecuting him and his converts, he clearly states the mindset and attitudes we are to have toward those who persecute us. We read this in **Romans 12:14**, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”
3. And here again, Paul got this from Jesus who said in **Matthew 5:43-45**, “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44] But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

III. Conclusion

- A. It is tempting to persecute those who are different than us, or who threaten the status quo of our home, community, workplace, church, or nation. And it is tempting to hate those who persecute us, or want them to suffer in ways equal to the suffering they are inflicting on us.
- B. However, hating our persecutors or wanting evil to befall them only adds to the hate and evil in the world, and it creates in us the same evil, unloving mindset and attitudes that they have – making us no better than them.
- C. I believe Paul said it well in **Romans 12:19-21**, “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”