

## What's the Message – Lesson 123

With today's lesson we begin our study of Unit Nine, lessons of guidance to the Church.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer today is taken from a well-known hymn: *Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.* Amen.

Thus far in our studies of the New Testament we have seen lessons from Jesus, and lessons from the missionary journeys of St. Paul as the Word of God spread into the Roman world. Now we turn to a series of lessons on practical guidance requested by the new congregations Paul planted. These congregations were largely made up of Gentiles, and were new to the monotheistic faith of Christianity. They had questions, many questions, and needed pragmatic answers to guide them in their daily lives. The point we need to see is that these questions are the very same questions many of us still face today, and we need the same guidance Paul gave his congregations some 2000 years ago.

So let us begin by trying to place ourselves "in the shoes" of those people. If you could go back in time and talk to someone who lived at that time - and let's choose the city of Thessalonica to begin with - the interview might go something like this:

I am Pangratios, a merchant of Thessalonica. I live in a time of political intrigue and plotting throughout the bureaucracy of the empire, and people like myself are suspicious of everyone's motives. We are cautious about whom we trust and support. The countryside is full of itinerant philosophers and other would-be leaders who urge us to follow this or that path, or some new religion. Some of them sound good, and make big promises, but all they seem to do is "milk" their listeners and then disappear. There have been accusations that Paul of Tarsus is one of these charlatans. He isn't, of course, but we had to hide him and help him escape the mob who attacked him. The biggest problem is that Paul was only with us such a short time, and we have been without his leadership for so long that many of us have questions.

That is why we were so glad to have Timothy come from Corinth to meet with us and to take our questions back to Paul. And we have also learned from Timothy that Paul likewise had some questions and concerns about us. He wondered, as you might expect, since we were "babes" in our new faith, if we could stand firm and face the persecutions that are beginning to come our way. And naturally, he fears that we might lapse back into the vile fertility cults of Dionysus and Orpheus that surround us. We miss the presence of Paul, but at least we can look forward to his written guidance about the concerns and questions we expressed to Timothy.

Timothy's report to Paul was filled with good news, news about how the church was faithful and standing fast within that sea of paganism. But not all of the news was positive. One of the biggest problems the Thessalonians had to deal with then - just as we do now - was the matter of sexual purity. Just as we are overwhelmed daily with sexual promiscuity on our TV programs, in our movies, in the advertising that pummels us at all hours, in business and in government scandals, the Thessalonians lived in the liberal Gentile environment of a Greek harbor town, where the idea of sexual purity was a "complete novelty." So the level of the moral tone of their society was very much like our own. And the guidance that Paul gave them applies equally to us as well. In 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, chapter 3, verses 3-8, we read:

*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives His Holy Spirit to you.*

Another problem these people faced was something a bit harder for us to relate to. They were so enthusiastic about the idea of the return of Jesus that they thought it would happen very soon, perhaps even tomorrow or the next day. Therefore, it appears that some concluded, why work? The

world will come to an end in no time, so what is the purpose and need to work? This attitude caused people in Thessalonica outside the fellowship, to look upon these new Christians as idle, lazy louts, and it created a bad impression that needed to be corrected. So Paul wrote some simple and practical advice for them to follow. In chapter 4, verses 10-12, we read:

*But we urge you, brothers . . . to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.*

It is still good guidance for us today on how to live our lives, and to fit productively within our society.

But there were also other concerns that related to the internal working of the congregation. Remember, there was a mixture of Jew and Gentile, and a need to balance the relationships between the two so as to establish a balanced functioning organization within the church. This need for a working relationship among a mixture of people with greatly varying backgrounds is a problem that most of us deal with daily in our working lives, and maybe even in the congregation we attend. So the guidance of Paul here also can be seen as directly applying to us as well as the Thessalonians. Look at chapter 5, starting with verse 12:

*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone with evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.*

Paul does not paint a rosy picture with perfect harmony and no confrontation between Christian brothers and sisters, but he does give us

the basis for how we should deal with those frictions and the difficulties that will inevitably arise.

He says to be patient, and to approach those situations with brotherly love and respect for each other. And always seek to do good to everyone.

We can summarize what Paul has said to the Thessalonians - and to us - regarding these three issues as follows: be pure in body, in mind, and in spirit . . . and deal with everyone in brotherly love. What a simple solution, and yet one that is so difficult to put into practice. That is why we should keep these statements of practical advice before our eyes, and review them on a regular basis.

Next time we will look at some of Paul's letters of guidance to the church at Corinth.