

Sunday 15/11/2020 sermon

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[0 : 00] 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 and verses 13 through to 15.

So 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 13 through to 15. Now hear God's word. But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

To this he called you through our gospel so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by letter.

Well, may God bless those few words to us and may God bless those words to us with understanding. It's God not only expects us to believe what we read, he wants us to understand what we read.

And this is part of what Paul is encouraging the church here to do, that understand what you read, because by understanding what you read, you will understand the fullness of what God has actually accomplished for you through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 56] So understanding the word of God is another way of building that assurance and dealing with that distant feeling. Because sometimes it's people can live with a feeling of not knowing that they're loved, even though they are clearly loved by the other person.

But if you have a feeling, for instance, that your mom doesn't love you or your dad doesn't love you or the person that you think ought to love you doesn't love you, it can create a distance in your mind that isn't actually there in the mind of the other person.

So you're feeling something that the other person is not feeling simply because of a lack of understanding. And so don't think of understanding as something that is merely intellectual, that sort of boosts your Christian IQ.

One of the ways of reflecting the image of God on earth is to know things and is to know things properly. I mean, don't you find it amazing how Adam could name all the animals?

Now, if you're not careful, you could think, well, you know, if I was Adam, I'd get to five and perhaps run out. What do I call this next one? But that would be a failure to understand the knowledge that Adam had.

[3 : 22] When Adam was created in the image of God, he was created with full knowledge. It's the Christian that has to be restored and renewed to the knowledge of God, which we learned in Colossians.

But Adam could name all the animals perfectly because God gave him all the knowledge to name all the animals perfectly. And so knowledge is not just something, well, what do I need it for?

Do I just need to know things? No. So it's the understanding that comes from knowing that makes the difference to relationship. So if we take back that illustration of knowing that you're loved by another person, it is very easy to not know that someone else loves you because there's something going on in your mind that's not going on in the other person's mind.

And while you're looking for reassurance from the other person, the other person is not giving it because they don't see it from your point of view. From their point of view, they love you.

From their point of view, they're demonstrating that they love you. But they don't understand what's going on in your mind, all those doubts or lack of understanding. And so they don't give you the reassurance that they think you need because they don't see it from your point of view.

[4 : 38] Well, understanding then, belief in the truth, sanctification in the Spirit, growing in what God has taught us, keeps us both close and clean to God.

It's one way of walking with the Spirit. Now, we know that our relationship with God is by virtue of our relationship with God the Son. In other words, we come into relationship with the triune God of

Scripture through the work of the triune God of Scripture.

God the Father sends the Son and the Son gives the Spirit upon his ascension. So the Christian has relationship with the triune God of Scripture, but we understand it through the story that God gives us, how he brings us close to him, how we are the first fruits of his creation.

You know, that we blossom first. We are the first, you know, growth that God gives. And therefore, we are offered to God as a living sacrifice, as Paul says in Romans.

Now, of course, in Thessalonians, one of the main issues is, of course, that the early Christians believed that Jesus was going to return very, very quickly after his ascension.

[5 : 52] Now, this was a misunderstanding because if they had actually understood what was being taught in Acts and what was being taught in the letters, then no one would have really thought, properly understood, that Jesus was going to return any time soon.

It was a misunderstanding that led them to believe that Jesus was going to come back quickly, not a proper understanding. And that misunderstanding led many people to sort of sit back and relax and live their Christian life waiting for Jesus rather than following Jesus.

And what Paul is trying to teach in, or what he does teach, not trying, he does teach it, in 1 and 2 Thessalonians is, of course, that you wait for Jesus by following him.

That it's not either or. It's not, well, I follow Jesus and now I'm waiting for Jesus. That I follow Jesus as a disciple on earth and then he ascended and now I'm waiting for him.

And my waiting looks very different than my following. And, of course, in the church, this can then have an overspill into the way people do now.

[7 : 04] So, the question would be, if you were to define your Christian walk with God, is it one where you are following or is it one where you are waiting? Is it one where you, if you were to break it down and say, well, what am I really doing?

Does it look more like waiting for something to happen? Or does it look more like actually following in terms of engaging in seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?

And the answer is, well, it ought to be both. It ought to be both. We ought not to exchange one for the other as though they both can't be done at the same time.

The Christian disciple is one who waits as he follows. And, therefore, following Jesus is equivalent with keeping in step with the Spirit, as Paul says in Galatians, that we are to keep in step with the Spirit.

Well, seeing that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are one God, it is consistent that our following Christ is consistent with keeping in step with the Spirit.

[8 : 12] In other words, the Spirit does not take us in a different direction than what Jesus is taking us in. It's all one and the same thing. Now, why is this so significant?

Well, because you, as the people of God, have not been placed under a strong delusion to believe what is false.

If you were to read back a few verses, go back to verse 11. It says this, that therefore God sends them a strong delusion that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

What Paul is saying here is not all judgment is future. But some judgments of God are very present. And one of the present judgments of God in the present world is that God can place people under a strong delusion to only do what is false, because they have already proven that they do not love the truth or love righteousness.

So God is saying, if you want, not only do I acknowledge that you're going in the right, the wrong, sorry, the wrong direction, the judgment will now be that I'll put you under a strong delusion so that you cannot turn around.

[9 : 45] That you will continue to believe what is false. In other words, that it's not that God lets go of people, but that he is actively involved in making sure now that in this present world that there is a present judgment and he puts them under a strong delusion.

You are not those people. You are a people who have been set free by the truth. You are a people who have responded to God, who have witnessed and tasted the things of the Spirit.

And so we tend to look at the world as if everyone else is on this sort of fence where they have to come down either on the side of Jesus or they continue in the way of unrighteousness or they go down on the way of unrighteousness.

The truth is, is that God has restored a people out of a fallen world who are his first fruits. And those who are continuing to not love the truth and continuing in unrighteousness, he puts them under a present judgment.

And the present judgment will be an indication of what they will receive in the future judgment. So we, as God's people, are a privileged people.

[11 : 02] We're a highly privileged people. We're a people who have been set free, set free by the truth and God's word is truth.

So now we are called to walk in that freedom and therefore we are to keep our lives consistent with the truth that we have received and of course pursue righteousness, which is the very opposite of what people under judgment do, which is pursue unrighteousness.

This means that you know that I will hold to a very post-meal view, which is that God wins not only in heaven, but he wins on earth, that in the end God will save millions upon millions, so many that you will not be able to count them, as John says in Revelation.

But that doesn't mean that there isn't going to be present wickedness on earth and people living under strong delusion. But we have been saved from all of that and we are a highly privileged people.

So in order to sort of press this point, I want to illustrate our way into it because it's not necessarily an easy one to make, but it's a really important one because it means that it's the difference between what it means to follow Jesus while you wait rather than just your life being defined as one where you wait.

[12 : 26] Now, there is a reason why three-year-olds run around the room smashing toys, throwing toys, crashing toys, and their energy is endless.

And then the parent thinks when they get them home, he'll go bed early tonight because he's just used up all his energy. And suddenly, you're still at 10 o'clock at night and he's climbing into your bed two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock in the morning, five o'clock in the morning.

Where do you get your energy from? But if you go into a room with people in their sort of 80s, they're sat in the corner with a cup of tea. And there's a good reason for that. And that is because we do slow down as we get older.

We've produced so much during our life. We've worked hard. You know, we've raised families.

We've done all. And now it is time to sit back and have a cup of tea.

Now, I'm not taking away from that, but there is a sense where Christians never do that within their Christian life and witness.

[13 : 28] We don't sit back on Christianity, but we're current, we continue actively following God. So here's a couple of illustrations just to lead our way into it.

Consider the book of Revelation. Revelation. I've never taught on the book of Revelation here, as in from the front. I've done a few studies on it in the Bible studies, which went down a treat.

But I've never actually gone through the book. I don't necessarily think it's particularly a book that we should be afraid of, but I can understand in one sense why people stay away from it, perhaps more now than ever.

But interestingly, let me put it in a slightly different way. Let's imagine, let's just imagine, that it's the people of God.

You go, well, I really don't need to read the book of Revelation because it's basically about Jesus returning. I believe that Jesus is going to return, so I'll just read other books instead.

[14 : 36] Now, that's quite plausible. That's quite possible to happen in the church, isn't it? That you settle yourself into a simple belief, the simple belief being, well, I believe Jesus is going to return, therefore, I'll save myself the difficulty of going through the book of Revelation with all of its difficulties.

I can understand that. But now imagine that the pastor is going to say next week, guess what congregation? We're going to do the book of Revelation. How many people do you think he's going to be able to engage in that book?

Perhaps not many. But it's not because the people are necessarily sinful or because they're rejecting the word of God, but it's rather because they have simplified the word of God down to a simple statement, which then thinks, well, I don't really need to engage in the bigger picture.

But God did give us the bigger picture, and then we've got to ask, well, why did God give it to us? So what I'm saying is is that we can have a very simple belief that can actually get in the way of

reading the rest of God's word.

And the simple belief can actually be a correct belief. I believe in the return of Jesus. I'll just read Luke again. Luke's quite tricky. Not as tricky as Revelation, but so hopefully you can understand that.

[15 : 57] Here's another example. Genealogies. How easy it is to skip over them because you can't pronounce the names. I would read them and make up the names. If you just have a go, you're probably never going to meet them, well, at least not for a long time.

And by then, they'll be so glorified, they'll forgive you anyway for getting their names wrong. And David White used to say to me, Daniel, have you read Obadiah?

And I go, I don't think I've read Obadiah. And he would say to me, what are you going to do when you get to heaven? And Obadiah comes up to you and says, sir, did you enjoy my book? What are you going to say?

Why has God given us these words? I would say that it's for us to know them, for us to believe them, and for us to understand them. And so I think if we read over the genealogies as though they are just a list of names telling us who is related to who, fathers and sons and so on, we would overlook the very important truth that God is a covenantal God that works through generations, that parents are to pass their faith down to their children, who pass their faith down to their children, and so on and so on.

And we know this with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so on. That God's normal means of evangelism is through genealogies. It's through the family.

[17 : 21] There's nothing surprising there. But of course, if we skip over the genealogies, it's so easy for us to miss that covenantal context, and suddenly God becomes like a child in a pick and mix store.

Well, I have a few of those. I have a few of those. I have some of those and some of those. And God's choosing looks random. As though God is just hit and miss.

Rather than seeing God in a very covenantal context, saying, well, the normal way that I save people is through genealogies, through generations. It's fathers and sons, sons and daughters, and so on and so on.

And I tell those people who are saved to go out into the world to proclaim the world so that I can save others. But of course, if we read over these things, we're not just reading over names.

We're reading over an understanding. We're missing the point that God is actually making, a very important point in both contexts there.

[18 : 26] So when Paul says here that we are a people who are to be sanctified by the Spirit, he follows it by saying, and by belief in the truth. And where do we get that truth from?

And he follows it by saying, by our spoken word, or by our letter, meaning the letter of Thessalonians, which we have in front of us.

In other words, we have to be careful, seeing that we live in relationship with God, that we're not trying to pull the wool over God's eyes.

I don't believe any of us intentionally would do this, but there is a way of lying to the Spirit that looks very much like trying to pull the wool over the eyes of God. Here's an illustration of lying to the Spirit.

A biblical illustration found in the book of Acts. You will know that in the early church, the Spirit of God came upon people and it changed their lives so dramatically that there wasn't a needy person amongst them in the church because the church looked after the church.

[19 : 29] There is no state or social benefit, but the benefits are voluntarily given by the people in the church who have been changed by the Spirit of God.

And two people, a man and a wife by the name of Ananias and Sapphira, decided that they would lie to God, lie to the Spirit, to try and pull the wool over the eyes of God.

Now, whether they actually would have articulated it that way, it would be impossible to tell. I doubt it very much, but at least they tried to do that with the apostles and the other Christians. So they sold a portion of land and they kept some of it back and they only gave whatever the other percentage was that they gave.

Now, biblically, they're perfectly free to hold it back. They could have held back 50%. They could have held back 90%, 99% and just given one, they were free to do it.

But what they were not free to do was to appear that they were given 100%. And that's what they wanted it to look like. So it was not that they kept money back for themselves, but it was the fact that they wanted to appear that they were given, giving everything.

[20 : 43] And God killed both of them. He took both of their lives. Because you cannot live your life trying to pull the wool over and trying to appear that you're one way when in fact you're a very different way.

So if we wanted a very serious example of what it means to trying to appear one way when in fact you're another way, look at Ananias and Sapphira who tried to appear one way but were actually quite different people.

Again, they were free to hold back the money, but what they were not free to do was to appear as though they were one way when they were not. And God took the lives of both of them.

And so when it comes to walking with the Spirit, this sense of walking with absolute honesty before God and a clear conscience is something you cannot get away from because it is God that you're dealing with.

So while you may satisfy yourselves by saying, I don't need to read the book of Revelation, I believe in the return of Jesus, I appreciate that and I understand that.

[21 : 55] But you're not being completely honest with yourself as to why God gave you the book of Revelation to read and participate in. Now this isn't a call for you to go home and read Revelation or read the genealogies.

It's rather a call for you to be honest with God in what he has given us and how he has called us to walk with him in the Spirit. That following, waiting and following can be the same thing.

That we can wait for Christ Jesus as we seek to follow him. We are to do more than just believe the Bible. We are to understand what God has given us. And the reason being, as Paul says here, is that is the way you stand firm.

The way you stand firm in a world that wants to take you away from following Christ, that wants to convince you to give up on prayer, that wants you to convince you to trust in other things than God, the way the world will get you to do that is by getting you to listen to them rather than to God.

That's how it gets you to do that. By convincing you of their arguments rather than the truth that God has given to you. So here's the conclusion. God has set you free from falsehood.

[23 : 13] He has set you free from believing lies to believe the right things. But it is possible, as we have illustrated, to believe the right things and then stop yourself from reading the rest of what God has actually taught.

So I can acknowledge, just like you can acknowledge, that Jesus is going to return at some point in person in the future. But I would not like to think that that then stops me from reading about the book.

It tells me about how that is going to happen. I wouldn't want that to get in the way. And the reason I need to read it is because God has given it to me in order to strengthen me in my faith.

And this is why Paul is so thankful for these believers, that they have actually come to participate with him in the same word. Yes, Paul is the one declaring it to them, but they are the one receiving it.

They're both reflecting in and on the word of God. They're just coming at it from different angles. Paul's teaching it, and they are receiving it, whether it's as a spoken word or as a written word, which means that listening to me now and going home and reading the Bible for yourself.

[24 : 33] So here's the exhortation as we close. Standing firm is not the same as standing still. Standing firm is not the same as standing still.

Following Jesus can be done at the same time as you wait for Jesus. And we are called to wait for Jesus in this way, by being sanctified by the Spirit and by participating in the truth.

And by participating, we mean coming to the truth, reflecting on the truth, living our life in the truth that God has given us. What does it mean to keep in step with the Spirit?

Well, it means this. This is how we keep in step with the Spirit. Because the Spirit keeps in step as it was with Jesus, with the Godhead.

They are all in step with one another. And this is how God enables you to stand firm in a world that doesn't want you to stand firm. This is how God enables you to stay close to Him in a world that tries to convince you, try this for a while instead.

[25 : 39] So we follow Jesus today in exactly the same way people have always followed Jesus, by faith and by listening to Him. By faith and by listening to Him.

Amen.