



Thoughts from First Thessalonians ...

“Excel Still More

What pleases the Lord has to be taught, and this instruction has to be received by one who is humble in heart. Man on his own has no ability to know God, much less know what pleases Him. Hence instruction must come from the Lord, specifically through that teaching which has now been recorded in the sacred writings. That is why Jesus commissioned first the apostles, then those subsequently instructed by the apostles, to go and make disciples, and after immersing them, to continue to teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded. “You were formerly darkness,” Paul reminded the disciples in Ephesus, “but now you are light in the Lord.” As children of light, then, they were to be “trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:8-10).

- ◆ **Received instruction** — When the apostle Paul came to Thessalonica, he engaged in serious teaching and preaching. He commented that what he taught in one congregation, he taught in all. Thus, the approach in Thessalonica was the same as the approach in Corinth, and he explained his methodology: “For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity” (2 Corinthians 2:17). His preaching, therefore, to the Thessalonians was straightforward. “Finally then, brethren,” says he, as he begins to start to close the letter, “we request you and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk ...” (1 Thessalonians 4:1). Clearly, they got the instruction they needed.
- ◆ **Walk and please God** — The Christian life is often referred to as “the walk.” Adam and Eve walked with God in the Garden, and Enoch is referenced as one who “walked with God” (Genesis 5:22). While those were apparently physical walks, by the time of the new covenant “the walk” is clearly spiritual. So as Paul is commenting, he is speaking of their life of following in the footsteps of Jesus. “You received instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God,” he reminds them. The old life of anger, clamor, and frustration was to be put aside and replaced by an orderly life of peace, forgiveness, and real love. The kingdom of God and His righteousness were to have highest priority, and the old wasting-time life was to be left behind.
- ◆ **Compliment and exhortation** — The apostle wanted to credit the brethren for the progress they had made. They had received instruction on how to walk and please God, and Paul compliments them, noting, “just as you actually do walk.” But Paul was also a preacher. He, for example, in giving some directives to Timothy, his protégé, charged him in these words, “Preach the word ... reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). Taking his own advice, the apostle then proceeds to exhort the brethren in Thessalonica, saying that through they were following the instruction they were given, he was encouraging them “that you may excel still more.”

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Because congregations consist of people in various stages of personal growth, there is always room for improvement. Even on an individual basis, the saint should never stay in a comfort zone; he should always be looking for the next way in which he can make improvement, set bigger goals, or increase his effectiveness. And people in Christ do tend to become complacent. The congregation in Laodicea of the book of Revelation fame is an excellent example of a numbing that can set in. They said, according to Jesus, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” (Revelation 3:17). The Lord’s analysis was that they were “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.” So the brethren in Thessalonica were exhorted so that they too would not fall into that complacent and deadening condition. So also, then, the modern saints are similarly exhorted through these inspired scriptures: EXCEL STILL MORE!

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