

A Life That Excels

Series: Mission Accomplished

by Stephen Zeisler

Through Ray Stedman's preaching in recent weeks we have become very familiar with the sights, the sounds, the style, and the problems of the city of Corinth. But this morning I invite you to travel some 200 miles to the north of Corinth to the city of Thessalonica to learn something from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

You will notice that there are many physical and societal similarities to those we have recently encountered in Corinth. Both of these cities are large capital centers for their region; both are wealthy and very cosmopolitan, and both are located on major trading routes through the Roman Empire. Both cities are arrogant and morally chaotic, but we observe a difference in Thessalonica when we meet the church of Christ located there.

If the Corinthian church might accurately be described as the "problem child" of the New Testament world, the Thessalonian church is on the opposite end of the scale. In our earlier studies covering the first three chapters of this book, Paul says these Thessalonians are conspicuous as Christians for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." (1:3) They reached out from their city in a gospel mission that covered the entire Roman Empire, that touched every place in the world they knew. They are a hero church, in fact, the only one that is given the title of being a type, a model church for the rest of the world during New Testament times.

Now we come to a section in chapter 4 that is like most of Paul's letters in a sense. Towards the end of his correspondence he generally includes a practical section dealing with Christian morals, Christian living, and activity in the Body of Christ. As in the Corinthian letter, Paul is here answering specific questions posed to him by the Christians in the city to which he is writing; Chapter 4, verse 1:

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for the purpose or impurity, but in sanctification. Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you. Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for any one to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

The key to this passage is the statement that is repeated twice, the first time in verse 1, ". . . as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more." Paul is writing to faithful, obedient believers who are following the will of the Lord in their lives. His witness to them is this encouragement, "excel still more"--keep on, stride forward, do not become complacent, do not become arrogant, but because of the gratitude you feel for what the Lord has already done,

stride forward, "excel more". The same point is made in verses 9 and 10: "You have no reason for anyone to teach you about brotherly love; God teaches you. But I say to you, 'excel still more'".

Paul is recognizing at this point, I think, a phenomenon that all of us have observed if we have been Christians very long at all, and that is that in the Christian life there is an initial awakening that brings a kind of excited responsiveness to the hearts of Christians. It may be your conversion, or it may be an adult experience where you open up to the truth that you committed yourself to as a child, but in either case most of us have a period where the Bible is exciting to us, where Christian fellowship is the most important thing in our lives, where obedience is a challenge, and we long for the Lord to require more of us so that we may be more obedient.

But that initial stage does not last forever. You recall that Jesus said there were four kinds of soil that the seed could fall into. Three of the four kinds had the initial, warm, excited, growing response. Only one of the three, however, produced fruit. That is the issue Paul has in mind here--that past the initial stages there comes a plateau; there comes a drying out; there comes a time when Christian obedience and Bible study and all these things are no longer new. They no longer challenge us because we have not been challenged that way before; they challenge us to remain, to grow, to continue to fight the fight of faith without the jolt of excitement and verve that is there at the beginning.

I can think of three different kinds of "plateau" Christians, three different kinds of Christians who, having come to this point, really fail to heed Paul's word here that having achieved this much, they "excel still more." One of this group of "plateau" Christians might be described as the "faddist" Christian. He needs to be into the very next evangelical thrill, the very next new thing that happens in the Christian world because ordinary Christian living has gotten boring; ordinary obedience to Christ and following the emphasis of the Scriptures has worn out. He needs "Christianity and Christian Diets", or "Christianity and Radical Politics," or "Christianity and Transactional Analysis," or "Christianity and Tongues," or even "Christianity and Hand-Tooled Leather Bible Covers!" It does not really matter--whatever is happening, whatever the next thing is, he requires that to stay committed to the Lord because he has gotten burnt out with just living the life that Jesus has for him.

Others we might encounter on this plateau are "cynical" Christians. I remember in my early Christian life that Christian camping was an important element for me of growing in the Lord. After a couple of years I graduated to the point where I was a worker at camp rather than a participant, and I remember that having come to that inner circle I was struck by the fact that many who were in leadership, full-time working positions were really cynical about what was going on around them. They would spend their free time in the evening making fun of the people who were excited about the message, ridiculing the speaker, perhaps, telling his jokes a half a minute before he did, and so on. You probably know Christians like that too. They are cynical. They never quite bail out of everything, but they have lost their first love. They look down on those who are emotionally and intellectually involved with the faith.

The third kind is the complacent Christian who, after an initial period of growth, just files his religious life away with fifty other things that are happening in his life. He goes to meetings occasionally and continues to respond to appeals for money every now and then, but his faith, his life with Christ, is no more vital to him than anything else in his life.

Now Paul knew that these things happen to people. He knew that after the first blush, the initial stages of growth, that all of us are going to face that day, and what he says to the Thessalonians, these serious-minded, faithful believers is, "I know you are doing well. I know you are successful. I know you believe, but I say to you 'excel still more.' Don't stop now, don't flatten out; don't quit; don't give in to something else. Take it seriously.

Out of gratitude for what Christ has done for you 'excel still more'."

He introduces the three specific areas he wants to talk about here by first encouraging them to follow up on what he is saying, and the way he begins that encouragement is by calling their attention to three relationships that they have. The first is with Paul and his friends. We see that in the first verse of this chapter:

"Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus..."

The verb is "doubled" there to show that it matters to him and his friends what happens to these people: 'It makes a difference to us; we are concerned, we want you; we beg you; we beseech you; we exhort you to excel still more. It would crush us to see in you this falling aside that happens so often in Christians.'

I do not think I can say too strongly how important it is that we, as Christians, have that kind of communication with one another, that we seek each other out, that we say to each other, "I beg you. I implore you. I exhort you, 'excel still more'. It matters to me what happens to you."

The second relationship that Paul highlights is their relationship with Jesus. He mentions the Lord in verse 1 and more clearly in verse 2 where he says:

For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

The thing about Christ that Paul highlights here is that he is "commander;" he is Lord. "Your brothers in Christ love you," Paul says, "We exhort you." 'You recall that you owe allegiance to Jesus, that he is in charge now, and if you will not be motivated by our concern, recall that you have placed yourselves at the hands of Christ to do with what he will with you. Therefore, remember the commandments of Jesus.'

And thirdly he recalls their relationship with God the Father:

**"...as to how you ought to walk and please God" (4:1); "this is the will of God, your sanctification" (4:3).
For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification (4:7). "Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you." (4:8)**

It is striking to me (and more so each time I face it), how incredible it is that God can be moved at all by what happens to us. Why God should even bother to care whether we obey or not is amazing to me, but he does. Here it says, in fact, that we have the opportunity of pleasing God, of delighting his heart, of bringing joy to the Master of everything by our obedience. Or we have the opportunity of rejecting him, because, as Paul says in 4:8, our rejection of these things is a rejection of God himself.

That is an amazing place to be in--the omnipotent, eternal God who needs absolutely nothing, has placed himself at our disposal to make him happy or not by our choices. He has given us the freedom to reject him if we choose to. It is as if Jimmy Carter, upon returning from Camp David and solving all the problems of the world, were to rush home to the White House basement to check out his aquarium to see how his guppies are faring in their growth in guppyhood--and for it to be really important to him that they be happy! Now the magnitude of difference between a guppy and the most powerful man in the world is infinitesimal compared to the magnitude of difference between God the Father and us. And yet he cares. It matters to him. You can please him by your walk, or reject him if you choose. Paul reminds us of these things. He says, 'Your brothers care for you. What happens to you concerns us. Jesus is Lord in your life, he is commander, and thirdly, God the Father has made himself vulnerable enough to be pleased or rejected by your choice.'

Having said those things by way of encouragement to remind us that we need to "excel still more," Paul now

goes on to list three areas that he wants to teach us about. The first, the longest and most difficult, has to do with our sexual practices. The reason it is difficult is that Paul uses words that are hard to translate from the Greek. But the whole section, from the end of verse 3 through verse 6, gathers around three infinitive phrases in Greek. Those are, "to abstain" in verse 3, "to know" in verse 4, and "to not transgress" and "not defraud" in verse 6.

Two of those, the first and third, are negative in their impact. Abstinence from something has the idea of pulling away, it is a choice to 'not' do something. Then in verse 6 he says directly, "do not transgress, do not defraud your brother." Paul is spoken of in many circles as a crusty old bachelor who lacked understanding in many areas, but it is amazing to me that anybody could ever read what he said and come to that conclusion, because what he is teaching us about our sexuality here is insightful beyond most anything else you will ever read. In verse 3 the phrase, "abstain from 'porneia,' abstain from sexual immorality," is a very concise, simple, to-the-point statement. God intended marriage to be the arena where we express ourselves sexually. Every other arena is wrong. The Bible is clear about that, and what Paul says is, with this clear understanding, therefore, 'do not do it.'

In terms of our sexual practice we are probably more easily deceived, we find ourselves more confused and rattled and uncertain than in almost any other area of life. Many times in counseling I have met people who, although they understand what the Bible says, somehow have decided that their case is extraordinary, that their circumstances do not apply (although they apply to everybody else). They feel that they are unique in their artistic sensitivity, or they face pressures beyond those that anyone else has ever faced, or their spouse has failed to minister to their "inner self" in a way that no spouse has ever failed before.

Ron Ritchie was talking one time about counseling a man who was going on at length about the loving, caring, holy, spiritual, deep, etc., relationship he was having with a woman, and Ron stopped him in the middle of the litany and said, "Oh, you mean adultery? Oh, I understand what you are talking about. You are talking about adultery." And the man was left with his mouth open, forced to admit that that was precisely what he was talking about.

That is the force of this passage. It does not admit any cloudiness. It is an anchor, it is a place to stand in the midst of all the deception and all the rationalization that we heap on ourselves. The clear statement of scripture is 'Abstain from sexual immorality.' It gives us a guidepost, a place to stand when we are confused.

The third phrase here (the other negative phrase), is in verse 6, where Paul says,

...that no man transgress and defraud his brother in this matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

Paul is facing two very significant rationalizations that always surface as far as illicit sexual practices are involved. The first one is the brand new but ancient excuse that sex is somehow a 'victimless crime.' Have you ever heard that? 'Nobody gets hurt. We are adults. We have made a choice. Nobody else is involved.' But Paul is saying here that whatever your intentions are somebody else almost always gets involved. That is why he uses the word "transgress." (That word might better be translated as 'to go too far.')

You can picture someone who started out into an area that he knew was wrong. He had set limits down the road that he was going to stop short of, but suddenly he wakes up and finds he has gone too far. He finds that somebody else is hurt, a whole lot of other people have lost credibility, and his own witness for Christ is damaged. Even his future wife's physical relationship with him can be damaged too by memories, by guilt that stems from this encounter. Somebody else

always gets involved, so Paul says, 'Do not defraud your brother. Do not take advantage of someone else.'

The other thing that Paul recognizes in this verse, I think, is our extreme vulnerability in this whole area. The other rationalization that comes to mind is, 'Well, I will get away with it. Not only is nobody else going to get hurt, but I know I can get away with this. The person that I have in mind to take advantage of is too weak to fight back and too emotionally dependent to resist me. I am the dominant one in this relationship. I know I can pull it off. I can stay in control. I will not lose anything.' And because there are vulnerable people in the world, you observe men and woman acting on the basis of, 'I'm the tough one. I can handle it.' But the problem with that, as Paul clearly states here, is that even if you do get away with it, even if you do manage to dominate the vulnerable one, you have managed, at the same time, to make an enemy of God, and that is not the smartest thing you ever did. "The Lord is the avenger in all these things" Even if you succeed, you have got to face him some day, and he is not quite so vulnerable.

The third point (it is actually the second in order), is the one positive statement, the one admonition to 'do' something rather than 'not do' something concerning our sexual practices. That word in verse 4 is precisely the same point that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 7 that God intends married people to make love to one another honorably and with sanctification and giving and concern. And I think that is what this phrase (the one that is difficult to translate) that "you know how to possess your own vessel" means. The "vessel" refers to the wife so, "possession of your own vessel," I think, refers to love-making. Paul is saying, 'You know how to possess your own vessel in sanctification and honor, not selfishly, not in lustful passion like those who do not know God, those who have no notion of what human beings were made for, but honoring the other person and caring and being sensitive and concerned.' That is the positive statement, and again it is consistent with what Paul has taught elsewhere and what all scripture teaches. So having given us the great statement, the heart of this passage, "excel still more," the first area Paul faces us with is our sexual practice.

The second area that he faces us with is that of brotherly love (4:9-10).

Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for any one to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.

Paul says these are people who have learned to love one another from a great Teacher; the One who has taught them to love one another is God himself. You cannot do better than that if you are trying to learn to be a lover of the brethren. And yet despite their great Teacher, despite the fact that they are advancing in this area, he is saying, "excel still more," move ahead, keep going, do not relax.

The thing Paul highlights here about brotherly love (and the two Greek words that are translated by one English word in this passage), is the word "**all**." "All the brethren who are in all Macedonia." What characterizes love among the family of Christ is that it does not exclude anybody. Jesus said clearly that anybody can learn to love the people who love him. Anybody can be nice to people who are guaranteed to be nice in turn. There is nothing difficult about that. What sets Christian love apart is that it is love for people who have nothing in common with you; love for people you might otherwise overlook or despise or have nothing to do with; love for people outside your background who do not share the same interests, who do not attend the same parties who have nothing in common with you--"all the brethren who are in all Macedonia." Paul reminds us that that includes everyone. "You are advancing in that," he says, but "excel still more."

The final area that he brings to their attention has to do with money, or more properly, financial responsibility.

In verse 11 he says,

...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we command you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

We know from the second letter that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that people there, having heard that Jesus was returning, were so excited about it that they quit their jobs and were sitting around reading the Bible and singing, waiting for the Lord to come back. They had dropped out of every other area of life and that is why Paul says to them, "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life attend to your own business work with your hands"--with two results: "that you may behave properly toward outsiders; i.e., first, "that non-Christians will not be turned off by the things you are doing in the name of Jesus," and second, "your own brothers and sisters will not have to take care of you. You will not be in any need." Paul is insisting that theology will never get in the way of practical love; it will never get in the way of a servant's heart.

You have probably known people (I have) who are so into study, who are so into tracking down Christian truth of one kind or another and talking about it with each other and writing about it and thinking about it that they make nuisances of themselves. They are being supported by people who have not chosen with open hands to support and encourage them, but because it is demanded of them. Paul is saying here that those two things will never come in conflict, that the Church will regularly recognize men and women who ought to be set aside for study. And that is to be expected--there are times in our lives where our concern to learn truth and to think about it and discuss it will be higher than it will be at other times, but God will not call us to a situation where our theology means that we have to take advantage of, and hurt and use other people. Those two things will not come into conflict if we are trusting him. That is the third area that he brings to their attention in which they ought to excel.

Now as we go to the Lord's Table we will have an opportunity to face him directly, to "proclaim the Lord's death" as the Scriptures say, in a time of communion. And a command of scripture concerning communion is that "a man examine himself," that because you have a chance to think of the Lord in a particular way, it is an opportunity for you to face yourself. I know there are people here who are tempted, and I know I am tempted myself, to fail the admonition that I stride forward, that I "excel still more. " I want to be lazy, I want to be cynical, I want to be complacent, I want to be faddish. I do not want to listen to the heart of the Bible and believe God in gratitude and move ahead, so I need to examine myself now. I want to encourage you to think in these terms as we go to the Lord, and as we have an opportunity to draw near to him that you let him speak to you on these issues.

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