

Living for God

1Thessalonians 2:1-7

I read an article earlier this week from the Harvard Business Review entitled, “Why Success Doesn't Lead to Satisfaction.”

The author begins the article with a conversation he had with someone who said to him, “I was almost happy.”

He was almost happy because he achieved all his business goals except he only partially achieved one.

Dumbfounded the author asks his friend, “So you’re telling me that had you completely achieved that one goal, you’d feel happy about all of it, but since you didn’t, you’re not happy about any of it?”

His friend replied, “What’s the point of being happy about failure?”

For the rest of the article the author tries to help his friend gain some perspective on life.

He encourages him to take more vacation, value his successes more, try to think of himself as something more than the goals he is trying to achieve.

As I came to the end of the article I thought that the author had made some good points to his friend but there was one thing that was glaringly absent.

You see all the advice given and all the replacement pursuits and projects that were suggested were still encouraging the man to focus on himself.

Without realizing it, he was leading his friend into the same problem that he already had.

Sure the picture might be different, admittedly it would probably even feel good for a time, but sooner or later that same feeling of disappointment would return because it is impossible to find genuine satisfaction in a self-centered life.

It’s ironic that Harvard, a school first established to teach people about the Bible, would miss one of the most fundamental questions to ask people discouraged and dissatisfied with life.

The question the author failed to ask his friend is, “Who or what are you living for?”

[If we are living for ourselves or for other created things we may find temporary happiness but we are never going to find lasting joy. Our text for this morning **1Thessalonians 2:1-7**. Shows us a better way. In this passage the apostle Paul recounts some of his ministry in the city of Thessalonica and what we see in his example is someone who was living for God. In these verses we see a powerful blessing of living for the LORD and we also see some of the practical effects it has on our lives. The blessing comes first, this is the blessing that...]

Point #1 – Living for God always matters. (Verses 1-2)

Despite how we may feel or how things may appear in the moment when we are living for the LORD we are doing something of eternal value.

Verse 1 begins with the phrase, “You know”.

The word know here is more than simple head knowledge it is a knowledge gained by lived experience.

The apostle is reminding these believers what they lived and witnessed while he and his co-workers in Christ were among them. **(Verse 1)**

There is no need to make a long argument or to present evidence here, you guys know this is true.

In reminding them of their experience he also reminds them of the relationship between them.

He calls them ‘brothers’.

He is speaking of who they are spiritually as those who belong to Christ.

This is a bond that is more powerful than DNA, it is a bond that is established in the blood of Jesus and sealed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is a phrase that reminds us that belonging to the LORD means belonging to one another as eternally adopted children of the King of kings.

The fact that he can call these believers ‘brothers and sisters’ proves his point that they know the ministry among them ‘was **not** in vain’.

The word ‘vain’ here is most literally translated as ‘empty’.

Commentators suggest two possible meanings. The word could be referring to the result of the ministry.

His coming was not in vain because people were converted and now have the gift of eternal life. It doesn’t get any more meaningful than that.

This may also be referring to the content of the preaching of the gospel.

I love what Matthew Henry writes on this text, he says,
“[Paul’s] preaching is not vain and idle speculations about useless niceties and foolish questions but sound and solid truth such as was to profit his hearers.”

That seems to be what **verse 2** is getting at.

We didn’t come to talk about the weather or the latest chariot race standings, despite the fact that we had been severely beaten in Philippi and despite the fact that we faced conflict in Thessalonica we boldly proclaimed ‘the gospel of God’.

The only message that gives meaning and purpose to life.

When he says their coming “was not in vain/empty” he likely has in mind both the content of the message and the results.

While it may be true that the preaching of God’s word does not always result in converts, it is also true that the preaching of God’s word always accomplishes something of eternal significance.

When people are sustained in their faith that has value.

When people are confronted in their error that has value.

When people repent and believe and are saved from God's eternal wrath that has immeasurable value.

The very nature of the gospel removes the possibility of meaninglessness when it is proclaimed.

[Of what else is that true? How many people remember King Solomon? God gave him an incredible amount of wisdom. The LORD also gave him wealth and power beyond what most of us can relate to. He could do pretty much whatever he desired within the limits of the time period in which he lived and he tried it all. You can read about it in the book of Ecclesiastes. Do you know what some of the most used phrases in that book is? 'Meaningless', 'vanity', 'chasing after the wind'. It is a super depressing book if you miss the point. The point of the book is that if we chase created things to satisfy our souls it is an 'empty' pursuit. That is why when you get to chapter 12 it says, "*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth*" and "*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*"]

When we live for ourselves and created things everything is meaningless.

If you are here this morning thinking, "If I can just get a new job! If I can just put a bit more money in the bank. If I can just be a bit more successful or powerful, then I will be happy!" You are chasing after the wind that will all come to nothing.

Paul knew that well. He also knew what it was like to live for the LORD as a minister of the gospel connecting his life to something of eternal value.

Have you asked yourself recently, "What am I living for? What am I chasing after in my life?"

It is a binary answer. We are living for the LORD or we are chasing after the wind.

Of course we are not all apostles, pastors, teachers, or missionaries.

But if we are Christians we are all servants of the KING and if we see ourselves like that and seek to live that out, then everything we do has meaning.

Ask yourself a very important question this morning. How am I applying the gospel to my life?

If we treat the message of forgiveness by faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ only like a get out of hell card that changes nothing in the way we live we have really missed the point.

[Yes we need to wake up in the morning and go to work to put food on the table, but if that's it we are chasing after the wind. Instead we should go to work as people who have been humbled by the grace of God and seek to work like we are working for Jesus and not men. How I treat my wife and children in the name of Christ matters into eternity. If I eat my food with thanksgiving and dependence of God to sustain me that is meaningful. There is no area of our lives where the gospel should be absent. Who or what are we living for brothers and sisters? If it is God then everything always matters. In order to have that perspective we need to have some things put in order in our hearts and minds. Verses 3-4

point us to a really big thing that we have to have right if we are going to live for God. These verses show us that...]

Point #2 – Living for God means valuing His approval above all others. (Verses 3-4)

It can be a great and constant temptation to please people, but it is impossible to give into that temptation and please the LORD.

Verse 3 continues to show us why Paul's ministry among the Thessalonians 'was not in vain' by saying something of what the ministry was not. (Verse 3)

The fact that Paul confidently writes that his 'appeal' does not spring from 'error' means that he is of the firm conviction that truth is a knowable objective reality.

That is the biblical worldview of truth.

According to commentator Leon Morris the time and place in which the Thessalonians lived was filled with many preachers of various cults and philosophies.

They all came from error because people believed in a wrong worldview.

Some no doubt taught error out of ignorance.

They simply believed what they had been taught and repeated it.

While we should have compassion for people trapped in error it doesn't change the fact that it is wrong.

With the gospel we have objective unchangeable truth.

You say, "How do you know?" Jesus really died, was laid in a tomb for a time that is beyond any human capacity to revive Him, and then God breathed life back into His body, He walked out of the tomb and ascended into heaven.

That historical fact shows beyond doubt the Bible is true, therefore the appeal of the gospel does not spring from error.

'Neither', he says, did the appeal spring from 'impurity'.

Many of the cults and philosophies of the day were based in sensuality and blatant disregard for God's design for marriage and family.

"Live out the desires of the flesh" they would say to hook people into following their message.

The gospel though calls people to self-control and submission to God's design for the image that He has stamped upon us being male and female.

The gospel calls people to exercise the power of the Holy Spirit over our passions to the glory of God instead of falling for the lie that we are at the mercy of our emotions and desires.

Finally, he says, the appeal does not spring from 'any attempt to deceive'.

There were many at that time, just as there are many today, who willfully lie to people in order to gain followers.

Those that live for the LORD, though, speak the truth in love.

The very idea of objective moral truth requires the existence of a transcendent being (a being that is completely superior and distinct from everything else that exists).

That is what Paul bases everything on in **verse 4**.

Commentator Robert Thomas points out that the phrase “approved by God” indicates a process of testing or examination.

We know from the Scriptures that Paul’s life and ministry following his conversion was characterized by trial and opposition of many kinds.

We also know that no matter the challenge, the apostle was unwavering in his commitment to the truth of the gospel.

It is important for us to see that correctly. The testing and trial of Paul and his companions was not proving how strong or intelligent they were, but instead it was proving the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit in and through them as people chosen by God to preach the gospel.

Look again at the result of that amazing work!

“so we speak....(4b)”

We don’t preach error, we don’t endorse immorality, and we don’t lie to people because we are chiefly concerned about pleasing God and not people.

Notice here the impossibility of faking this!

Because the LORD examines our hearts, He knows what is driving us, He knows whether our concern is to please Him or people.

Fence sitting is out of the question as well.

Either God’s approval is what we want the most or someone else’s praise means more.

[If we stop and think about how we make decisions we will see that this is true. Quick show of hands, how many husbands are worshipping with us this morning? I’m thankful for you guys. Here is a question for you, “What colour is your living room painted?” Here is another question, “Why is it that colour?” I’m going to take a wild guess and say that is the colour your wife picked. Now imagine your wife telling you she thinks the room should be a ‘beachside drive blue’ but your sister thinks it should be ‘fashion grey’. What would does it mean if you go with your sister’s advice? It means you will be sleeping on the couch for one thing, but it also means your sister’s advice/approval is more important to you.]

Now consider how much of your decisions are based on God’s opinions or on something or someone else.

When what He says in His word is in competition with what the people in your life are wanting from you a choice needs to be made and that choice reveals whose approval matters most to you in that moment.

It is a huge temptation to please people rather than God.

It feels fantastic when people are happy with you.

It can be really scary to have people mad at you.

Those are powerful things, but in the end they will always disappoint.

[The Bible calls us to eternal life brothers and sisters which is far better than temporary happiness. No doubt we have all stumbled in this from time to time, but by God's grace if we belong to Christ we need to desire God's approval above all others. Now, this is not a license to treat people like they don't matter. Quite the opposite in fact. In the next few verses we see how seeking to please God above people was worked out among the Thessalonians and what we see is that...]

Point #3 – Living for God frees us to truly love people. (Verses 5-7)

When pleasing the LORD is our first priority it will keep us from trying to manipulate people for selfish gain and instead seek their highest good.

Again we see the word 'for' at the beginning of verse 5.

He is going to give us the evidence of his seeking to please God rather than people.

He is going to tell us about three things that he and his fellow workers did not do and then give us an illustration of how they did act among these believers.

Look with me at the **first half of verse 5.**

What the apostle means by 'flattery' here is something more than the offering of a nice complement.

Robert Thomas suggests the meaning of the word is 'saying nice things [likely insincere things] to gain influence.'

Saying things that you don't believe to be true for the purpose of personal gain.

[How many kids have ever said something like, "Mom you are just the best mom ever! Your kind and your pretty and you make the best food, I'm am just the most blessed child on earth." Have you ever said something like that? What did your mom say back? I'm guessing she said, "What do you want?" But what if you said those kinds of things on a regular basis because you really believed it? That is the difference between flattery and sincerity. Flattery just says it to get something.]

Flattery for selfish gain should have no part in gospel preaching and living.

Next he says, "we never came...with a pretext for greed."

The word 'pretext' has the sense of being a covering a person wraps himself in.

The idea is using words to present one picture while really the true intention is get a whole bunch of material gain out of these people.

That hasn't changed down through the centuries.

There are many pastors and preachers who are gifted speakers with charismatic personalities that use spiritual language to get stuff out of people.

That is not living for God that is living for yourself.

He adds this in **verse 6.**

They did not 'seek glory from people'.

That is they did not seek to have people tell them how great they are.

Certainly Paul's position in the church could have been used towards such an end which he indicates at the end of the verse with the word 'apostle'.

The word by itself simply means ‘one sent under authority to speak on another’s behalf.’

Silas and Timothy are what I would call small ‘a’ apostles in that they were set apart under Paul’s authority to preach the gospel.

Paul though is a big ‘A’ apostle meaning he was set apart directly by Jesus Himself to have authority to speak on Jesus’ behalf.

That is a very select group of people upon which the theological foundations of the church rest. All of the big ‘A’ apostles are in heaven now. Anyone claiming modern day apostleship is a false teacher and ought to be rejected.

Because that is such a big deal Paul could have made a big deal about it.

He could have used his office to put ‘demands’ on the people as he says here.

While that would be technically ok according to a worldly mindset that is not the example Jesus left His followers.

Who has a higher position in the universe than Jesus? No one. Who would have been more justified at demanding service from people? No one.

Where to we find Jesus at the last supper? Washing his disciple’s feet.

That is the sentiment we see here from Paul. He could have made demands technically “but” **verse 7**.

[Some time ago Michelle and I were at Heritage Theological Seminary for an event and while we were in the parking lot a handful of baby foxes trotted across the parking lot followed by their mama. I looked at the mom fox and said out loud, “She looks really thin and somewhat unwell.” Michelle said to me, “That’s motherhood.” Not meaning that motherhood is a terrible burden, but meaning that mothers give of themselves very literally for the sake of caring for their children.]

That is what Paul, Silas, and Timothy were seeking to do while they were ministering in the city of Thessalonica.

That is love. Not flattery but loving truth. Not greed. Not glory, but selfless service for the highest good of others.

That is what living for God frees us to do.

Think about it. If we are living for God we will not claw and scratch after worldly gain.

Now, there is nothing wrong with being successful if we are doing it in a way that glorifies God, but we don’t need that.

That frees us to serve people rather than trying to get people to serve us.

You see? When we are satisfied in God we are truly free to love others because we are not looking to get anything from them we are looking to give instead. That’s amazing.

Who or what are we living for this morning?

Have you asked yourself that recently? Have you ever asked yourself that?

It is a powerful question and the answer will tell you a lot about your life.

If by God's grace we are seeking to live for God there is some really good news for us in this text.

For one thing living for God is never in vain! Whatever we do that is for the LORD no matter how small is connected to eternity at it matters.

If we are living for God it means we are seeking to have our priorities straight in our heart and mind. It means getting off the heart wrenching roller coaster of people pleasing and seeking God's approval first in our lives.

When that happens we don't cast people aside, but inside we are free to truly love others the way Jesus wants us too.

Who are we living for today?

Such an important question and I hope, by God's grace we can say, "I want to live for God."