I Thessalonians 2:13-20

James Ard

We're in I Thessalonians the 2nd Chapter and beginning with vs. 13. If you read this letter that Paul is writing to a church he is saying some things that we have difficulty transferring and making application to our own life. I keep reminding us that we need to read these letters from a viewpoint of what is Paul telling those people and what is he telling us? Sometimes it is difficult for our situation is totally different from theirs…we're not undergoing the same things that they underwent when he was there. The first century is different than ours in some ways and in some ways it's the same.

I want you to notice some of the things that he said that are applicable to our response to the gospel. He began to be very positive about this group of people and I think we can learn something from that. Most of us need encouragement rather than having our sins or our mistakes pointed out to us all the time. Now, I'm not saying that we should never challenge someone or correct someone but the majority of our speech should be of the encouraging nature because all of us need that and Paul recognized that. Look at what he said about these Thessalonians: he said **we thank God continually because of you…** and he started out the letter that way…"we thank God continually".

In our prayers we sometimes wonder how Paul could spend hours or how do men spend hours in prayer and most of ours don't consume two minutes. I believe that

his prayers included a lot more people than ours do; we tend to forget about people, we even tend to forget about family. I know that I do – Sarah and I both have people that are aged and sometimes we don't pray for them and I believe that we really should be mentioning them in our prayers more often. And this is what Paul did; Paul prayed not only for those at Thessalonica but for those at Philippi, the Corinthians because he was intimately involved with them and I think we can gain something.

He said I thank God for you. This is the positive attitude that we need to have toward one another. We need to speak those words to one another. We always do at funerals; we learn more about people at funerals than we do at any other time. Sarah and I had a unique experience in the sense that our mentor and the minister that performed our marriage ceremony, the teacher that really we identified with and the reason that we moved to Tennessee was because of Leonard Johnson and when he had a stroke and was almost at the point of death, Sarah and I had the unique experience of going into his hospital room and even though he couldn't respond he could hear and we told him how much we appreciated him…the meaningfulness that he had to our lives. We should have done that all along and we did but I'm just saying that we need to look for those opportunities to express to people what they mean to us and this is what Paul is doing to the Thessalonians. He said I thank God continually.

And he had several reasons for the thanking of God continually for the Thessalonians and notice some of the things that we can identify with and that we can transfer what he said with us. #1 is how they received the word – this is simplistic in a way but it's very meaningful. He said **you received the word that we spoke to you not**

as the words of men but as it is in reality the word of God. Now, if you think about that, that makes a big difference. Don't we have problems sometimes with the message sometimes because of the messenger? Think about that. Sometimes when you're listening on TV to some of these evangelists they may be speaking the truth, they may be really honing in on really what God would have us do but what is our problem?**We don't believe like they believe.* And sometimes we may have that with preachers. A preacher may come in or Robert may stand up there and say some things and we say, oh, you ***say*** that but you don't ***do*** that. All of us do – teachers the same way! You look at me and you say well yeah, you're real strong in what you say but I don't see any evidence of it. You know, you're not gentle, you're not compassionate but Paul was saying to these people, you overlook me; you didn't pay attention to my stature or the way I looked or the way I spoke, you listened to the words and you accepted and you received the words as the words of God. And you accepted it not as the word of men but as it actually is the word of God. That should make a difference in how we respond – if we believe that it's the word of God. If it's the word of God we have to react to it and I think this is one of the reasons why he was thankful because they received it as the word of God.

Now, notice what happens when the word of God comes into our lives. Jesus used many parables to describe how the word works – the parable of the sower was one. There were a number of others that described how the word works and the word of God does work. Since it is the word of God it has a power of its own and we sometimes

discount that. It can change people and that is what he said here. You have seen it and you may not necessarily see it in your life as much but you see it in other people's lives.

Notice what he said here: **you accepted it not as the word of God but it actually is the word which is at work in you who believe.** That's a really neat concept that we don't often grasp that the word of God works in us.

Jesus told his apostles right before he left – he said there's something that's going to be different in our relationship; I am leaving but the Holy Spirit is going to come and he is going to dwell within you…within you.

Paul tells the Corinthian church – **know ye not that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit which dwells in you**, so there is something mysterious about the word of God and God. God dwells in us. Paul describes us as being stones that build up the temple of God. That's why we don't really need a building; the building is not the church although we refer to it in that manner and everyone understands that but we need to realize that it doesn't matter where we are we are the temple of God. Whether we're in a prison or whether you're in Afghanistan or Iraq or wherever you are.

There are more people meeting outside in facilities that are just nothing today than are meeting in church buildings. If you see the pictures of those who are meeting in Africa and India and the areas of Indonesia, the Philippines; they're just in the bush – people just gathering together almost like Paul did when he came into the City of Philippi. Down by the river they were meeting and lo and behold that's where the church met.

He said here it is within you and also since it is within you there is something else that happens – there is a change that takes place. We do not convert anybody; no one is converted by us, no one is even converted by World Bible School correspondence courses, are they Betty Sue? They're converted when they take the word of God inside them and they begin to change their attitudes or they begin to change their spirit or they begin to change their behavior and this is what we can see gradually.

And this is why he rejoiced about; he rejoiced about it because it is at work in you who believe. **For you became…** now notice how he describes it; he uses a word that is not a good word in our vocabulary, in fact it's a word that we really don't use very much and what is that word? Imitators! Do you ladies like to hold up your bag and say this is an imitation of the real thing? ☺ It has the names on it; some of the famous names that you say well, this is a knock-off, this is an imitation or guys who pull out and you have a watch that says Rolex and you say well, this is really not a Rolex it's an imitation, I got it one time when I was in Hong Kong for $20. We do not like to brag about imitations do we?

But what was Paul talking about when he said the Thessalonian church or the Thessalonian Christians became imitators? What is another word that we would use; what is a common word today that has come into our vocabulary that we use? They became clones…and Paul said I rejoice that you became just like I am. **Like!* Yes, although it's more than "like" because the word "imitator" there means that they duplicated. It's not that they are similar, it's that they ***are***; they are the same; he uses the

word not only in this sense but he's going to use it a little bit later on in the persecution situation. But they became imitators of us and this is really what we're trying to do. We want Sue, we want myself to become "like" Christ. When we look at Sue we want to see Jesus; when you look at me you want to see Jesus, when you look at Richard you want to see Jesus.

And what do we mean by that? In speech, in thought and in actions – we want to see Jesus…imitators and that's what he is saying here. See the things that he is thankful for – **they received it and they became imitators.** This is what we need to be; we need to be imitators.

How can we be like Christ? Now notice he does not say like me – later on in another letter he said you need to be like me as I am like Christ. This is a challenge to us that we become like Christ. It's not like the church; not like a preacher; like Christ…like God. This is a real challenge for me. How do I duplicate in my life the same characteristics of Christ and needless to say, I don't.

For you became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ… notice how he also in their duplication – because they were duplicating Christ, because they became like Christ the same thing happened to them that happened to the churches in Judea. This is something that we cannot identify with. We can talk about it but we cannot identify with it. We cannot identify with the persecution of the Thessalonians or of the Judean churches or of the church at Philippi…we can't do it.

We sit here in America and we fuss about this government and we fuss about that government; we really complain about things but nobody, no matter if you're a

Republican or Democrat or Polliwog or whatever you are, you still are able to assemble here, you're still able to do whatever you want to in religion. Now, I know a couple of bumps along the road – you may not be able to wear a pin of some sort at work or you may be frowned upon if you decorate your cubicle with a cross or a Christmas tree or something like that and people don't say Merry Christmas to you, they say Happy Holidays. Although last night several of our Jewish acquaintances wished us a Merry Christmas and I thought that was nice; they recognize the difference. **We are under attack by educator; we see it every day*_____. Well, you're right in that we have difficulties to do that but we still are not restrained.

Your children who go to school can believe in God. **But they are afraid of the ACLU, why they don't confront them I don't know.* Al, I'm saying that that's true but that's not persecution…it's not persecution. Your children are free to pray, your children are free to go to whichever congregation they want to, which church they want to; we are free here but yet these people were beaten. I mean mobs took their property. Later on in II Corinthians Paul is going to say to these brethren here you gave to the support of the churches in Judea out of your deep poverty. Well, something happened in those five years between the time that he established the church and the time that he wrote II Corinthians and probably part of it was the mobs of the Jews had probably taken some of their property.

I get a magazine and I shared it with some of you regarding the martyrs that are going on now. There are places in this world where Christians, believers, are dying for their faith, are being imprisoned for their faith. Now, Al gets upset about various things;

I get upset for those countries that do that and we are supporting them militarily and financially. It's just like we go and liberate Afghanistan and you cannot as a Christian worship in Afghanistan and the same thing is in Iraq…that's what I get upset about.

I'm saying that we have difficulty identifying with this and I don't even know that it's a good thing. I sometimes think it's a test and Paul is thankful here because they came through the test and he says you became like the churches in Judea where the Christ was killed and where I was driven out and where the brethren have difficulty and you see this is the test. Other tests are come besides persecution. **When you are persecuted you're not lukewarm.* No, they're not…they're not.

Al's son and daughter-in-law are in China right now. Today they are worshipping in their own home and they can't advertise. When he sends us emails he says "do not respond to this email"; don't send this email back because everything is monitored, everything is looked at and they are gradually making inroads with one person at a time but they have to be extremely careful.

Do you'll remember Larry Cobb? Sarah and I were with Larry and Barbara Cobb on Friday at noon; their 23 year old daughter Audrey was killed in a boating accident and her grandfather was the driver of the boat; it was just a tragedy. I bring that up because Larry is an elder in the Southside Church in West Texas and when we spoke about Audrey, he wept. Fourteen years – it's still as fresh as yesterday. I bring him up as an illustration because he could have gone two ways. He could have said God, why did you allow this to happen; he could have said you're not a good God, you've taken away the love of my life and why should I worship you? He could have gone that way

but instead he and Barbara are active in the church; he serves as an elder…my point being is he hasn't undergone the persecution like that but he's undergone a very significant trial in his life that believe me, people make other choices other than the ones that he made. There is rejoicing when we have people who go through traumatic experiences and they remain faithful and this is what Paul is saying. Paul is saying I understand that you really believe that you really accepted God, the word of God really works in you because in spite of all of this persecution you have remained faithful - - and that's the test.

He does not say anything about the persecution in that I wish God wouldn't bring it upon you; I'm sorry that it happened to you – he doesn't address any of those things. What he addresses is their endurance, their faithfulness. You have heard me say at times that I am thoroughly convinced that God sometimes does not care about what is happening ***to*** us; he cares about how we're responding to what happens to us because that is the most important thing. Sometimes we do well and sometimes we don't do well but he's always there – so the endurance through suffering.

The final thing is that he says that I long to be with you. There's an interesting thing that I want us to note that makes living in this life real – Paul said that I desired to come to you on several occasions but what happens? **Satan hindered me!**

Now, often when something happens, an automobile accident or something like that we always say well, why did God allow it? We seem to think that there is only one power in this world. There are two powers in this world and one of them is the god of

this world and it is not Jehovah. Jehovah Almighty is not the god of this world. Scriptures tell us that there is another god of this world and Paul identifies him as Satan.

You've heard me refer to this several other times – in Daniel, Chapter 10 is the story of Daniel praying fervently for many days and he got no answer from God. Finally the angel came to him and said God heard you when you started praying 21 days ago and he sent me immediately but (paraphrasing) when I was passing through Persia I got involved in a battle and for 21 days I struggled to get to you and I couldn't until God sent Gabriel to help me and then I was able to come. And you think **"WOW"!** That sounds like science fiction; that's why Paul says our fight is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities, the power of darkness in heavenly places. The battle is going on all the time and here Paul says **I wanted to come to you again and again but Satan stopped us. You are still our glory and crown.**

You Thessalonians are our joy and crown and that's because they accepted the word, it changed them into imitators of God, it made them persevere through persecution and it made them stand firm and I think that's what we can do. Think about that. How can we accept the word; does it change us, do we become imitators and are we a joy and crown and I think we can do that.

Thank you!

16 December 2007

This is a transcript of a class taught by James Ard at the Waterview Church of Christ.
**Indicates comments by class members.*
A blank indicates words/phrases that were inaudible.