

Eyes Fixed on Jesus

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

Online Sermon:

http://www.mckeefamily.com/?page_id=3567

Ever since creation humanity has struggled to establish channels of communication and demonstrate reverence towards a holy God! Sacraments such as confession, Eucharist, confirmation, and baptism serve as sacred rites, symbolizing spiritual transformation and communion with the divine. Through these rituals, believers strive to approach God with humility and reverence, acknowledging their own imperfections while seeking grace and forgiveness. Engaging



in time-honored rituals, often rooted in biblical tradition, has undoubtedly drawn many individuals closer to God, fostering a deepening of faith and spiritual connection. However, these same rituals have also, at times, morphed into a stumbling block for others, leading to a rigid adherence devoid of true spiritual

understanding, reminiscent of the Pharisaic mindset. For instance, Saul, later known as the apostle Paul, held firmly to his understanding of how to approach God. When confronted with the revelation that faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ superseded reliance on the Torah, tradition, and temple rituals as the sole means of adoption into God's family, he responded by beathing "murderous threats against the Lord's disciples," imprisoning many and even approving of their execution (Acts 8-9). In one of his stern rebukes, the Lord warns against the dangers of religious hypocrisy by vividly describing those who are "full of dead man's bones and all things unclean" (Matthew 23:27). This powerful imagery underscores the notion that outward piety and adherence to religious rituals can mask inner corruption and moral decay.

When Rituals Become our god

Though persecution often comes from the people of this world who hate the light, some of the most severe treatment of God's people comes from His very own! In Matthew 23:29-37 and 1 Kings 19:10-14,¹ the Bible depicts a recurring pattern of the Jewish people rejecting and mistreating God's prophets. Similarly, during Jesus' trial, both Jewish authorities and their followers demanded His crucifixion, highlighting collective responsibility for His death (Matthew 27:22-25).² Paul's

¹ Daniel M. Gurtner, "1 Thessalonians," in *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: Acts–Philemon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Buebeck, First Edition. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2004), 618.

² Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1–2 Thessalonians*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 170.

intention in highlighting these truths is not to be anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish.³ Rather, he seeks to underscore the reality that persecution often befalls those who seek to approach God in a manner divergent from the established traditions. Even though at the Jerusalem council it was decided that the only requirements of Gentile believers to be good with God was to



“abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:28-29), by 48 AD⁴ a zealot movement in Palestine formed with the goal of “purging

Israel from all Gentile influence.”⁵ They openly mirrored their predecessors by affirming the necessity of adhering to Mosaic customs, particularly circumcision, for salvation (Acts 15:1). They persecuted those who deviated from the Judaic approach to approaching God. This aligns with Christ's prophecy that believers would face persecution, including being brought before councils and flogged in synagogues (Matthew 10:17).⁶ The experience of Apostle Paul exemplifies this, as he endured

flogging and imprisonment at Philippi and after being at Thessalonica but a mere three weeks Paul was “driven out” due to his conviction that salvation is found solely through faith in a resurrected Savior, not in adherence to traditions.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, apostle Paul warns against the danger of driving away seekers of the Lord through excessive adherence to traditions, stating that such actions only serve to “heap up their sins to the limit” (2:16)! In Ephesians



2:22, Christ is depicted as the cornerstone upon which a new church is established, symbolizing His foundational role in shaping the community of believers. In

Ephesians 2:11-22, the transformative power of Christ's sacrifice is vividly portrayed. Through His shed blood, the “dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles is dismantled, signifying the abolition of distinctions and the establishment of unity among diverse groups. This unity is achieved by Christ “setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations,”

³ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1–2 Thessalonians](#), ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 168.

⁴ Joseph R. Dodson, “1–2 Thessalonians,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*, ed. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 1194–1195.

⁵ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1–2 Thessalonians](#), ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 167.

⁶ Gary Steven Shogren, [1 & 2 Thessalonians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 111.

highlighting His role as the ultimate fulfillment of the Law and the means through which reconciliation is accomplished. Paul's assertion in Acts 5:39 and Acts 9:4-5 carries a weighty implication: to persecute the church is to directly oppose God Himself.⁷ Those who persist in persecuting believers risk facing the full measure of God's wrath, as evidenced by historical events such as the famine of A.D. 46 (mentioned in Acts 11:28) or the banishment from Rome in A.D. 49 (referenced in Acts 18:2). Furthermore, Paul's warning may also allude to the imminent destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁸ In this context, Paul's admonition carries both historical weight and prophetic significance, urging hearers to heed the consequences of opposing God and His purposes.

Reflection. Paul emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between honoring traditions and welcoming those who are earnestly seeking a relationship with God. By prioritizing rigid adherence over genuine love and acceptance, individuals' risk not only estranging seekers but also increasing their own culpability before God. Do you actively cultivate space in your heart for fellow believers? Are you committed to nurturing and strengthening their faith, while also extending to them the same grace and compassion you have received from Christ? Furthermore, are you open to embracing the diverse spiritual

practices and perspectives of others, including various styles of music, interpretations of Scripture, and outreach initiatives? Building meaningful relationships within the faith community requires a willingness to not only support and encourage one another but also to engage in mutual growth and learning. This involves being receptive to different expressions of worship and interpretation of God's Word, recognizing that diversity enriches our understanding of the divine and fosters unity amidst differences.

God's Judgment is Right

Even when we make room for other methods of getting close to God how are we to handle being persecuted, especially by God's very own? It is extremely difficult to see how God can be just when he allows His own to go through hardships, suffering, and pain.⁹ When we see the "malice, cruelty, power, and arrogance of evil men who persecute. We see also the sufferings of the people of God, who are opposed, ridiculed, boycotted, harassed, imprisoned, tortured, and killed.... We are tempted to inveigh against God and the miscarriage of justice!"¹⁰ This cognitive

⁷ Gary Steven Shogren, [*1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 110.

⁸ Joseph R. Dodson, "1-2 Thessalonians," in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*, ed. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 1195.

⁹ Mark Howell et al., [*Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 191.

¹⁰ Mark Howell et al., [*Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 191-192.

dissonance¹¹ is easily dispelled by Apostle Paul with two divine facts. First, even when the world persecutes those who love Christ (John 15:18-25) and their mouths “lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth” (Psalms 73), Paul says do not be dismayed for upon the Advent of Christ¹² they will be judged and held accountable for their direct opposition to God and His people! Second, suffering is not to be viewed as



“God’s rejection but somewhat paradoxically as a sign of God’s acceptance.”¹³ Suffering is not how one becomes saved but is proof of one’s salvation.¹⁴ It is precisely because we are sealed by the Holy Spirit that our light shines and

the world hates us! We learn in the Old Testament that “Yahweh is a jealous God” (Exodus 34:14).¹⁵ To help us live our lives worthy of the Gospel, Christ simply will not allow our “personal sinfulness to derail His purifying work in us.”¹⁶ The author of Hebrews states, “endure hardship as discipline, God is treating you as His children” and while it “seems unpleasant at the time” later on if it “produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for

all those trained by it” (12:7-12). Suffering and pain are often the crucible in which repentance, holy living, and utter dependence on God flourishes! Praise be the good work that Christ began in us will be carried on to completion until the day He returns (Philippians 1:6)!

Reflection. Navigating persecution, suffering, and pain is a formidable challenge. In our pursuit of an “easy life,” adorned with privileges akin to a silver spoon, we may overlook the profound growth that emerges from adversity. It’s amidst trials and tribulations that our commitment to confession and aligning with God’s will becomes ingrained in our character. Amid life’s storms, true growth in faith emerges when we willingly invite the Lord to chart our course and illuminate our path. Are you currently weathering turbulent times? If so, who do you lean on the Lord to sustain you and find unspeakable joy amidst your storm?

“There is the story of an encounter between two farmers, one a believer and the other an atheist. At harvest time the atheist’s fields were rich with crops while the Christian’s fields produced a paltry little. The atheist taunted the Christian by telling him that apparently it did not pay to serve

¹¹ Gary Steven Shogren, [1 & 2 Thessalonians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 247.

¹² F. F. Bruce, [1 and 2 Thessalonians](#), vol. 45, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1982), 149.

¹³ Clinton E. Arnold, [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon](#), vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 435.

¹⁴ Gary Steven Shogren, [1 & 2 Thessalonians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 248.

¹⁵ Mark Howell et al., [Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 194.

¹⁶ Mark Howell et al., [Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 195.

God. The Christian replied, “It does pay to serve Him, but you must remember that God does not always settle His accounts in October.”¹⁷

When we are being persecuted for righteousness’ sake (Matthew 5:10) rarely do we see ourselves as blessed because we “invariably fail to see our circumstances through the lens of God’s promises.”¹⁸ While it may appear that those who are on the broad path of worldly pleasures that “oppose the Gospel and trouble God’s people have the upper hand,”¹⁹ if we “listen carefully to what He says and do all that He says, He will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you” (Exodus 23:22).²⁰ Looking through the lens of the Lord’s promises and from an eternal perspective we learn that the Judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42) will return a legion of angels, separate the goats from the sheep and repay each according to how they responded to His word (Matthew 25:31-46). This principle of divine retribution, or *lex talionis*,²¹ means

¹⁷ Mark Howell et al., [*Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 200–201.

¹⁸ Mark Howell et al., [*Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 201.

¹⁹ Mark Howell et al., [*Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 202.

²⁰ Gary Steven Shogren, [*1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 249.

²¹ Daniel M. Gurtner, “[*2 Thessalonians*](#),” in *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: Acts–Philemon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Bubeck, First Edition. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2004), 628.

²² Gary Steven Shogren, [*1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 248.

that the goat who persecute the church and thereby are enemies of God²² will be absolutely defeated²³ and forever face His eternal wrath! While God is loving, gracious and merciful, His justice “demands that sin, committed against His supreme majesty, be punished.”²⁴ Paul does not mention their punishment as being thrown into an eternal fire where they will wail and gnash their teeth due to unimaginable pain and anguish (Matthew 13:36-43). Rather, Paul points that the severity of their punishment lies in being image-bearers that will be eternally separated from their Creator and “totally immersed in evil” as being “the ultimate desolation”²⁵ and “unimaginable in its severity.”²⁶ For the sheep, on the other hand, they are promised not only “eschatological rest from being persecuted,” but also they get the privilege of “sharing with Jesus in the manifestation of His glory (2 Corinthians 4:17)!”²⁷ Though Paul does not mention in this passage, the book of Revelation also states that believers will “be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will no longer exist; grief, crying, and

²³ Grant R. Osborne, [*1 & 2 Thessalonians: Verse by Verse*](#), ed. Elliot Ritzema and Danielle Thevenaz, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 161.

²⁴ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, [*Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1–2 Thessalonians*](#), ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 466.

²⁵ Gordon D. Fee, [*The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 259.

²⁶ Grant R. Osborne, [*1 & 2 Thessalonians: Verse by Verse*](#), ed. Elliot Ritzema and Danielle Thevenaz, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 162.

²⁷ Mark Howell et al., [*Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 203.

pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away (21:3-4)! So, while we experience apparent injustice while living in a world not our home, the day is vastly approaching when the goats and sheep will answer to God!

Eyes Fixed on Pleasing the Lord

Paul finishes with a short but powerful prayer for the church. Through rituals believers strive to get closer to God but when these “traditions” become to them pharisaic laws without love for God and those created in His image, they become snares



by which one justifies the persecution of other believers. While belief in and living for Jesus Christ invites hatred by those of this world who hate approaching the light, it is

persecution by the “religious” that often is the most intense! Paul prays above all else that God Himself would mold, shape, and transform the Thessalonians into His ways so that they might be worthy of His calling.²⁸ In times of affliction, it's natural to become consumed by the desire to escape our

suffering, often leading us to view the apparent injustices of our situation with intense anger. We as God's elect, however, are called to see beyond the temporal and see the eternal consequences of both the sheep and goats as being absolute righteousness! As we long for heaven we are to pray for “God who works in us to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose” in our lives (Philippians 2:12). May our desire not to be right in our own flawed sight but in Lord's righteous sight, for He alone is the head of the church and our very lives! Rather than being rigid in our worship, interpretation of His word, and rituals intended to bring us closer to Him, let our primary aim be not the control of others but the pursuit of holy lives, thereby glorifying Christ's name, “according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ,” (12) Amen!

²⁸ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1-2 Thessalonians](#), ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 481.