

## ST. PAUL'S PASTORAL TO THESSALONICA

### *I THESS. 5:12-24*

**Golden Text:—**"See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good."—*V. 15*

THIS might be termed a lesson on character building. It was written from Corinth during the year and a half in which St. Paul labored with his associates in the latter city, as detailed in our last lesson [R4416]. The first epistle to the Thessalonians, of which our lesson is a part, is credited with being the first of the New Testament writings which have come down to us, A.D. 52.

The epistle is a very fatherly one, very gentle and loving. When we remember that the believers addressed were merely "babes in Christ" less than a year old we are inclined to amazement that the Apostle should consider them prepared for teaching on so high a plane. But the fact is that the cause of Christ was very unpopular because of the pureness of its message, because it presented no comparison with the worldly spirit and because it called for a full consecration, not only of heart, but also of daily living, to the will of God and to his providences.

Let us recall to mind the setting of this epistle. Less than a year before its writing the Apostle and Silas arrived from Philippi bruised and haggard, surely, as a result of their experiences in the riot and from the beating and other severe experiences connected with the dungeon at Philippi. It will be remembered that they had peace but a short time at Thessalonica, during which they made known the Gospel of God's grace. Then the Apostle was obliged to flee again, but subsequently heard from the believers at Thessalonica through Silas and Timothy. With a fatherly love he assayed several times to revisit the believers, but was always providentially hindered. Possibly these hindrances led up to the writing of this epistle, more profitable for them, as well as advantageous to all of the Lord's people throughout the world during eighteen centuries. Thus do God's providences "work together for good to those who love him." After faith has been instructed and developed through the wonderful lessons of God's Word, it becomes a firm foundation for peace and joy, comfort and rest under all conditions.

### THE WORD CHARACTER SIGNIFICANT

The word character in Greek is exactly the same as in English. Originally it was the name given to a sculptor's tool—the forming chisel used in the development of the Greek statuary. Gradually the word broadened in its meaning to include not only the tool used, but the tooling process, the formation or shaping of the sculptures. Gradually also it came to signify the peculiarities or characteristics of a piece of sculpture. The word today in its English usage had reached a still

higher plane and associates itself with the Divine character, which is the perfect example, and with humanity as it possesses more or less of the Divine characteristics.

When St. Paul writes in [\*Hebrews 1\*](#) of Christ's being the "express image" of the Father's person, the phrase "express image," in the Greek is the word character. How beautiful the thought that our Lord Jesus, through whom the Father has spoken to mankind, explaining his Justice and his Love and his provision for our reconciliation—this one was the express image, the character-likeness of the heavenly Father, full of grace and truth! Nor does it seem strange to us that the Father, in inviting a "little flock" to joint-heirship with the Redeemer in glory, honor and immortality, has decreed, foreordained, that the acceptable ones, the "elect," must all be conformed to the likeness of his dear Son, who was the character likeness of himself. Truly there will be a wonderful family likeness in this Divine family—the Father, the Son, and the Bride, the Lamb's Wife! Who is sufficient for these things? Who is worthy of such exaltation? Surely those who would attain it must lay aside every weight, every besetting sin, and must persevere in the great work of mastering self and developing character—the one kind of character which God can approve and reward.

As the sculptor must first have an ideal in his mind before he can follow it and hew the image from the rough stone, so must we recognize the true ideal of life and then follow it with all our hearts, with unwavering will. How important, then, that we have proper ideals before our minds; that we have a purpose in life; that it be a noble purpose of high standard! Herein is the value of the doctrines of Christ, the teachings of the Scriptures. They set before God's people the truest and noblest ideal and thus assist the pupils in the school of Christ in attaining higher and grander results than would be otherwise possible for them.

It has been said that every man is the sculptor of his own career. To a large extent this is true, but with the Christian it is different. He gives himself to the Lord and the Lord undertakes to work in him "both to will and to do his good pleasure." Again, as it is written, "We are his workmanship." True the Lord does not do the work in us without our co-operation; but in our case he is the Principal or Superintendent and we are the assistants co-working with God for the attainment of that which he has set before us as his ideal, his design for us. The glorious pictures set before us in the inspired Word—of participation in the Divine nature and sharers, joint-heirs with our Lord and Redeemer—are so transcendently bright that they overwhelm us; nor are we able to realize their details except as, more and more, we become transformed by the renewing of our minds, by the Spirit of the Truth.

## **THE MODEL OF OUR LESSON**

The model or ideal of this character lesson is found in the closing *verses (23,24)*. Here the Apostle holds up before our minds the culmination of the Christian character, which the preceding verses tell us how to attain. He says (R.V.), "The God of peace himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ"; "Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it." In other words, this condition of complete sanctification is the Divine ideal before you and God will complete it

in you if you will but follow the directions prescribed. Following these, every blow with the mallet and the chisel of self-control, and experience will gradually transform and shape us to the character likeness of our Lord.

"Sculptors of life are we as we stand  
With our ungarbed souls before us;  
Waiting the hour at God's command  
Our ideal comes before us.

"If we crave it, then, on the yielding stone  
With many a sharp incision,  
Its heavenly beauty shall be our own,  
Our life's beatific vision!"

### **OVER YOU IN THE LORD (vs 12)**

"We beseech you, brethren, to know them that labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you."

While the Scriptures are very particular to maintain liberty of conscience for all of the Lord's people, and while they assure us that in Christ there is neither male nor female, neither bond nor free, but that his consecrated ones are "all one" in him, his members, nevertheless they distinctly set before us the thought that God is the supervisor of the affairs of his people and that their prosperity will result from their appreciation of the Lord's Headship and their recognition of those whom God hath "set in the Body"—apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers, helps, etc. The Lord's people are all children of God possessed of "the liberty wherewith Christ makes free," yet he has not given us a liberty to sin, but a freedom from sin, its slavery, its blight. These liberated ones, introduced by faith and consecration into the family of God, need to realize that the Father's house and all of its arrangements are under heaven's first Law—order. They must first learn to willingly and gladly submit to this order as the condition upon which they may abide in the Divine love and favor and participate in the family blessings. Neglecting to do so, they can never make progress into the deeper and more spiritual matters of that household, but, as babes unskilled and unruly, will be permitted to go no farther than the nursery.

The recognition of the Lord and the watching for his guidance through his Word and his promises will enable the Lord's people to discern the ones he has set over them in the Lord. While, therefore, in the Divine order, the Church is to select its own servants, Elders, Deacons, Pastors, each member is to "stretch forth his hand" in voting, not according to his own judgment merely, but according to his understanding of the Divine judgment or will. If, therefore, in the Lord's providence, our conception of the matter is not realized; if, under a fair understanding and vote, someone is set over the Church contrary to our conception of the Divine will, we are to be submissive and cooperate with such to the best of our ability; because recognizing the Divine wisdom and power we are to realize that the will of the majority of the consecrated is to be accepted as the Divine will. If sometimes the Lord may seem to permit

things in the Church to go contrary to her highest interest, we are not to fear, but to trust everything to him and to content ourselves with a full and free expression of our judgment of the Lord's will, whether others see eye to eye with us or not.

The Apostle in our lesson takes for granted that the Church is acting in an orderly manner and has in the name of the Lord appointed some of their number to be over them in the Lord—to have a supervision and measure of control of the interests of the work. The Apostle urges that these be known, be recognized, not only personally, but in their capacity as servants in the Church and of Divine appointment through the Church. They are to expect admonishments from these. They are to realize that as faithful servants they must watch over the Church's interests. And all who love the Lord and the Truth should seek to cast as few difficulties in their way as possible and should do all in their power to uphold their admonitions and proper influence. These elect servants are supposed to labor amongst the brethren, as well as to admonish them. The service of the Church is not merely an honorary one. The word minister signifies servant and is a proper one and full of meaning—and more full of meaning than many seem to observe.

Continuing the Apostle urges, "Esteem them very highly in love for their works' sake." Permit no rivalry of spirit to come in to constitute in your own heart and in others a root of bitterness. Permit no unkind word of criticism to fall from your lips as against any servant of the Church. On the contrary, esteem them, honor them, as their position requires, for in a measure they represent the Lord. And honor them in proportion as their labors of love in the Church seem to merit. Thus, the more Christ-like will be the more loved.

Furthermore, St. Paul exhorts, "Be at peace among yourselves." Why not? Why was it even necessary to suggest peace, harmony, amongst those who had left the world behind, named the name of Christ, and come together as the followers of the Prince of Peace? What should hinder their peace? Surely each one of them must have known from experience something of the wrangle and jangle of the world. As sheep every one of them has been to some extent worried by the wolves, or at least threatened. Having come together, why should not these worried sheep have rest and peace and joy and comfort under the Great Shepherd's Son and his appointed under-shepherds over them in the Lord? This is the ideal peace, love, harmony. Of course, not peace at any price, not harmony at any price, but peace and harmony because Divine standards are well upheld in the Body of Christ and because the voice of the Master has been heeded in the choosing of the Elders, Deacons, etc.; because all have been seeking to know the Lord, to know his will, to know those whom he hath set over them in the Church; because all are hearkening for the voice of the Shepherd and striving against the self-seeking spirit in word and in deed.

#### **ADMONISH THE DISORDERLY (vs 14)**

"And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the disorderly, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, be long-suffering towards all." We must assume that in these words the Apostle addresses the entire Church and that some features of this exhortation belong specially to the chosen representatives of the Church—the Elders. While it is true that any member of the Body of Christ might with propriety admonish any brother, encourage a faint-hearted one, give assistance to a

weak one and be patient towards all, nevertheless some of these duties belong specially to the chosen Elders—they should be chosen with a view to the fact that they are more advanced in knowledge and in character, "Elder" brothers. The younger brethren, the brethren not specially designated by the Church as "Elder," should indeed feel an interest and a care, but they should exercise great caution in respect to admonishing the disorderly, realizing that the Church has specially appointed certain ones as Elder-brethren, and that specially upon these such duties properly devolve. Even when the disorderly need correction, it requires to be wisely done, else more harm than good may result. Many of the Lord's dear people need to learn this lesson and to restrain themselves lest they be disorderly in attending to a matter to which another is appointed under Divine regulation.

We have already pointed out that the word "Elder" applies to the spiritual development and not to the natural years. As, for instance, Timothy, though a young man, was an Elder in the Church. So, in this young Church at Thessalonica, although none of them had been long in the Truth, some were found competent to serve the others as "overseers, to feed the flock of Christ."

Notice the wisdom of the Lord's injunction through the Apostle. It was for peace, but not for peace at any price. The unruly, the anarchists, were to be admonished. The faint-hearted were to be encouraged. The weak were to be assisted. And each member of the Body was to endeavor to be patient, long-suffering, toward each other member. How beautiful the picture! How grand the ideal of a Church from the apostolic standpoint, the Divine standpoint, our standpoint!

Let us each labor more and more towards these ends. Let us remember that while the Lord deals with us as individuals, he deals with us also collectively. While there is to be a development, shaping and polishing of the Christ-likeness in each of us individually, the same thought is to be preserved in connection with the Church as a whole. No man liveth to himself nor dieth to himself and no member of the Church of Christ is privileged to ignore the fellow-members of the Body of Christ. This is the Apostle's standpoint in this lesson.

### **"SEE THAT NONE RENDER EVIL" (vs 15)**

Of course, each is to see for himself, first, that he renders no evil to others; but secondly the Church should see to it that none of its members in fellowship so do without being admonished. As we have seen, this is specially the duty of the "Elders"—to watch out for all the interests of the flock and the relationship between the Church and others. The Church is the Lord's family, and whatever one member of this family may do that is contrary to Justice and Love will bring reproach or dishonor to all the members and specially upon the Head of the House—our dear Redeemer. On the contrary, we are to see that all "follow after that which is good, one towards another and towards all." This is the uniform teaching of the Scriptures. It expresses a higher principle and more exalted character than generally prevails. The man or woman who would forget a kindness or ignore a benefaction would be esteemed as "mean" by everybody, civilized or heathen. There the world draws its line and declares by action, if not by word, that enemies are to be hated, opposed and grilled as opportunity may offer. Anyone who would be uniformly good to friends, neighbors and enemies would surely be godlike, to such an

extent that he would be out of touch with the sympathies of his neighbors and friends. He would be considered soft and unmanly if he did not oppose his enemies and inappreciative of his friends if he treated his enemies generously. But we are not to follow the world's ideals.

It was our Lord who set the example and gave the message, "Love your enemies. Do good to them that hate you and persecute you and speak evil of you." It was he who said, "If ye love them that love you, what thank have you? Do not publicans and sinners the same? But be ye like unto your Father in heaven, for he is kind to the unthankful and sends his rain and sunshine upon the evil and upon the good." Thus we see the spirit of the Lord manifested also through his apostles' words and the exemplification of these heavenly teachings should be manifest in the life of every follower of Christ. We are told we will thus glorify our Father which is in heaven, and thus also we shall form in ourselves and in others with whom we have influence the character-likeness of our Redeemer and of our Father.

### **"REJOICE EVERMORE" (vs 16)**

From the worldly standpoint these must seem to be strange words to come from a man who for years had been serving Christ as a missionary, not only voluntarily depriving himself of the comforts of a home, the advantages of his station in life and training and Roman citizenship, but additionally enduring buffetings and scourgings, and, according to his own language, being treated as the "Filth and offscouring of the earth." Why should he think of rejoicing and, above all, why should he write to the Church at Thessalonica to rejoice? Was it not he that brought upon them the persecutions they had to endure? Without his message they would have known none of this. What an incongruous word to such people under such circumstances—Rejoice! Ah! the world knoweth us not, and it knows not the mainspring of our joy and peace. How can the world understand that those who receive the Divine message into good and honest hearts and the unction from the Holy One have a continual source of refreshment, not only in the Divine providential care in all of life's matters now, but additionally the inspiration of the "exceeding great and precious promises," which include the crown of glory and life eternal and the Divine nature.

### **"PRAY WITHOUT CEASING" (vs 17)**

To some, prayer at any time is irksome, tedious, but to the true Christian prayer constitutes one of the greatest of God's blessings. His privilege of approaching the throne of the heavenly grace to obtain mercy and also to find grace to help in every time of need, is a privilege the value of which cannot be too highly esteemed. The Lord's people are glad to assemble themselves frequently for prayer and worship, not only on Sunday, but in mid-week. They are glad to bow the knee in prayer every morning, giving thanks to the Giver of every good gift for the favors of life—for all of life's blessings and privileges. They are glad at the close of day to review it and to give God praise for his blessing and protection, for mercies enjoyed, for the promises fulfilled, for petitions answered. They are glad also to have the opportunity of recounting the experiences

of the day and of making apologies and asking forgiveness for shortcomings, and to renew their vows of loyalty and faithfulness in the name and strength of the Redeemer. These blessed privileges of prayer belong to the Lord's family because they are his and have access to him continually through their great Advocate, their Redeemer.

However, the Apostle speaks of "praying without ceasing." What does he mean? We answer that the following statement is explanatory: "In everything give thanks." In a word, the life of an advanced Christian should be a life of prayer in the sense that a desire to know the Lord's will should be continually before his mind, and in every stress of life, in every trial, in every victory, in every undertaking, the will of the Lord should be sought and accepted and thanks should be given. The interests of the day committed to the Lord in the morning should be continually remembered as being in his loving care throughout the day. The experiences of life as they come should be accepted thankfully as under the Divine will; and thanks should be rendered for them, whether agreeable or disagreeable to the natural man, "For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." This is what would please God. This is living up to the high privileges his grace has provided for us. Let us seek more and more to live up to the very highest pinnacle of our privileges. Proportionately we will find ourselves nearer to the Lord, and developing in his character likeness and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God and the precious things which he has in reservation for those that love him.

### **"QUENCH NOT THE SPIRIT" (vs 19)**

The Scriptures represent God as being a light. "God is light." In the Tabernacle he was represented by a brilliant light on the mercy-seat called the Shekinah glory. Our Lord Jesus, filled with the light of the holy Spirit, was called "the true Light." And it was he that said of his followers, "Ye are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Similarly the Divine power at Pentecost was represented by flames of light, cloven tongues of fire. Similarly the Spirit of the Lord from his Word is in the Scriptures pictured as the blaze of light from a lamp. As we read, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet, a lantern to my footsteps." The flame of sacred love, the holy Spirit of the Father and of the Son, was enkindled in our hearts through the Word of grace and the impartation of the holy Spirit. In proportion as we have fed this flame (the Spirit) with the Truth we have become burning and shining lights in the world—the Spirit of the Lord in us.

But how easily such a holy flame may be extinguished—how quickly too! A sufficient draft of the spirit of the world might extinguish our flame, quench it; or, even to put it under a bushel, we may shut off from ourselves the Divine supply of oil and spiritual oxygen and would soon quench the flame of love—the holy Spirit. We have not mentioned the Adversary; yet he is one of the potent influences to be contended against. He is continually attempting to get us into such a position as would extinguish our light and quench the Spirit. If not in one way, then in another our besetments come from the world, the flesh or the Adversary. Yet the Apostle intimates that we, and we alone, have the determining of the matter,—whether the holy Spirit in us shall be quenched or not. This is the Divine arrangement: We can take ourselves out of the Lord's hands

if we choose, but neither saint nor sinner can do this for us. The Adversary himself is powerless to touch one of the Lord's "little ones" so long as he abides in him in faith, in love, in obedience. He himself, therefore, alone has to do with the matter, because God has promised that he will not suffer him to be tempted above that which he is able to endure, but will, with the temptation, provide a way of escape. As the flame of love is to be kept burning in our individual hearts so in the Church it is to be guarded, favored.

### **"DESPISE NOT PROPHECYINGS" (vs 20)**

We are not to despise prophecies, but to respect them and to heed them. But this is not what the Apostle refers to. By the word prophesying he meant teaching, public utterance. Do not despise what anyone may publicly utter as a child of God in the Church of Christ. If he is a true Christian so far as you can discern, not only in his professions of faith in the Redeemer and his sacrifice, but also confesses him in a consecrated life, be willing to hear such. Receive him not to disputation of his doubts, but permit him to tell his view of the Truth of the Divine Plan, if he has something in harmony with the foundation which he seems to believe would be additionally helpful to others and to the Church. In a word, be not above hearing any of the brethren.

Nevertheless prove all things and hold fast that which is good—that which stands the test. Because a brother is sincere, is earnest, does not prove that he is right in his Scriptural expositions. God could hinder such from having any opportunity in the Church. Nevertheless, his permitting them may work a blessing to all who are in the right heart attitude. Even if you cannot accept his proposition, the study of the subject, the searching of the Scriptures in the proving may be of lasting benefit to yourself, establishing you more than ever in the Truth. But let us be sure that we hold fast to the good. We have known cases in which this advice was not carefully followed. Some of the bad was taken with the good, and the result was untold mischief.

### **"ABSTAIN FROM ALL APPEARANCE OF EVIL" (vs 22)**

According to the revised version, this is to abstain from every form of evil. Ah, yes! how comprehensive is the language of the Apostle. The Adversary, through the old nature, would have us believe that while it is true that some grosser forms of evil should be abstained from, it is not needful or proper that we endeavor to abstain from evil of every form. The plea is that we should give "the old man" a chance, and not kill him off too rapidly. Happy is he who heeds the Lord, says the Apostle, and pays no attention to "the old man." The first step in abstaining from every form of evil is to *resolve* or *vow* so to do. The fixing of the will, the purpose, the intention, must come before successful battling can be done. The will decides on which side of every question we may stand. Such a resolve to God is a Vow and such a Vow to abstain from every form of evil and every appearance of evil to the best of our ability is the very Vow we have recommended during the past year and which has been taken by so many of the readers of this Journal and which they report has been the source of so many blessings to them.



Some say, Yes, we approve of every feature of that Vow as being consistent with the instructions of the Word of God—every item of it without exception, but we have not taken it. The fact is that we do not like to bind ourselves. We wish to retain our liberty, and to decide every question upon its merits. Our reply is that our Covenant to the Lord upon us is that every one of life's interests should be shaped according to our understanding of the Divine will and to glorify the Lord and to be of the greatest source of blessing to others and to ourselves. The question is how much liberty this leaves us. If we hold our liberty unto the moment of temptation our original Covenant binds us then to do and to be what would please the Lord. The difference seems to be that by making the Vow in a wholesale manner and covering practically every source of temptation for days and weeks and years to come we are more fully than before decapitating the old man and preparing him for burial. He prefers to have us prolong the agony and decide, if we must, at the last moment. Why so? Because he hopes that now and then the temptation may come in a most subtle form or at an unguarded moment and thus he might, even if only momentarily, gain a little advantage and liberty to the injury of the New Creature. Is it wise or is it unwise to make provision for the flesh, even to the extent of holding on to our personal liberties to the last moment? Would it not be to the advantage of the vast majority of people to settle these questions once and forever and thus cause the old man's hope to die and him the sooner to surrender?

### **"THE GOD OF PEACE HIMSELF" (vs 23)**

Now we come to the concluding verses which we noticed at the beginning—the summing up, the character picture. If we follow the course outlined by the Apostle, God himself will sanctify us wholly, completely. Is not that what we desire? "Faithful is he that calleth us, who also will do all of his part." Hence the responsibilities lie with us.

The Apostle carries his argument beyond the individual question to the Church, the Spirit of the Church, the Soul of the Church, the Body of the Church, which he prayed might be preserved entire and without blame to the coming of Jesus. Undoubtedly it would have remained unto this day had it maintained its early and proper relationship to the Lord. But departing from this the Church at Thessalonica was not preserved. There is no trace of it today. Let us, individually and collectively as an Ecclesia of the Lord's people, seek to have this sanctifying power of God wholly, fully in control of every power in us, and of our tongue, that we may glorify God in body and spirit which are his. We who are living in the end of the age may realize that the time has come, not only that judgment has begun at the house of God, but also that all the faithful may be preserved and experience part of the glorious change "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye"—"the First Resurrection."