

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Keep On Doing What You're Doing

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

One of the things that makes the Christmas season appealing to us is that we pretty much know what to expect. This time of the year is so bound up with traditions, rituals, and repetition that we welcome its predictability. As with last year, and the year before, and the year before, the candle of hope will be lit first on the Advent wreath, then the candle of peace, then the candle of joy, then the candle of love. The ladies will decorate the tree as part of their Christmas party. The familiar hymns of the season will begin to appear in our Sunday morning worship. Mission videos and Lottie Moon Offering updates will get featured in our weekly gathering. Boxes in the vestibule will become the drop off spot for food and toys. All these are examples of the regularity and the rhythm that come back into our lives during this season of the year.

Not that we shouldn't be open to some innovations and adjustments in our holiday routines. There should always be room in our Christmas plans for new insights and fresh practices that can renew our appreciation for the celebration of Christ's coming. But that doesn't mean forsaking the sacred customs, the holy habits, and the patterns of living that have helped bring us to where we are now in God's saving plans. In a culture that prizes the latest holiday invention or the most unconventional Christmas idea, we in the church also recognize the enduring value and the life-changing power of doing the same things that we've been doing for a long time, and doing them with an eye on God's long range purposes. In other words, we have to look beyond that point where the shopping season is over and the decorations have been packed away for another year. Our vision of life and our patterns of behavior are to be shaped most of all by God's faithfulness across time and by the promise of Christ's coming.

In this morning's Scripture passage from 1 Thessalonians, Paul aims to mold the attitudes and actions of his fellow believers by reminding them that as they await Christ's return, they're called to live a distinctive life of love and holiness. In one respect, this message is nothing new. At the beginning of today's text, Paul acknowledges that he's telling them something that he and his missionary colleagues had told them before. "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living" (v. 1a). The word translated as "live" or "behave" is a Greek term that means "walk." You'll sometimes hear people speak about "walking the talk" of the Christian faith. That's the kind of thing that Paul is stressing here, the distinctive kind of living or behavior that should characterize those who profess faith in Christ. In fact, Paul uses this verb for "walk" in the opening and the closing verses of today's text.

The good news is that the Thessalonians have been getting it right. They've been walking the talk. According to Paul, they've been conducting themselves in ways that are appropriate for believers. That's because their primary aim has been to please God. Their lifestyle, individually and together, isn't driven by what's popular in the wider culture or by the unreliable standards of the day. Rather, their behavior is shaped by a desire to follow God's will and to please him in the routines, details, and ordinariness of daily life.

Paul uses good pastoral form by praising the Thessalonians for what they're doing right. But he also knows that part of his pastoral responsibility is to urge them to keep it up, to keep on doing what they're doing. In fact, to do so even more. After commending the Thessalonians for living in order to please God, Paul says, "Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more" (v. 1b). Later in our text, as Paul notes the way the Thessalonians believers love each other, locally and regionally, he says, "Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more" (v. 10b).

This isn't just a matter of quantity, as if love and holiness can be easily measured and accumulated. No, Paul is primarily stressing the need for persistence in the distinctive lifestyle to which believers are called. While we wait for the coming of Christ, living faithfully, in order to please God, demands persistence. And to persistent we can add another key adjective, consistent.

Earlier in his letter, as Paul reflects on his ministry among the Thessalonians, he writes, "You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (2:10-12). Notice how Paul stresses the way that he and the church's founding leaders lived consistently before the Thessalonian church, so that they themselves could continue that way of life consistently, in a way that becomes visible to others. Without consistency, holiness simply can't take shape and increase the way that God intends for his people.

One of the reasons that consistency is essential to the Christian life is because the threats to holiness are always near. Without steady, daily devotion to pleasing God by walking in the way of Jesus, you can end up going down paths you shouldn't pursue, or landing in circumstances that you never thought possible. Mike Yaconelli tells about the small, rural community where he lives, a community where there are lots of cattle ranches. He notes that every once in a while, a cow wanders off and gets lost. If you ask a rancher how a cow gets lost, chances are he will reply,

Well, the cow starts nibbling on a tuft of green grass, and when it finishes, it looks ahead to the next tuft of green grass and starts nibbling on that one, and then it nibbles on a tuft of grass right next to a hole in the fence. It sees then another tuft of green grass on the other side of the fence, so it nibbles on that one and then goes on to the next tuft. The next thing you know, the cow has nibbled itself into being lost.¹

All of us who profess a commitment to Christ are vulnerable to nibbling our way into unholiness. There's usually no sign posted saying, "If you want to live a life closed off to God's instruction and totally unregulated by the Holy Spirit, go this way." That's usually not how impurity happens. Instead, we fail to practice consistency in following the way of Christ, and our inconsistency becomes the occasion for complacency and backsliding. In the process, our sanctification suffers.

Between now and the full revealing of God's kingdom at the return of Christ, our vocation is to grow in holiness. In other words, to mature into lives that reflect the character of God to the world. In order for that to happen, you and I need to practice consistency, day in and day out, across time. Sanctification isn't a matter of instant stardom. It's more like what we saw in the career of Cal Ripken Jr. Though it has been twenty years ago, many of you remember when Ripken played his 2,131st consecutive major league baseball game, breaking the record set by Lou Gehrig, a record that had stood for more than fifty-six years.

In a sense, the way that Ripken broke the record was simple. He showed up for every single game for thirteen years, prepared to play his best. It's no wonder that to so many people, Ripken became known as the Iron Man of Baseball. He was, and in many ways still is, Mr. Consistency.

There simply is no substitute for showing up daily for life and work in the kingdom of God, with a desire to please God and to become more like Jesus. Consistency is absolutely fundamental to the Christian life and to the life of the community of Christ's people, the church. That certainly means consistency in worship attendance, consistency in Bible study, consistency in giving, consistency in fellowship, and consistency in service and ministry. But it means more than just consistency when we're the church gathered. It also means consistency when we're the church scattered into the world. Whether the issues are, as we see in today's text, proper sexual conduct and the dignity of a daily job, or other contemporary concerns such as violence, racial tensions, and immigration, holiness is still the vocation of every single Christian and of every single Christian congregation, moment by moment, day by day. You and I need to keep on doing what we're doing, most of all loving each other.

"Brothers and sisters," says Paul, "we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more." Do this more and more. Paul speaks to them in this way because he knows he's not dealing with a congregation of completely perfected believers. Rather, he's exhorting a community of disciples who are still on their way to what God intends them to be in Christ. Like every church, they're a blend of consistency and inconsistency. This has always been true of God's people. I like the way that James Sennett puts it when he writes, "If we are to be Christians at all, we will be inconsistent ones. We will be right some of the time and wrong some of the time. What Jesus asks of us is that we strive to take the 'right some of the time' and make it an ever-increasing portion of the time (Christian growth)."²

Show me a Christian where "right some of the time" is becoming true more of the time, and I'll show you a Christian who's developing more and more consistency in their life. You see, when you're consistent in Christian living, your resistance to temptation and sin is stronger. When you're consistent in Christian living, you help build and promote stability in your own life and in the lives of the people around you. When you're consistent in Christian living, you help cultivate stability and vitality in our congregation. When you're consistent in Christian living, you provide an example to others in the church who are also striving to grow in holiness. When you're consistent in Christian living, you offer unbelievers a more solid and effective witness to what Christ and his church are all about, and what it means to live as a child of God. Those outside the church may not necessarily agree with you, or may even criticize or reject you. But we still rely upon the persuading power of the Holy Spirit to help others hear the call of Christ and join us in embracing a life of holiness.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, we've arrived at a time of the year when we recall and repeat familiar customs, familiar Scriptures, familiar songs, and familiar messages. Our eyes will see, our ears will hear, our tongues will taste, and our hands will touch things that we've seen, heard, tasted, and touched many times before. But as we come back to them again, these fixtures of Advent and Christmas help us cultivate consistency. In the repetition there's the potential for deeper holiness and for lives that are more and more and more pleasing to God.

¹ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: from Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 230.

² James Sennett, *The Wittenberg Door* (December 1984/January 1985). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, No. 3.