

No In-Between

Ezekiel 36:16–32, 1 Thessalonians 1:8–10

The apostle Paul is writing a letter to a church that he has planted: the church in Thessalonica, now part of modern Greece. Paul feels a great deal of affection for the people to whom he writes. He is deeply gratified that they have remained true to the faith despite great persecution. Their continued faithfulness is evidence of the genuineness of their faith—of their election. Paul is simply following the teaching of Christ: “a tree is known by its fruit.”¹ If a person’s faith is real, it will be known by the fruit of good works. If you have a true faith in Jesus Christ, then you will gladly and voluntarily do the good works commanded in God’s Word—you won’t have to be cajoled or browbeaten, living a life of obedience and doing the good works commended in Scripture will naturally flow out of you.

The Bible teaches that we are all sinners with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ. We have failed to measure up to God’s standard of absolute perfection; but what we *failed* to do, Christ has *done*. He kept God’s law perfectly on behalf of all who put their trust in him. When we look to him in faith, our sins are credited to him, and his perfect righteousness is credited to us. This is called “double imputation.” We are all called to put our complete trust in Christ for our salvation. The Bible promises, “*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be *saved*.” As we shall see, to believe on Christ means to turn away from our idols—anything that is more important to us than God himself. His Word is true: “No man can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and *mammon* [an Aramaic word meaning *wealth* or *property*].” If we believe in Christ as Savior and show that belief by becoming his devoted worshippers, gathering with his people every Lord’s day to confess our faith, sing his praises from thankful hearts, and sit at his feet to learn of him, then we can have assurance that we are his people, and heirs of eternal life. (Worshipping, confessing the faith, singing and receiving the preached Word are not good works by which we *earn* salvation but *evidences* of a true and living faith.)

Our text this morning is very special; there is nothing else in Scripture quite like it. As we look at it we pray that its message will become precious to us and describe our own experience. I have three points: a new *purpose*, a new *love*, a new *reputation*. First,

1. A new purpose

In our text this morning the apostle Paul makes two poignant observations about the Thessalonian believers. We will examine them in turn; first: “how you *turned* to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (v. 9). The apostle

¹ Matt. 12:33

² Matt. 6:24; Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, μαμωνᾶς (Logos Bible Software)

observes that the Thessalonian Christians turned to God from idols and became worshippers of the living and true God. This is indeed a dramatic turnaround! They have a new purpose in life. Formerly, their purpose was to serve their pagan idols which they thought would give them prosperity, happiness and eternal life—gods (small “g”) such as Zeus, Apollo, Atlas, Chaos, Gaia, Tartarus, Uranos. Now, they had come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life. Their sins had been washed away. They experienced fellowship with the Father and the Son. Their hearts were filled with the fruit of God’s Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control. They were supernaturally enabled to forgive those who sinned against them. They were motivated to confess their faults and make restitution to people they had harmed. Failed marriages were put back together again. The root of bitterness that ate at them inside had turned to joy in the Holy Spirit. They were enabled to love the unlovely. They became winsome witnesses to the Gospel. Their friends and neighbors, remembering how narcissistic and self-centered and hard to get along with they had been before they were converted, began to ask what had happened to them. They were amazed. Some of their neighbors began to trust Christ too. The community was being changed, one person at a time.

At the same time their enemies spread vicious lies about them, but God was teaching them to “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”³ Their faith in Christ was echoing forth throughout Macedonia and Achaia and beyond.

Paul observes that the Thessalonian Christians “*turned* to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” The word “turn” is used in the Bible as a synonym for *repent* and *believe*. In Ezekiel we read: “As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked *turn* from his way and live: *turn* ye, *turn* ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11). Again: “Say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; *Repent*, and *turn* yourselves from your idols; and *turn* away your faces from all your abominations” (Ezek. 14:6). In Isaiah *turn* is used as a synonym for faith: “Seek . . . the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him *return* unto the LORD . . .” (same Heb. word: to have faith is to *turn* to the LORD).⁴ Again, in Acts 26 Paul testifies how he had preached to both Jews and Gentiles, “that they should *repent* and *turn* to God.”

Turn means to rotate or move in a circular direction. Humans turn, animals turn, automobiles turn, heavenly bodies turn; it is a concept understood by people in

³ Matt. 5:44

⁴ Isa. 55:6–7

every culture and civilization. How thoughtful of the Lord to pair a simple word like *turn* with the more difficult-to-define words like *repent* and *believe*! What do we do when we repent? We *turn*—not physically but in mind and heart! We turn away from our sin. In the same manner, faith is turning to Christ (in a figurative, not a literal sense).

The saints in Thessalonica “*turned* to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” Their lives began to go in an entirely new direction. With Paul they could say: “this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are *behind*, and reaching forth unto those things which are *before*, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus”—the language of turning. The Thessalonians had a new purpose in life: to worship and serve the true God, rather than vanities that exist only in peoples’ imaginations.

What is repentance? A twofold *turning*: from sin, to God. There is no middle ground, no in-between. Hypocrites want to sit on the fence: to enjoy the “pleasures of sin for a season”⁵ while dabbling in Christianity and hoping for heaven. They want to savor the best of both worlds, to keep their options open. But Jesus demands our *unconditional* loyalty. He says, “If any man come to me, and *hate* not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”⁶

If we’re dealing with someone in the business world who made that kind of demand, we could say “Nothing doing” and walk away. In the business world there are options. If one business doesn’t satisfy, we can take our business elsewhere. But there is only *one* way to God—through Christ, the only mediator between God and man. Jesus in effect says, “If you want to go to heaven, you have to come through me.” He demands our unconditional loyalty. And this is as it should be. We were on our way to hell. We had no hope. Jesus is the lover of our souls. He came to earth to save us at great personal cost. He laid down his life that we might live. There was nobody else who could rescue us. Why should we not love him in return? Like a hero who runs into a burning building, sacrificing his own life to save another, he is worthy of our lifelong gratitude and devotion.

The unregenerate person does not realize his great danger. He won’t accept the fact that if he dies, he will go to eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire. He doesn’t know the sweetness of the divine Redeemer, the lover of his soul. The regenerate person, on the other hand, understands this. From the bottom of his heart he knows he owes an eternal debt of gratitude to the Father who chose him in Christ before the foundation of the world, the Son who died to save him, the Spirit who convicted him of sin and gave him the knowledge of Christ. He *loves* Jesus and

⁵ Heb. 11:25

⁶ Luke 14:26

voluntarily receives him as Lord. He has a new dedication, a new commitment, a new focus, a new direction. He has a new purpose. Second, he has

2. A new love

Paul's writes that the Thessalonian believers were waiting for the second coming of Christ: ". . . and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."

This is an amazing statement. The Thessalonians hadn't adopted a new philosophy. They had received a *person*—a divine Person, the eternal Son of God. He who came down from heaven to redeem lost sinners had won their hearts. They had a new love. Jesus became for them the lover of their souls. They could say with Paul, "the life [that] I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who *loved* me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). "Jesus loves me; this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

A wife wants her husband's love. She doesn't just want him not to go out with other women; she wants him not even to *want* to go out with other women. She doesn't want her husband carrying a picture of another woman in his wallet. She wants her husband's exclusive love and loyalty. That is the love he pledged to her on their wedding day: "forsaking all others, to cleave to thee alone, till death do us part." For a husband, to carry around a photo of another woman is to cling to an idol. For the Christian, to desire *anything else whatsoever* in the place of Christ is to cling to an idol. Whether a pleasure, a pastime, a hobby, a sport, TV, movies, concerts, online gaming, pornography, YouTube—whatever takes the place of Christ and his worship is an idol that is to be rejected. To hold onto it is to betray the trust of him who is the lover of your soul.

Search your own heart. Is there something that you desire besides Christ? Is there something that gives you more pleasure than Christ? "All idols underfoot be trod; the Lord is God, the Lord is God." If you do not want to give it up, then you do not really love Christ.

Our families ought to see us turning off electronic devices and reading the Bible—not out of a sense of obligation but because we truly want to spend time with God. If we go days and weeks never reading the Bible and are OK with that, there is a problem.

Our text says, ". . . and to wait for His Son from heaven." This is a reference to Christ's Second Coming. Before ascending to heaven Jesus assured his disciples that "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Christian, your Savior at this moment is in heaven preparing a place for you! Like a wife whose husband is on a business trip, the church at this point in time is waiting for the return of the Son from heaven, to catch up his bride and escort her to the heavenly wedding feast where Christ and his bride will enjoy perfect union and spiritual fellowship

forevermore. And what a day that will be! Now we see through a glass darkly; then we shall see face to face. Now we know in part; then we shall know fully as we are known. All life's mysteries will be cleared up—why our wise and loving heavenly Father allowed this or that misfortune or calamity or crisis to happen to us in this vale of tears. Suddenly, everything will come into sharp focus. The disappointments of this life will disappear in an instant as we gaze into the face of our heavenly Lover. We will be in perfect peace and rest in the presence of the divine Savior forevermore.

Here is the Son of God who took on our flesh and became man, so he could die in our place. Here is the One who went to the cross and was forsaken by the Father so that we might never be forsaken. Here is the one who died and rose from the dead and “delivers us from the wrath to come.” The word for “delivers” is the same word that is used in the Lord's prayer: “lead us not into temptation, but *deliver* us from evil.” Christ by his death delivers us from the ultimate evil—the wrath to come. Christian, you are secure in Christ; if you are trusting in him alone for your salvation, he will never forsake you but will deliver you from the wrath to come, for he personally took the full brunt of the divine wrath against sin upon himself when he went to the cross and cried out, “It is finished.” Jesus paid it all; there is nothing more left outstanding that remains to be paid. Jesus is not like the earthly husband who died, leaving his wife with a mountain of debt that he incurred unbeknownst to her.

Recently, Norma and I received identical letters from the IRS informing us that we owed a certain amount in taxes and interest. Both of us were told that we owed the exact same amount—\$225 and some change. At first I was concerned: did we owe \$225 or \$450? I didn't want to get this wrong. I did a little digging and found out that by law both husband and wife must be notified of the amount outstanding; both are to receive legal notice of their debt. The reason is that in the past an unscrupulous husband might hide the notice from the IRS from his wife and never tell her. He might go to his grave, leaving her find out later that she owes principal and interest on tax debt her husband never told her about. That is not love!

But our heavenly Bridegroom is not like that. His words “It is finished” are true; there is nothing more to be paid. Christian, if you are trusting in Christ, your sin debt is paid in full. The wrath of God has been satisfied. Christ died in your place on the cross, and there is nothing more to be paid. Jesus has fully delivered you from the wrath to come. He endured the wrath of God for the sin of every man, woman and child who comes to him in faith. There is nothing more to be paid. Amen! A Christian has a new purpose and a new love; lastly, he has

3. A new reputation

Paul writes: “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth [echoed forth], not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith

toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”

The saints in Thessalonica had a reputation in the ancient world that they belonged to Christ. As we saw last week, from them the word of the Lord sounded forth throughout Macedonia and Achaia and beyond.

We, too, if we are trusting Christ, have a reputation. People around us are watching us. Family, friends and neighbors are watching. We are being observed every waking moment. People know that we are Christians. They know that Christians are supposed to be honest and truthful and people of integrity. They watch us as we leave for church on Sunday mornings. They observe how we take care of our homes, children and pets. They overhear us talking to other people. Are we considerate and respectful? Do we show the love of Christ in our interactions with others? As people watch us, they form opinions of what is most important to us. They can tell what’s most important to us by the way we spend our time, by the things we talk about.

They intuitively know that Christians are to be different from other people. We are to be like our Savior. They form opinions of the church based upon what they see in us. They know what we were like before we became Christians. Maybe we were self-centered, obnoxious and inconsiderate. Maybe we were prone to pick a fight. Maybe we were irresponsible and didn’t make wise decisions about people and possessions. Maybe we were drunks or substance abusers. Maybe we, like the people described in the book of James, “lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.”⁷ Maybe we, like so many who do not love Christ, had lived in carnal lusts and pleasures, gratifying our senses by eating, drinking and gaming, and so were dead while we lived.

But now we are Christians. We are disciples of Jesus Christ. We no longer live for pleasure but for him who loved us and gave himself for us! We use the things of this world with restraint and moderation. Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we are learning to do all to the glory of Christ. If Christ would not sit with us and engage in an activity with us, we will not do it either. We are learning that all things must be subordinated to—that is, be under the domination—of Christ. He at all times must be Lord of all. We must learn to take every thought and imagination captive to obey Christ. People all around us are sizing us up, evaluating whether we are living like Christians or whether we are frauds, deceiving ourselves and people around us.

Christian, the God whom we serve says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” As our doctrinal standards teach, this commandment forbids us from giving

⁷ Jas. 5:5 ESV

that worship and glory that is due to God alone to any other person or thing. Christ must be Lord *of* all, or he is not Lord *at* all. We are to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

In just a few moments we will sing the hymn “Jesus Calls Us,” which says in part, “Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world’s golden store, from each idol that would keep us, saying ‘Christian, love me more.’”

Yes, the idols that we entertain in our hearts keep telling us, “Christian, love me more—love me more than you love Christ.” But if we love anything more than Christ, then we are idolaters deserving of eternal fire.

The hymn goes on to say, “In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease, still he calls, in cares and pleasures, ‘Christian, love me more than these.’” This is our calling as Christians—as those who have been given a new purpose, a new love, a new reputation—to love the Lord supremely.

There is no in-between. Either we love Christ with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, or we are idolaters. May we all pray daily, “Lord, help me to use the things of this world soberly and responsibly, without making them an idol. Amen.”