

“Divine Reflectors”

Introduction: It can certainly be one of the more puzzling aspects of our life of faith, but God, in his wisdom, has determined to use us, his people, to reveal his goodness and his glory! As our OT reading suggests, the darkness that is in the world is to be overcome by the light of the life of God’s people, a light that draws others to our living, loving God. So, what should that light look like?

We get some sense of this as we continue to read the apostle Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica and come to the part of his letter where Paul gets very practical with his readers, identifying three challenging areas of their life that might trip them up and compromise their ability to reflect the character of God to the world around them. Lest you are tempted think that the Bible has nothing relevant to say to our day and age, these three areas—sex, work, and death—are very much areas in which we can struggle as well. As the writer of Ecclesiastes hauntingly says, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). In other words, human nature hasn’t changed very much!

We’ll look at the first two of those this morning to see how God calls the church to make its life together distinguishable from the society around it, how he longs for us to become the kind of people who will reflect his image, his holy, loving, and faithful character, to a watching world.

I. Living in order to please God

A. Last week we noticed how Paul frames these instructions in prayer (3:11-13; 5:23-23). I want to notice a couple of other aspects for us before we get to the instructions themselves. First, notice that Paul talks about them in terms of “how to live in order to please God.” To my mind, this puts the ground of our ethical behavior not so much in the category of obeying the law, but in the realm of a desire to love the Law-giver. Yes, we need to be instructed how to live, but such instruction comes in the context of a relationship with the living God, of responding to all that this God has done for us. As God put it to his people Israel following the Exodus: “I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore, be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:45; cf. Ex. 20:2). God’s call on his people to be holy so that we can reflect his holy character, comes out of, and in response to, his rescue operation on our behalf, a rescue that becomes even more pointed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, as we’ll recall at the Table in just a few minutes. Seeking to please God is not a way to earn God’s favor but our loving response to his favor.

B. Second, let’s also notice that pleasing God is a progressive endeavor. That is, we will never be able to claim that we’ve fully arrived. Instead, as Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, while they have been living in a manner that is pleasing to God, they are to seek to please him “more and more.” And part of that “more and more” is to be aware of ways that might trip them up, damaging their call to be divine reflectors.

II. with our bodies

A. The first area Paul turns to is our sexuality, to how God calls us to use our bodies in a manner that honors him. The challenge to these young Christians in this call is that the culture in which they lived, not unlike our own, was one in which sexually, for those “who do not know God,” anything goes.

The only real rule that exists is that people must be allowed to express and pursue whatever desire arises. So, for instance, as one of the Greek philosophers put it, it was considered totally normal for a man to have a mistress for pleasure, a concubine for daily needs, and a wife to bear him children and manage his house. The Christian teaching of the enjoyment of our sexuality within the boundary of a committed marriage between a man and a woman, was considered as strange then as it is today.

B. It shouldn't surprise us. Desiring to live without any constraints is a part of the nature of sin, and has been since Adam and Eve decided that eating from the one tree God told them to avoid was actually a good idea. Ever since, human beings have been pursuing things that seem to look good and promise satisfaction, even though they may be outside of the boundaries God has, in love, set for us. Living within a boundary is not bad thing. It implies a humble willingness to surrender to powers wiser and greater than oneself. And in fact, for those who do know God, this manner of living within boundaries to guide the expression of our sexuality not only leads us to a fullness of life but also serves a missional purpose. It leads to a fullness because the practice of casual sex in our hookup culture never really satisfies. Rather, it leads to an emptiness and simply becomes a matter of dulling our senses and wondering what love is really about. As one writer puts it, "People are starving for God and settle for sex" (Trevin Wax, *This Is Our Time*, 169).

C. If, on the other hand, we can see sex as one of God's good gifts, designed to flourish within the faithfulness of a marriage, it can not only be fully enjoyed, but point others to the faithfulness that God has toward us. As well, it can serve as a sign of the intimacy that God desires to have with us, as a one flesh relationship between a man and a woman points to the beauty and mystery of the ultimate spiritual union between Christ and his church.

D. Important as well is to recognize that for those whom God calls to live a celibate life, that sex isn't everything and that life can be lived without it. As John Stott, a pastor and theologian who lived his entire life as a single man, puts it: "We shall not become a bundle of frustrations and inhibitions if we embrace God's standard. It is possible for human sexual energy to be redirected into affectionate relationships with friends of both sexes and into the loving service of others. . . we can find joyful self-fulfillment in the self-giving service of God and other people" (1 Thessalonians, 84f).

Above all, God's call for our holiness in this area of our sexuality is not because he is against us and wants to take away our fun. Rather, he is totally for us and wants what's best for us, and for others, as we seek to live in a self-giving, not self-gratifying way.

III. and with our work

A. Then, Paul moves on to have his readers consider the way in which our work life can reflect the character of God, if we are self-giving there as well. The issue in Thessalonica is a bit harder to discern here but it seems to stem from the fact that a number of people in the church had stopped working and had become dependent on the care and support of others. This would not win the respect of outsiders, Paul writes (v. 12), as they look in to see what claiming "Jesus is Lord" actually looks like in practice. Rather, they would be viewed as idle or lazy. Importantly, Paul is not seeking to instruct those who wanted to work but could not find a job; he was addressing those who would not work when work was available to them.

B. Why weren't they working? Several suggestions have been made. One, that they believed Jesus would be returning soon so why bother to work? Another, and related to this, was that these idle folks thought they should be spending their time sharing the good news and that working was a waste of time. A third possibility comes out of the patron/client network that existed in that day. In this arrangement, some folks were supported as "clients" by "patrons" who would provide for the needs of their clients if, in turn, their clients would honor them and publicly speak out in support of their economic and social interests. It was kind of like a political, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" patronage system.

C. Certainly, you can see how loyalty to a patron, especially one outside of the family of faith, could lead one away from loyalty to God. Further, as Paul worked daily with his hands, making tents and other shelters wherever he went, sharing the good news in conversation (and in good tentmaking!) throughout the day as he worked, working does not prevent the good news from being shared, regardless of when Jesus is scheduled to return. And not to work, for whatever the reason, when one could and instead receive support from others, ultimately took that support away from those who truly needed it. In the context of loving one another, which is how Paul begins to talk about this issue, not working when one could would not reveal a God who is self-giving but one who is self-gratifying. As the old Beatles song has it, "I don't care too much for money; money can't buy me love." Yes, but as my grandmother was fond of saying, "it sure helps!" Money, as we earn it through our labor and use it, not to gratify ourselves but to meet the needs of others, can express love. And such an expression of love can reveal the love of the God who loves us and desires his love to be reflected to others through us.

Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy. Be a light in order to reveal the light of God in a world of darkness. To these OT texts let me add one more, this from Ezekiel: "I will show how holy my great name is—the name you dishonored while you were scattered among the nations. And when I reveal my holiness through you before their very eyes, says the sovereign LORD, then the nations will know that I am the LORD" (36:23).

We can either dishonor, or honor, the name, the holy character, of the Lord. As we consider how we use the gift of our bodies, and our work, may God reveal his holiness through us. AMEN

As we come to the Table of the Lord together, and enter into a time of confession, you might want to bring before God you body, or your work, and the ways in which you may have used them that dishonors the Lord. Do so knowing God's gracious promise that the blood of Jesus cleanses and purifies us from every sin, that God has the power to set us free from our past and make of us a new creation.

And do so with Paul's prayer in mind from last week that it is God himself who will sanctify us through and through, that our whole spirit, soul, and body will be kept blameless at the return of Jesus, and that this God who has called you is faithful to his promises.