Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)
2001-017

July 8, 2001 by Steve Brandon

Final Directives

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

1. Do not quench the Spirit
2. Do not despise prophetic utterances
3. Examine everything
4. Hold fast to that which is good
5. Abstain from every form of evil

Over the last several weeks, we have looked at passages of Scripture which have been nothing more that directives to the church (i.e. how those in the church ought to conduct themselves). We have sought to group these commands according to Paul's thought. Tonight, we are going to look at five final directives to the church of the Thessalonians, which I believe are all related together. They have to do with our conduct in the church as it relates to truth and living.

These commands are found in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22. Let me read them for you:

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22
Do not quench the Spirit;
Do not despise prophetic utterances.
But examine everything carefully;
Hold fast to that which is good;
Abstain from every form of evil.

Permissive Directives
We have here five simple directives to the church. Two of them are permissive and three of them are restrictive. By permissive, I mean that Paul is directing those at Thessalonica to "lighten up" (if you will). He is telling them not to be so negative with others in the church -- not to be so restrictive. He is pressing the Thessalonians to allow more activity in the church, which was being prohibited.

Those things that were being prohibited and shunned were twofold:
1. The activity of the Spirit.
2. Prophetic utterances.

In some way, those in Thessalonica were quenching (or suppressing) the activity of the Spirit. Additionally, there were prophetic utterances being made that were being despised (or looked down upon) Paul was seeking to direct the Thessalonian believers to allow the Spirit to guide and direct the church. He was also attempting to have those in Thessalonica take a positive look at these prophetic utterances -- rather than being negative.

Restrictive Directives
By restrictive, I mean that Paul is directing those at Thessalonica to "pay attention" (if you will). He was seeking to balance out his previous statements by instructing the Thessalonians to make sure that any activity done in the church was according to the truth.

Simply because somebody claimed the Spirit's working was by no means license to say anything to the church that they wanted to say. Paul wanted those in the church to examine these "prophetic utterances" and activities of the Spirit. Any activity in the church needs to be examined to make sure that things are being done in a way consistent with what is true and right.

As much as Paul told them to "loosen up," he also told them to "pay attention" and make sure that things are done properly.

- Those things that are good and right and true, you need to embrace and hold on to. Never let them go.
- But, on the other hand, those things that are evil and untrue, you need to avoid. Push it away from you and never let it come close.

As tightly as you cling that which is right, so strongly should you resist that which is wrong.

Tonight, let us look first at the permissive directives of Paul. Paul gave them first, so we shall examine them first. Look at the first directive:

1. Do not quench the Spirit

The best place to begin examining this phrase is with the verb Paul uses. The Greek verb, translated, "quench" in every one of its seven other occurrences in the Bible, it is used to describe the quenching of a fire. For instance, ...

Matt. 12:20 - A battered reed He will not break off, And a smoldering wick He will not put out, Until He leads justice to victory.
Matt. 25:8 - The foolish virgins requested of the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out."
Mark 9:44,46,48 - Hell is "where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.
Eph. 6:16 - The shield of faith is "able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one."
Heb. 11:34 - Speaks of the fire of martyrdom not being quenched.

So, here, in the this passage, I believe that it is best to understand Paul's directive to the Thessalonians as instructing them not to "put out the Holy Spirit's fire." In fact, the NIV picks up on this idea, as verse 19 is interpreted, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." The NIV conveys the meaning of this passage very well. We ought to let the Holy Spirit do what He is intended to do: burn and rage in people's lives. Where the Holy Spirit is burning, let us not be guilty of putting out its fire.

Well then, the question comes up, in what ways does the Holy Spirit burn? The best place to answer that question is by examining the role of the Holy Spirit within the pages of Scripture and reminding ourselves to allow the Spirit to work in this area...

We cannot hope to be exhaustive in this area, but let me mention a few...

1. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment.

"When He [the Helper] comes, He will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8).

In other words, one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is to take God's truth and impress it upon the hearts of people. And particularly, in this case, the Holy Spirit teaches others about the reality of sin in your life, of God's demand for perfect righteousness, and the judgment that follows from your sinfulness and God's righteousness.

So, if that is one role of the Holy Spirit, how may this be suppressed? How may this fire be put out? I believe that we quench the Holy Spirit whenever we minimize the reality of sin, righteousness and judgment. Whether this is in the lives of others or in our own lives.

For instance, this week, I was in a conversation with an unbeliever. We were talking about Noah's ark and the flood. As I spoke with this man, I told him how God destroyed the world once through the flood and a second time, God will destroy the world through fire. We spoke about how God did this because of the wickedness of men.

I believe that you would quench the Holy Spirit if you minimize or deny the reality of God's judgmental purpose of the flood. God destroyed the world because people were evil. God will again destroy the world because people will be unrepentant. Those who deny the reality of the flood, essentially are denying the judgment of God and are quenching the Spirit.

2. The Holy Spirit guides us in truth.

"When He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13).

Now, particularly, Jesus is speaking to the disciples here and is probably speaking the historic revelation that the Spirit gave to the apostles as they wrote the Scripture. But, it obviously goes further than that. The Holy Spirit here is called, "The Spirit of truth." He is the one that enlightens our hearts to know and understand the truth.

1 Corinthians 2:12-14
1 Cor. 2:12 - "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God,"
1 Cor. 2:13 - "which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words."
1 Cor. 2:14 - "But the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Peter tells us that the "prophesy of Scripture" is not an act of human will, "but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." (2 Peter. 1:20-21). In other words, it is the Holy Spirit through Whom the Scriptures were written as well as through Whom the Scriptures are understood.

We quench the Holy Spirit when we don't seek earnestly to be taught the truth by the Holy Spirit. When we come to the Bible and think that we can understand it ourselves and think that we have no need for the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit, we quench the role of the Spirit in being taught the truth.

3. The Holy Spirit empowers people to do God's work.

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Particularly in the life of the early church, we see how the Holy Spirit continually filled His people to do His work. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit to speak boldly before the religious people (4:8). The Holy Spirit filled all of those involved in the ensuing prayer meeting to "speak the word of God with boldness" (4:31). Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit to speak against Elymas the magician (13:9).

To do God's work in your own strength is to quench the Spirit. Not to yield to the Spirit in doing God's work is quenching the Spirit.

4. The Holy Spirit sanctifies God's people.

This is perhaps, the greatest issue that Paul had in mind when he instructed the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit. We have seen in chapter 4 that the Thessalonians believers were struggling with issues of sanctification in their lives.

> 1 Thessalonians 4:3,7,8
> 4:3 - "This is the will of God, your sanctification."
> 4:7 - "For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification."
> 4:8 - "Consequently, he who rejects this is nor rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you."

The Holy Spirit has been given to us to sanctify us and to make us pure and holy. As we sin, we quench the Spirit, because the role of the Spirit is to work in us that we don't sin. In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, he would again remind the Thessalonians that this is true, "We should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). To live a sinful life is to quench the Spirit.

Here are a few other scriptures that speak to this.

> Gal. 5:16-17 - "Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please."
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> Gal. 5:22-23 - "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."
>
> Rom. 8:13 - "By the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body."
>
> Peter spoke about the "sanctifying work of the Spirit." (1 Pet. 1:2).
> Jude talked about those who are worldly minded and devoid of the Spirit (Jude 19).

May the Lord continue His working through His Spirit in our lives to convict us, teach us, empower us, and sanctify us!

Let's now turn our attention to the 2nd directive Paul gives:
2. Do not despise prophetic utterances

Like the previous directive, this one is also a negative command. Just as the Thessalonians had a problem with quenching the Spirit's activity, so also, the Thessalonians despised these "prophetic utterances." The Greek text simply calls them "prophecies."

Now, at this point, we need to ask, "What are these prophecies" that are being spoken about here? However, there is a difficulty in understanding exactly what these were. I wish that we could ask Timothy, "What did you see in Thessalonica that caused you to see that this wasn't good?"

Particularly, for us today, there are particular difficulty in understanding this word. Many of us, when we think about prophecies, think about several things.

1. Perhaps we think about the "prophecies" that are made today in churches across our land.

My wife has told me of an experience that she had when she visited a Bible Study on the campus of UCLA. At the end of the study, there was a time when the visitors were announced. After greeting them, they were given a "prophecy" about themselves. The prophecy concerning Yvonne was something about how she had a great family heritage because of her godly grandmother, who prayed for her. Well, neither of Yvonne's grandmother's were either believers nor godly and certainly not prayer warriors.

Unfortunately, this is typical of many of the "prophecies" that are made today in the church. Such "prophecies" have caused us to bring to mind these sorts of things when we read this in this epistle. Though Paul tells us not to despise "prophecies," we ought to despise these sorts of prophecies, because many of them are merely made up in the minds of people who want to say something that is nice to say. Furthermore, often they are simply untrue (as in the case of my wife).

2. Perhaps we think about Old Testament future predictions.

When we think about the Old Testament prophets, we think about their predictions of things that would happen in the future. So, when we think of prophecies, we often think about future predictions of what is to come. Thus, when we think of these prophecies that Paul was addressing here, we often think about people standing up in church making predictions about the future.

But, may I encourage you to think slightly different about these things.

Prophecies are nothing more and nothing less than what God has said -- spoken or written.

Think with me about the Old Testament prophets. What was their burden? What did they say?

1. It came directly from the LORD - "Thus saith the LORD."
2. It was usually a message about repentance and forgiveness.

Yes, they did predict things that would happen in the future (particularly with reference to the coming of Messiah). However, their predictive role is really in the minority of their ministry. The OT prophets were primarily those who called the people of Israel to repentance, faith, and obedience. Even within many of their future predictions, it was essentially a call to repentance. For instance, Nahum preached to Ninevah that they need to repent or perish. They didn't repent, so they perished.

Should it be any different for the prophetic word in the New Testament?

John the Baptist was called a prophet. Though his role was to point to and predict the coming of Jesus, his message was primarily one of repentance. Judas and Silas were called prophets. Yet, they "encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message" (Acts 15:32).

There are many other prophets mentioned in the New Testament, but we know very little about what many of them spoke about. Agabas did predict a plague (Acts 11:27,28), which occurred during the reign of Claudius. We can only assume that they were speaking what God had explicitly told them. The constant ring of the Old Testament prophets was, "Thus saith the LORD." Just as Peter said, "No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21).

Many commentators, seeking to bring up this distinction I have been talking about, make a difference between "fore-telling" and "forth-telling." "Fore-telling" is that which predicts the future. "Forth-telling" is that which proclaims forth the word of the LORD. And the office of the prophet, they say, involves both of these: fore-telling AND forth-telling.

When Paul was telling the Thessalonians not to despise prophetic utterances, I believe that he was telling them to listen to those who are speaking in the name of the LORD. Ultimately, this was for their edification and for their good. We know that the Thessalonians were somewhat resistant to the call to holiness and purity (cf. chapter 4). Certainly, any prophet coming into their midst would address any sin that existed in the congregation. Perhaps some were hesitant to this. Perhaps some were despising the directives of certain prophets that would come, because of this.

Paul was telling those in Thessalonica not to despise those who exhorted them in their midst. Do not despise those who were calling them to holiness. This may come across to us as a simple thing. But let's face it. Who likes being corrected? Who likes being told that your behavior isn't pleasing to God? Raise you hand if you like this.

So, Paul was telling them to listen to God's word as it comes forth, either by a prophet, who spoke directly from God, or by a prophet, who spoke what God has already said -- perhaps expositing the Scriptures.

Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians comes also to Rockford. We ought never to despise the preaching of God's Word. We ought never to despise the convicting application of it to our hearts. When the day comes that Rock Valley Bible Church doesn't want to hear God's words expounded and explained, is the day we begin on the slippery slope to lukewarm ineffectiveness with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You remember how Paul told Timothy that the days would come when men no longer will endure sound teaching, but will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires. (2 Timothy 4:3). This begins by despising God's prophetic word. This begins by looking down upon the application of God's word to the hearts of sinners.

And so, I ask you..... Do you despise God's word? Or do you find it refreshing to the soul? Do you find your life in it? Or do you shy away from its teachings when directed at your heart?

As strong as Paul was in not despising the word, he was equally as forceful to tell them to ...
3. Examine everything

While the previous two admonitions were permissive, this begins the three restrictive admonitions.

"Examine everything." In other words, "don't merely accept what everybody says as coming from the lips of the Almighty. But, check it out and carefully test it to determine its truthfulness. If it is true and good, cling to it and never let it go. If it is false and evil, run from it and never come near it."

I love the word picture here. The Greek word describes the refining process of precious medals. You heat up the medal and then skim the impurities off the top. You test it to the point that the impurities become apparent and can be removed. So we need to do likewise with Prophetic utterances and with all teachings you hear. You need to try it over the furnace of God's word to see if any of it comes to the top.

This was something that the Thessalonians needed to hear. You remember how noble-minded the Bereans were? "They received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11). But, I think that the Thessalonians had difficulty in this area. "These [in Berea] were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica." (Acts 17:11). As noble minded as the Bereans were, the Thessalonians were equally as ignoble.

So, I think that is why Paul writes. Initially, it was a tendency of the Thessalonians to merely accept what was being spoken as true, without

examining the Scriptures (in this case, the Old Testament scriptures) to see if the things spoken were true. Perhaps they had learned this and began to despise prophetic utterances and quench the Spirit. They needed balance.

John Calvin wrote (in his commentary), "Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to keep the middle path between these two extremes, while he prohibits them from condemning anything without first examining it; and on the other hand, he admonishes them to exercise judgement before receiving what may be brought forward as undoubted truth."

But this is not merely something that the Thessalonians needed to hear -- it is something that we need to hear. I echo Paul's words. May Rock Valley Bible Church test everything.

There is a reason why I preach the way that I do. It is to train all of you in the process of better understanding the Scriptures that we all might be more discerning of the good and the bad. My goal for this church is that we would all be able to accurately handle the Scriptures, so that if anybody comes through that back door and begins to ask questions about what we believe, each of you could take the Bible and begin to tell them why we do what we do from the Scriptures.

It takes a commitment from all of us to take the words of Scripture and constantly pour over them, that we might know the truth. I know and trust the long-term benefits of Exposition. Long-term, you will come to love the hearing of the scriptures explained, because they begin to make your Bible clearer is you read it.

I fear for the American church. Never has the church had its fingers on so many Bible resources. On the Internet, there is so much Bible Study help that one could never begin to read it all. On a weekly basis, I search for all of the articles, or sermons, or papers on the text we are dealing with. I cannot read it all in the week in which I prepare to preach. On any given passage, on the average, I read about 5 sermons others have preached, and I just scratch the surface. For less than $100, you can own more theological works that you could ever read in your lifetime. Yet, for all of the resources that we have available to us today, I would contend that there has never been more Bible illiteracy than there is today. The result? Very little discernment in the church today.

Quite frankly, it is pretty disappointing when you encounter Christians who don't test everything. My heart sinks when I see in people a lack of the regular practice of sifting everything through what God has revealed to us. They are easily led astray. Furthermore, they often promote the very things that take away the focus of what God intends to do in His church.

It seems like today, it is the feeling that counts and not the truth. At work, somebody pointed me to a "spiritual" web-site. She said that I need to read the things on there. They are really good. She said that several of them made her cry. For here, the emotional reaction justifies the content. It seems like today, it is the earnestness of people that matter, not the truthfulness of what it said. People say, "How can you not like that? They were so sincere?"

The Bible warns that false teaching will come. Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and form among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Seven of the epistles in the canon were written with the primary purpose of combating some error: 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 2 Peter, and Jude.

Yet, what happened? Think with me about the churches in Revelation 2-3. Pergamum held to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:14-15). Thyatira tolerated Jezebel and her immorality (Rev. 2:20).

Beloved, false teaching begins with subtle errors. You can sway in several different ways. You can sway toward legalism, which goes past the line of Scripture. You can sway toward license, which stops before the line of Scripture. You can drift into speculation, which is being wise beyond what is written (Deut. 29:29). You can drift into Liberalism, which is simply not believing what is clearly taught in the Bible.

So, what should we do when we encounter something that doesn't pass the test?

Paul gives two final directives...
4. Hold fast to that which is good
5. Abstain from every form of evil.

Let me deal with both of these at the same time, because they are exact opposites. For that which is good, Paul instructs us to ...

Hold on to it.
Cling to it.
Embrace it.
Apply it.
Obey it.
Love it.
Cherish it.

For that which is evil, Paul instructs us to ...

Stay far away from it.
Run from it.
Shun it.
Avoid it.

Keep it far from you.

The teaching here isn't complex. Those things which are good, we are to cling to with all of our might. But those things which are evil, we are to keep as far away as possible. These good and evil things can come in several forms. They may pertain to theological issues (what you believe) or to ethical issues (how you live).

Theological Issues
As you increase in your love for and knowledge of the Bible, you will begin to see around you more and more those who mis-represent the Bible. Things you didn't recognize before as wrong, you will begin to recognize as untrue. When you encounter these sorts of teachings, we are to flee from it. When you hear it on the radio, turn off the radio. When you see it on television, turn it off. When you read it in a book, pass it by. We are to flee from it.

May I offer a word of warning with respect to discerning the truth and error in theological matters? When you detect this, you can respond in one of two ways. You can be proud (like I was as I exited Seminary). Or, you can be humble. The proud person will demonstrate his "godliness" by pointing out to everybody his superior discerning abilities and will demonstrate to others exactly why such a person was in error. The humble person will simply let it pass and leave the scene.

I say this, because, for the most part, somebody apart from our fellowship, we will have no control over what others teach. In my experience, I have found that theological error rarely is corrected by a proud refutation of what was taught. I have come to understand that "a scoffer does not listen to rebuke" (Prov. 13:1).

Yet, in the right circles, corrections can be made. At the Jerusalem counsel, James and Peter successfully corrected the brethren who believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation (Acts 15). Priscilla and Aquilla corrected the humble Apollos (Acts 19:26). Paul told Timothy that "the Lord's bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but ... patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition" (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

Ethical Issues
But these last two phrases go far beyond merely holding on to true doctrine and rejecting false doctrine. They include all of life. That which is good, hold onto and live by it. That which is evil, avoid it. This is identical to what Paul said in Romans 12:9 - "abhor what is evil; cling to what is good."

So, I ask you ... is there anything evil in your life that you need to flee from? Are there practices in your life which are quenching the Spirit's role of purifying your life? May I urge you to flee from these things! May I urge you to make great efforts to rid yourself of these things.

But I further press you ... are there good things in your life that you need to cling to more strongly? Perhaps you may not be surrounded by great sin, but you are surrounded by a lukewarmness toward activities for which you ought to wholeheartedly embrace fully. May I urge you to hold tight and be greatly diligent in these things?

I could go into details tonight, but one of the roles of the Spirit is to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgement. May I not quench the Spirit's working, but allow His convicting fire to work in your life right now. Let's take a moment of silence now to examine our lives to see if there is evil from which we must flee or if there is good to which we need to grasp more tightly.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 8, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.