



Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

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Did you take time this week, as part of your Lenten devotions, to meditate on the cross and to reflect on the great love that Jesus showed us when he died there for us sinners? I want to stress again—because I don't think we can hear it too many times—that Lent is about love. It's not about being sad and sombre, it's about focusing on the love of God at the cross. Yes, meditating on the death that Jesus died there because of our sins is something to sober us up and something that's bound to make us mourn our sins and the sins we see all around us in the world, but more importantly, it makes an impact on our minds and on our hearts: God loves us—even though we sin against his majesty and holiness—and he loves us enough to die himself so that we can be restored to his fellowship and freed from the bondage of sin. Lent focuses us on the love of God, and the more we reflect on his love, the more we can't but help to love him more; and the more we come to understand the love of God towards us, the more we can't help but to show that love to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to the whole world around us. And yet, as I pointed out last Sunday, of all the ways we can (and should) show our love for God, Jesus himself said: "If you love me, *keep my commandments*". If you love me, obey me.

Have you ever thought about how it must make God feel when you disobey his commandments? Think of it this way—and I think those of you who are parents will particularly understand. One of the guys I lived with in University got himself into serious financial trouble. His parents were grieved to see him where he was, so in their love for him they were very generous and they paid his bills and got him back on his feet. And yet within a few months, he was right back where he started. The cycle played out two more times that I knew of. They'd bail him out, but within three or four months, he'd be back in the same place. He didn't

appreciate what his parents had done for him. In fact, I remember one time overhearing him on the phone with his sister complaining that his parents were always trying to tell him what he should and shouldn't spend his money on and how he needed to get rid of his credit card. I knew his parents were utterly exasperated too—they loved their son, but he didn't appreciate what they had done for him and how much it had cost them, and whenever they tried to lovingly teach and direct him—for his own good—he'd just respond in anger and cut them off until he needed another bailout. To me it seemed absurd. Not only were his parents bailing him out when he blew all of his own money, they were paying his tuition and his room and board, because they wanted what was best for him.

Now consider how often we're just like that guy when it comes to what God has done for us. He sent his own Son to die on the cross—to bail us out, not only from the debt and consequences of our sins, but through Jesus he gives us the power to stay free of sin's clutches. We exist only by his continuous and gracious care and provision. And yet we repeatedly and willingly return to our old sinful ways, we don't really bother to listen to him when he tries to teach us and give us instruction for our own good, and sometimes we even get angry—like my friend—and cut God (or his Body, the Church) out of our lives. When we do these things, we show our profound lack of gratitude and we show that we need to spend more time reflecting on the love of God in Christ and cultivating a spirit of loving gratitude and appreciation that displays itself in obedience.

St. Paul gets at this in our Epistle from 1 Thessalonians 4. This entire epistle is an exhortation from Paul to the Christians in Thessalonica—an exhortation to live out their days in grateful obedience that they might be a holy people at the time when Jesus returns to consummate his kingdom. It's an epistle that was written with joy and exuberance to a church where the people were doing what Christians are supposed to be doing—and Paul says to them: "Good work. Keep it up!" He writes in 4:1:

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

Paul, Timothy, and Silas had spent three weeks preaching in the synagogue in Thessalonica and people had heard the Gospel and believed. A lot of people became angry too, and the missionaries were forced to leave town sooner than they expected, so a few months later Paul sent Timothy back to help get the church on its feet. Paul's now writing back to the Thessalonians to encourage them. They were young Christians. They had heard his message when he was there and they'd heard Timothy's preaching and teaching about what it means to walk in God's ways. They were doing what they were supposed to do and Paul encourages them not to give up. They were facing persecution for their faith, but they needed to keep pressing on. And yet Paul reminds them that it's not enough to just maintain the spiritual status quo—they need to keep doing what they're doing, but they also need to "do so more and more."

Paul's reminding them—and us—that there's always something more, that there's always room for growth, in the Christian life. That's what Lent reminds us. Even when we're doing well in following Jesus, we can always follow more closely. There are always things that we need to repent of, things we need to change. We can always come to a deeper and richer understanding of the love of God in Christ and there's always room for our love of him to grow. There's always room to become more excited about the Gospel, to learn more about God through the Scriptures and by listening, not only to our brothers and sisters around us in our own church, but listening to all our brothers and sisters who have gone before us. That's why I love so much reading especially the Church Fathers, the Medieval Scholastic theologians, the Reformers and the Puritans. Some people call it the "Great Tradition". It's not infallible, but Jesus promised that his Holy Spirit—who indwells every Christian—would lead his Church into truth. The Great Tradition is the collective teaching, preaching, and devotion of all those who came before us, working under the illumination of the Spirit. When we gather here on Sundays, our worship is enriched by that tradition specifically through the liturgy, through the hymns we sing, and I even draw on it when I preach. The bottom line is that the more we learn about God, the better we know him. The more we experience his grace, the better we know him. The more we live as part of his body, in loving fellowship with our

brothers and sisters, the better we know him. And the better we know him, the more we'll be hungry for and passionate about keeping on getting to know him better, because there's always more and always room to grow closer.

But Paul has something more specific in mind when he urges them to keep on walking in a way pleasing to God. He writes in verses 2 and 3:

For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification...

What did Paul and Timothy teach them when they were there? Let me read that again. "For this is the will of God, *your sanctification*." This is one of my favourite passages in the Bible. People come to their priest to ask, "What's God's will for my life?" Brothers and sisters, you don't need to come and ask me. It's right here: God's will is that you be *sanctified*—that, day-by-day, you be made holy. I'm always here to help you work through the practical applications of that, but the question itself has a really easy answer. Again, God's will for you is that you be sanctified.

It makes perfect sense when we reflect on the cross. Like my friend in University, his parents' will for him was a solid financial footing. It was obvious to see, because they kept trying to give him just that. The problem was that he couldn't see it. Similarly, if we look at what God has done for us, we can see that his desire—his will—is for we who are inherently unholy to be made holy. He gave his own Son to die so that we could be freed from the penalty of our unholiness. He declares us holy on the merits of his Son. And graciously fills us with his Spirit—connecting us directly to his righteous Son—so that he can gradually transform us. When we trust in the sacrifice of Jesus and make him our Lord, we are immediately declared holy even though it's still the same old sinful us. But as we continue from there—as we live in Christ and cooperate with his grace—who we actually are changes. We start setting old sins aside and develop new habits of holiness. This is why Paul tells them—and us—to keep on keeping on—the process will never be finished for any of us until we stand before the throne

of God on the other side of eternity. But that's God's greatest desire for us—his will for us: to grow in holiness. But how often are we like my friend? His parents provided everything he needed to be secure financially and he ignored it all. God gives us everything we need to be holy. Do we truly value and make use of those means of grace, or do we undervalue them? Do we ignore them?

So now, practically speaking, what does this mean? Life throws all sorts of things at us and we've always got decisions and choices to make. I think that most, if not all of us, really do want to follow God's will. The question is: What is his will? We seek God's will about all sorts of things: Should I get married or stay single? Should I accept this new job offer or keep my current job? Should I move to that city or stay where I am? Should I go to Mexico or Europe for my holidays? Chevy or a Honda? Chicken or beef? It runs the gamut from major life decisions to some things that can be extremely trivial. And we do all sorts of things to try to figure out God's will. We look for some kind of sign from God. We pray and ask for guidance. We go "lucky-dipping". (That's when you ask God for advice, then close your eyes, open your Bible, and plunk your finger down on a verse. But friends, none of those things is particularly biblical—especially when God has *already* spoken. When you're faced with a decision in life and you don't know what to do, ask yourself which choice is going to better lead to your growing in holiness and setting aside sin. What's going to allow you to better follow Jesus? Sometimes it doesn't matter which thing we choose. But in a lot of cases—especially with those big life decisions—we need the reminder that the better choice might not be what brings in a bigger paycheck, makes us more comfortable, or meets our fleshly needs. The best choice is what keeps me close to God and what keeps me walking in his way—pursuing holiness.

There are people out there who teach that God's will is for everyone to be healthy and wealthy, therefore whichever decision in life leads to more health or more wealth—well, that's the one that will lead us in God's will. If we swallow that line, we forget the consistent witness of Scripture that God's true will for us is growth in holiness and that he'll do

whatever it takes to keep us in that will. He took the Jews to rock bottom as part of his call to holiness. He gave St. Paul a "thorn in the flesh". We don't know what specifically that was, but it wasn't pleasant. It caused Paul trouble and grief, but God also used it to keep Paul close to himself. The more we cultivate an eternal perspective and get rid of the worldly perspective we're all born with, the more we'll be able to rejoice—just as Paul did—in our weaknesses, in our frailties, and even in our poverty, knowing that when we are weak, God is strong and working powerfully in and through us. And so Paul warns the Thessalonians more specifically in verses 3 to 6:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-6)

Paul knew the depravity of the Greek culture, especially when it came to sexual sin. I know we think that we live in a sex-crazed culture and Christians especially are always up in arms about one aspect of it or another it seems, but as bad as our culture is, the Greek culture was much worse. A few weeks ago we read Paul's litany of woes from 2 Corinthians, at the end of which he writes about his constant concern for the churches he oversaw. This fits in with that. He was concerned for these new Christians that they not be drawn back into the sexual immorality of the culture around them. He specifically uses the Greek word *porneia*, which covers the gamut of sexual immorality. Basically, any sexual activity outside the marriage relationship of a man and woman is covered by *porneia*. He says: "God has called you to himself. Don't be like the pagans around you. Because they don't know God, they allow themselves to be consumed with lusts of the flesh and fall into all sorts of sexual immorality. God punishes sin. He loves you so much that through Jesus he has redeemed you from the punishment you deserve and he's given you his Holy Spirit, to change the desires of your heart—to focus it on holiness." Paul stresses this because he

wants them to understand and to remember just how great this thing is that God has done for them. He wants them to *appreciate* it.

Paul's reminding us that God in his love has redeemed us from sin at great personal cost—he points us to the cross. I wanted to point my friend with the low fiscal I.Q. to the love of his parents and the sacrifices they made for him—love and sacrifices that he didn't appreciate in the slightest. Because he didn't appreciate them, he kept walking in his old ways. But friends, because we don't appreciate God's love and sacrifice for us as we should, we too often fall back to our old ways. So Paul says:

For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8)

Again, God calls us—his will for us—is to walk in holiness. My friend's parents didn't bail him out just so that he could get into debt again and God didn't send Jesus to die on the cross and redeem us from sin just so that we could go back to our sinful ways, but this time free of the consequences.

And Paul hints at something vitally important for the Christian life here. He says: "If you disregard this—if you still think it's okay to go back to your sinful ways—know that you're not disregarding me. When I gave you instruction—when I was there in Thessalonica teaching and preaching—those weren't just my thoughts or my ideas. If you disregard what I've taught you and go back to your sins, you're disregarding God—the very God who punishes sin, the very God who bought your redemption with his blood, and the very God who has put his Holy Spirit in you that you might walk in holiness.

Now, why is that a big deal? Because too many of us go through life with heads full of beliefs, but very few convictions in our hearts. We wonder why our kids so often wander away from God. It's because we've taught them what to *believe*, but those beliefs have never become *convictions*. We understand *what*. We don't understand *why*. That's the difference. If all we've got in our heads is

a list of do's and don'ts, but we don't really understand why *this* is right and *that* is wrong, all we've got is belief. The problem is that beliefs can evaporate very quickly in a lot of circumstances. That was Paul's concern. He knew that the Thessalonians knew the list of do's and don'ts, but he feared that those moral beliefs would evaporate when faced with the temptations that surrounded them on every side and pressured them to give in. So he gives these people the "why": Sin is wrong—God hates it—because he is holy. When he made you his own through baptism, he not only washed away the filth of your sins with the blood of Jesus so that you could stand before him unstained, he also filled you with his Holy Spirit. He loves you that much. He wants you to be holy. And we need to be reminded from time to time of just what God has done for us. When we start thinking, "Well, sure Jesus 'saved' me, but I really wasn't that bad. I *almost* could have made it to heaven on my own." That's when we need to be reminded of the grossness of our sins and just how great an offense against God even our smallest sins are. When we fail to appreciate our redemption, sometimes we need to feel the flames of hell licking at our toes—a reminder that yes, eternal damnation is real and it is what we deserve. And when we're tempted to take Jesus and the cross for granted, we need a reminder of just how tormented he was, how brutalized he was, and how anguished he was when he died for sake. When we know and appreciate the cost, we understand that to continue in sin is to trivialize God's love for us. To continue in sin is to trivialize the death of Jesus on the cross. To continue in sin is to violate the Holy Spirit who now lives in us. To continue in sin is to refuse the grace God has given us. To continue in sin is to blaspheme our Redeemer.

This is why we need to reflect on the love of God and on the cost of our redemption. To understand the depth of love shown at the cross is what transforms our faith from a moralistic list of do's and don'ts into the conviction that God has gone to great and costly lengths to show his love for me, and that my greatest desire in life—my first priority—should be to return his love as best I can by living my life in obedience to his will—by receiving his grace and by allowing his Spirit to work within me to make me holy.

Please pray with me: Almighty God, we are sinners and apart from you we have no power of our own to help ourselves. And yet through the sacrifice of your Son at the cross, you have redeemed us from our sins and given us new life. We ask this morning that as you offer grace to us through your Word and Sacraments, through your Church, and through your indwelling Holy Spirit, let us always remember the cost of our redemption and the depth of your love for us that we might never take your grace for granted, and that we might always take full advantage of it and day by day conform to the image of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.