

Living as Sons of Light

(1 Thessalonians 5)

An Expository Sermon

by Avon Malone

(Read 1 Thessalonians 5.)

First Thessalonians 5 stresses the theme of living as sons of light. The Christian is a child of the light. He is assured and confident concerning the future. He knows where he is going because he knows what the future holds.

This chapter accents three characteristics of the children of light. It will show us how those who walk in the light live.

I. LOOK TO THE DAY (5:1-11)

First, the children of light look to the day of Christ. Paul says, "But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that aught be written unto you" (v. 1). The terms, "times" and "seasons," are terms which have to do with the last things, such as the coming of our Lord and the final judgment.

The first of these expressions, "times," is translated from *chronos*. *Chronology* and other words come from this same basic root. *Charos* is the second word. The first expression has to do with a very long and indeterminate period of time. The second might have to do with more limited and specified periods. Paul probably doesn't use them, however, with these distinctions in mind.

He says, "I don't need to write unto you about this." In 4:9 he used about the same expression regarding brotherly love as he said, "I don't have to write to you about love of the brethren because you are taught of God to love one another." Paul says he does not need to write to them about the last things because they knew perfectly well that we don't know when the day will be.

He says the Savior will come as a thief in the night. How does a thief come? Do you get an invitation in the mail? No, he strikes unheralded and unannounced. Second Peter 3:9, 10 says, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish,

but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief: . . ." People at a town in Arkansas not long ago were saying, "He's coming right away. His coming is imminent." Time-setters in practically every age have tried to pinpoint the exact time. But Matthew 24:36 makes it clear that no man knows the day or the hour. The Son of Man said He didn't know. The angels of heaven don't know. No man knows. Thus, Paul says, "Because you know perfectly well that you don't know the time, you need to live in continued preparedness."

There is a linkage, a joining together between the doctrine of the second coming and practical morality. This is seen as Peter talks about the day of the Lord's coming and says,

... the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, *what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy living and godliness* (2 Peter 3:10, 11; italics mine).

The fact that He is coming back needs to have an effect on the way we live. Unless the truth of His second coming affects how you live today, then you really haven't taken to heart the lesson of this section.

A discernible contrast runs through this section. One of the easiest ways to spot it is to watch the pronouns. Throughout this section Paul talks about "we" and "us" as opposed to "they" and "them." "We" are not of the darkness, that the day should overtake us as a thief, but "they" are of the night. A sharp, distinct line of demarcation exists between the believers who live in a state of continued expectancy and live in the light and the unbelieving world which lacks this sense of expectancy and have been lulled into a dangerous sense of complacency, and are saying, "Peace and security."

In New Testament usage, "the day of the Lord," "the day of Christ," and "the day," unless

there is something else in the passage that would qualify it, characteristically refers to the second coming. The Old Testament has many passages which use the day of Jehovah to describe judgment upon Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Israel, and Judah. Generally, such a day is described as a dark day, a day of cloudiness and gloominess, and a day in which the sun refuses to shine (Joel 1:15; Zephaniah 1:16; Amos 5:18). This is prophetic imagery which describes the awe-inspiring nature of that time of divine visitation upon a particular people. The New Testament writers write against that background. They speak of the day of the Lord, but the day of the Lord in the New Testament is not a time of judgment upon Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, Israel, or Judah. It is rather that great and final day of judgment.

“When they are saying, Peace and safety,” it will come. The “they” reminds us of the false prophets in Old Testament times who spoke smooth sayings by talking about peace and security. Paul says, “When they are saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall in no wise escape” (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Two figures are used to suggest certain characteristics of “the day.” The first one is the thief in the night, which we have noticed. The next figure is the travail of a woman with child which suggests the swiftness and inevitability of the day. Through the use of these images or figures the inspired writer is saying that the day will come swiftly, unheralded, and unannounced. The contrast is seen again. Paul says, “They are saying, Peace and safety, but ye, brethren, are not in darkness.” The word *darkness* often appears in passages having to do with the last things. The word also is used when the inspired writer wants to describe the condition of the unbeliever. Paul says, “. . . have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, . . .” (Ephesians 5:11). In Ephesians 4:19 he speaks of those “who are in darkness, and who have been hardened by lasciviousness.” Thus, the word *darkness* describes the condition of life, the unenlightened state of the person out of Christ. By contrast, the Christian is urged to walk in the light (1 John 1:7).

Paul says, “But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a

thief” (v. 4). *Overtake* is in the sense of seize in a hostile or harmful way. He is saying, “You are not of darkness, that the day should overtake, seize, or capture you as a thief might.” Christians are characterized by vigilance, watchfulness, and alertness.

Paul says, “For ye are all sons of light, and sons of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness” (v. 5). Verse 5 presents an interesting mode of speech. It is a sort of idiomatic expression. In our language we have *idiotic expressions* and *idiomatic expressions*. The idiomatic expression generally is not to be taken literally, but it may be a highly expressive, suggestive way of conveying a thought. Though Paul is writing in the Greek language, which was common in the first century, the expression he uses really reflects the Hebrew. It is a Hebrew or Semitic idiom. It really means this: You partake of the nature of whomever is your father. “Son of” suggests a close relationship. Paul is saying that we are sons of light, and that truth affects how we are to live. God is light, so we are to walk in the light, John argues (1 John 1:5). We are the offspring of the light, and therefore we are to partake of the nature of light.

He also says we are sons of the day. The day here is the day of the second coming. There is a sense in which the Christians’ natural habitat is the day that still approaches, that great and certain event toward which all history moves, that event that is so momentous, significant, and certain that it casts its radiance back across the age in which we are now living. We look to that day, and in a very real sense, are the offspring of the day. Using the old Hebrew idiom, we can say that we are sons of the day. We partake of the very nature of the day. We live with one eye on the day He is coming back. Since we are sons of the day and partake of the nature of the day, we do not walk, talk, or live day by day in a way that could not stand the brightness and brilliance of the day. It is a tremendously powerful way of saying that that great event which is in the future must affect the way we live right now. As a son by a living link is related to his own father, even so we are related to the day.

Paul says, “. . . we are not of the night, nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep, as do the rest, but let us watch and be sober” (vv. 5, 6). Vigilance, alertness, sobriety, a balanced tempera-

ment, a looking unto Him, an expectant anticipation of His coming, should characterize us. We probably see a metaphorical use of sleep in verse 6. He is describing a spiritual stupor through the figure of sleep. Paul refers to those that are drunken in the night. He is speaking of the stupefying effect of the darkness that brings on a spiritual condition like unto slumber and drunkenness. In practical terms, vigilance and sobriety would certainly dictate an avoidance of anything that would be harmful and inconsistent with the character of the day.

Paul also refers to our armor. The emphasis upon watchfulness suggests that we are involved in a conflict. The description here is not exactly like the one in Ephesians 6. There is no contradiction, but the emphasis is somewhat different. Paul says, "... putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation" (v. 8). In 1:3, when he spoke of faith, love, and hope, hope was emphasized. That is true here. Faith and love are the breastplate. Hope is the helmet. Paul says, "Put on this armor that you might be able to defend against the evil one, for God appointed us not unto wrath." We are not intended by God to be the objects of His wrath. He rather intends to show "the exceeding riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:7). This ought to build assurance, as Paul says, "For God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him" (vv. 9, 10).

The looking to the day affects our living right now. There are ethical, moral, and spiritual implications and applications of the fact that there is a day coming and we are sons of that day. That day is the very atmosphere, the spiritual habitat, to which we ought to be acclimated.

II. LOVE THOSE WHO LABOR (5:12, 13)

Children of light, secondly, love those who labor among them. Paul says, "But we beseech you, brethren, to know them that labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them exceeding highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves" (vv. 12, 13). The three participles with only one article indicate he is speaking of the same men. When he speaks of those who

"labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you," he is showing their three-fold work. They labor among you, they are over you in the Lord, and they admonish you.

To whom does he make reference? Some say he is referring to the prophets because in verses 19 through 21 he says, "Quench not the Spirit; despise not prophesyings; prove all things" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). This is doubtful. The expression "over you in the Lord" appears in 1 Timothy 5:17. It is not translated exactly in 1 Timothy the way it is in 1 Thessalonians. A cognate form of this same word is found in 1 Timothy 5:17. First Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching." Thus, "the ones who labor among you" must refer to elders. In practical terms, we need to know the elders, the overseers. We need not only to know their names but we also need to know them. The elders have a responsibility to do some knowing too. When Jesus discussed the good shepherd, He said, "I know my sheep" (John 10). Knowing, loving, leading, feeding, and laying down one's life for the sheep is the picture in John 10. Thus, there is a heavy responsibility upon the shepherd.

He says, "Know them that labor among you." "Labor" is a form of that word that we saw back in 1:3 which is translated "labor of love." It is a form of the word *kopos*, and *kopos* is far from *copout*. It is the labor that produces exhaustion. It is wearisome, fatiguing labor. Paul often uses this word when he talks about his own tentmaking. Here it refers to the work of those who are shepherding souls. What a labor it is! In a kindred passage, Hebrews 13:17, we read, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this were unprofitable for you."

We are also to "esteem them exceeding highly in love for their work's sake." Notice, it is not deference because the person is extremely likable that Paul says esteem them. It is because of their work's sake. The responsibility of the leaders is summed up in three words: *labor*, *over*, and *admonish*. Our responsibility is also summed up in three words: *esteem*, *know*, and *peace*.

III. LIVE JOYFULLY (5:14-25)

The final section of this chapter pictures the kind of church the Spirit would have the Thessalonian church to be. It is to be a praying church, a joyful church, and a church that is characterized by a spirit of love. The sons of light are to live joyfully.

Paul says, "And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the disorderly." The KJV has "the idle." This becomes a more severe problem in 2 Thessalonians. The disorderly may be the idlers. It literally means "the one who breaks the ranks."

Paul says, "Encourage the fainthearted, support the weak." For "fainthearted" the KJV has feeble-minded. That may not be a good rendering. Fainthearted literally means "the little in soul" or "the little in heart." Paul seems to mean "the afraid." Those who may be fearful because of the dead, fearful with regard to their own salvation, may be referred to by Paul. He says, "Support the weak." "Weak" may be used very broadly. Some have believed that the weak are those who have not yet seen the connection between the gospel and morality. They are to be helped. They are to be supported.

Paul says, "Be longsuffering toward all." He says, "See that none render unto anyone evil for evil." Matthew 5:38 is here reflected.

Paul says, "Always follow after that which is good." He refers not to just general, ethical good but to good in relation to those who may be hostile toward you. Galatians 6:10 says, "Do good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith."

Paul says, "Rejoice always." On the blackest and darkest day, there are blessings to count. If you will face the sun, the shadow will always be behind you. If you will face the Son of righteousness, the shadow will always be behind you. Turn from the Son and you are looking into the shadow.

Paul says, "Pray without ceasing." We are not commanded to be constantly wording a prayer, but we are to be constant in prayer. Luke 18:1 says, "... they ought always to pray, and not to faint."

Paul says, "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus to you-ward. Quench not the Spirit" (vv. 18, 19). The brother who said, "Squench not," didn't quite get it pronounced right. It is "quench not."

Ephesians 4:30 is a related passage: "Grieve not the Holy Spirit." In this particular context, the Thessalonians were in danger of quenching the Spirit because they were not listening respectfully to the prophetic utterances. Apparently, there were inspired prophets in Thessalonica. An almost parallel idea is "despise not prophesyings." R. C. H. Lenski, J. B. Lightfoot, Leon Morris, and others have recommended that "quench not the spirit" may not be limited quite as much as prophesyings. The Spirit can be quenched or grieved by a hardened and calloused attitude of heart on the part of man. We are to be led by the Spirit's sword, the Word. Immorality and other acts of sin quench or grieve the Spirit. And yet, in this context the Thessalonians are in danger of quenching the Spirit because of their failure to listen with respect to the prophetic utterances spoken by inspired men.

Paul says, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. And the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, . . ." (vv. 21-23). Perhaps Paul does not intend that a great distinction be seen between all these terms. The word for spirit is *pneuma*, the word for soul is *psuche*, the word for body is *soma*. If there is a distinction intended it would be that the spirit is that part of man that bears the mark of the Maker and is destined for eternity, whereas *psuche* would refer to that animating principle of life that human life would hold in common even with animal life.

Paul says, "And the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 23). This is Paul's way of talking about complete and ultimate salvation.

Notice he asks that they pray for him. He says, "Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it. Brethren, pray for us" (vv. 24, 25). God is faithful (1 Corinthians 10:13; 1 John 1:9). He can be trusted. He is not a fickle, whimsical, or vacillating God. William Barclay tells about a man who was elected to one of the highest offices in his land. People came to congratulate him. He told them, "Don't congratulate me. Pray for me," Paul, the greatest saint of all in one sense, writes to a congregation made up predominantly of new converts and says, "Pray for me."

CONCLUSION

Paul says, "Look to the day, and look to the day as an incentive for morality, purity, and vigilance," He says, "Love those who labor among you and esteem them highly." He says, "Live joyfully."

Are you working? Are you watching? Are you living joyfully? There is a great sense of expectancy that should characterize us. It characterized the early church. It was seen in the Thessalonian church. Are you ready for that day? Suppose the Lord should descend with a shout at this moment. Would you be ready?

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