

Gospel Repentance
Part 2 – Repentance from Idolatry
I Thessalonians 1:4-9

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

- I. Repentance from Idolatry: Today I will be bringing part 2 of this 2 part series on the essential doctrine of Gospel Repentance. As I mentioned in the previous session, I'm choosing to focus on 2 significant descriptions found in God's Word of the initial Gospel repentance that always accompanies God-given faith and is experienced by all who are saved. We often refer to this experience as repentance from dead works and former idolatry. In the previous session, I focused on the description, "repentance from dead works" which reflects a complete change of mind about how God saves sinners – we change gospels. That's why I like Sonny's chosen title – Gospel Repentance.

Today we will consider this initial or Gospel repentance as it is described as a repentance or turning from idols – repentance from idolatry. We know that the popular idols of our day are not necessarily constructed out of wood or stone but rather they are often the products of our own sinful imaginations, as we imagine god to be altogether different from the true and living God of the Bible – and so, it's an idol, constructed in our minds and typically in keeping with the false preaching and teaching under which some of us have sat. And this, our former idolatry, is exposed to us when God is pleased to reveal Christ to us as He is set forth in God's Gospel – God's way of salvation in and by Christ alone – a way of sovereign grace that is diametrically opposed to what most in our day actually refer to as "salvation by grace," but which in reality is often a cleverly disguised promotion of salvation by works – in other words, grace in name only.

We will begin today by looking at I Thessalonians, chapter 1. Paul opens the chapter telling these believers at Thessalonica how that he, Silas, and Timothy gave thanks to God for them. I want to pick up with verse 4, (which actually is the closing of a sentence that began back in verse 2). So, from the beginning of vs. 2 this would read, ***"We give thanks to God always for you all,*** (and the thought continuing into vs. 4), ***"Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God."*** The literal reading of the verse would be, "Knowing, [brethren – beloved of (or by) God], your election."

And then as we go through the rest of the chapter, Paul tells us how he knows them to be among those chosen by God the Father unto salvation in Christ before the world began, God's elect, saying in verse 5, ***"For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. ⁶ And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.*** You received the word in affliction. This radical change of mind turns your world upside down. You didn't merely gain a little higher knowledge. No – when it came to this Gospel, you now received something that caused others to oppose you, especially if (and when) they figure out how you now judge what you once believed – which by implication tells them how you now fear for their eternal well-being if they were of that like-minded, but false faith.

Verse 7... ⁷***So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.*** Now the word "ensamples" is translated from a Greek word referring to a die, a stamp, a pattern, and as such, we can conclude that Paul is describing identifying characteristics of all true believers. This is much like what Paul wrote to Timothy in I Timothy 1:16: ***"Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting."*** We see Paul as a pattern to all believers and that pattern of Gospel repentance is on vivid display in Philippians 3 where after citing all the things he had previously held dear and thought had found him in favor with God (e.g. – "circumcised the eighth day, touching the law, a Pharisee, touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless"), he then wrote in verse 7 concerning those things, ***"But what things were gain to me, <not the things he and others had known to be evil or immoral, but things he thought gained him something with God...> those I counted loss for Christ. ⁸Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, ⁹And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:"***

Philippians 3:7-9

Here we see Paul's own description of his repentance from dead works as his gospel had changed and we see how repentance is inseparable from God-given faith wherein God's righteousness is revealed. And we see what a radical change of mind this involved.

So, this coincides with our text in I Thessalonians, where Paul tells them that likewise they are a pattern to all that believe. God, through Paul, is telling us we can know their election (as Paul stated in verse 4) because as “ensamples,” they possess the identifying characteristics of all that believe. They fit the pattern and have responded in these ways that are characteristic of all true believers.

It’s not uncommon for kin folks to bear some physical resemblance to one another. And here we see that all of those who are translated into the kingdom, as children of the King (spiritually having a kinsman redeemer in Christ, their Substitute) bear spiritual resemblance to one another in this sense – they fit the pattern of those who believe – as we read here, even “*...ensamples to all that believe...*”

And as such, unless and until we also possess these identifying characteristics, we have no warrant to presume ourselves to be among the beloved of God as one of His elect – chosen unto salvation in Jesus Christ. Verse 8 continues to describe how they knew of their election and were ensamples saying, – *“⁸ For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.*” That is, they knew their election by the gospel they identified with and preached and promoted elsewhere – it being the one and the same as that which had been delivered to them – the Gospel (of how God saves sinners based solely on the merits of the doing and dying of Jesus Christ). Verse 9 he continues this description of how they were ensamples saying, - *⁹ For they themselves* (i.e. – those fellow believers to whom their faith toward God had been spread abroad) *shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*; Their repentance from idolatry shows how their world, like Paul’s, was also turned upside down. Notice the resemblance in the language here and what we looked at in the previous session from Hebrews 9:14 where it spoke of how the blood of Christ had purged their “*...conscience from dead works to serve the living God*.” And here it says he knew of their election and they fit the pattern of all believers in having turned to “*...God from idols to serve the living and true God*.”

Here we see how these 2 aspects of repentance, (1) repentance from idolatry (turning from a false god to the one, true and living God, and (2) repentance from dead works both describe that which is experienced by all true believers in the initial, Gospel repentance that always accompanies true, God-given faith.

II. Idolatry Exposed: For certain folks, recognizing their idolatry may seem more subtle. E.g. – I know there are many who claim to believe what they consider to be the “doctrines of grace,” but who still consider themselves and / or others to have been saved at a time when their doctrine was actually contrary to the doctrine of Christ – diametrically opposed to God’s Gospel of sovereign grace, of salvation conditioned on Christ alone, where God gets all the glory. So, while they may seem to have learned and embraced some new doctrine, they expose that they have yet to recognize the slander on God’s character embodied in their former, thoughts of God or in the evil thoughts of their friends perhaps who still sit under a false gospel doctrine. And for such folks who can (to use the words of Jeremiah) cry peace where there is no peace – this absence of Gospel repentance, sadly exposes the absence of genuine God-given faith. They don’t fit the pattern.

Notice the wording in I Thess. 1:9, that the “ensample” of a true believer is one who has, “**...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;** For your god to be true, He must possess the qualities of character that are true of Deity as they are proclaimed in God’s Word. For God to be God, He must be sovereign, just, love, all-powerful / omnipotent, all-wise and all-knowing / omniscient, holy – perfect or impeccable in every attribute of character. And many, like myself in years past, presume to ascribe to their god these character attributes and yet in their ignorance of the necessity of having the righteousness of God imputed to them – the perfect satisfaction to God’s injured justice due unto the sins of those for whom Christ died, the very righteousness which is revealed if and when the Gospel comes in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in full assurance – (in this ignorance) they expose that their god (i.e. – how as they perceive God to be) is a god that does not act nor live in accordance with who He is – in keeping with His true attributes. They assume that God will save sinners in ways that actually deny the very attributes they think they agree belong to the one true God. Like me in years past, in my spiritual blindness I was a walking contradiction. Consider some of the attributes of God that are unwittingly (but nonetheless) denied by the majority of so-called “Christians” who tragically insist (as I once did) that God loves everyone and Christ died for everyone.

A. Sovereign – To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is God. He is in control. In Ephesians 1:11 we’re told that God “***...worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:***” (Eph. 1:11). In Isaiah 46:9-10 God says, “***Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me,***

¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel <i.e. – His purpose contrived by infinite wisdom> shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:

Now how different is this sovereign God of the Bible from the god of most of modern day “Christianity?” I now know that the god I once worshipped would actually have been a helpless being – had he been anything other than a figment of my imagination, in keeping with the false teaching under which I was raised. He would have been an object to be pitied rather than one to be revered. To believe that the one you presume to be God is not sovereign in any area is to believe in a false god – an idol. Many concede that God is sovereign in many areas, but not in salvation. It’s amazing how much truth we will concede but apart from God’s grace, we won’t give up the notion that our eternal destiny ultimately remains in our hands. We would talk a lot about God’s mercy but we didn’t really need mercy. We simply needed to fulfill our end of the deal by meeting the condition that was prescribed to us by some false preacher – Just repeat this prayer, invite Jesus into your heart, accept Him as your personal savior, God’s done His part now the rest is left up to you – whatever. Many teach that God the Father purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died for all and with the express intention of saving the whole human race, and that God the Holy Spirit is now seeking to win the world to Christ. And yet even they admit that the great majority of men and women are dying in their sin, without Christ, and passing into a hopeless eternity, making their god an abject failure – unable to fulfill that which he is presumed to have purposed. That’s an idol.

To deny the sovereignty of God in salvation is to call God a liar – i.e. denying what He says of Himself, that He “...***will have mercy on whom*** <He> ***will have mercy...***” (Rom. 9:15) – is to worship a god who is not worthy to be worshipped. Consider that God’s sovereignty characterizes His whole being. He is sovereign in the exercise of all His attributes – His power, His mercy, His love, His grace. Sadly, many presume the will of their Creator is subordinate to the “sacred,” so-called free will of the creature.

- B. Consider the justice of God – The Bible teaches that God is just. Think of the implications of believing that Christ died for the sins of all mankind while readily acknowledging that many of these will perish in hell anyway. Only an unjust and ruthless monster would sentence any folks to hell whose sin debt allegedly had already been paid by the precious, shed blood of Christ for them.

The belief that Christ died for all without exception exposes an erroneous concept of God which by default accuses God of being unjust even though in our spiritual blindness we fail to recognize this (and the other) slanderous assaults on His character, implicit in that false doctrine. If confronted with this, many will reply as I once did, “I just didn’t think of it like that” as if that let me off the hook. It just didn’t cross my mind – that is what it is to have no fear of God before our eyes – to have no regard for the honor of the holy character of the one true God of the Bible. That’s not a “God-ward” faith as Paul described it. No, that’s thinking from the ground up, from the perspective of sinful man who often struggles with the issue of how (or what must I do) to accept Jesus as my Savior. But a God-ward faith would be dealing with God as He is, prompting us instead to seek to understand how (or on what basis) a holy and just God could accept me, a sinner.

In Isaiah 45 where God declared that they were praying to a god who cannot save, He then distinguished Himself as the One to look to for salvation as a “just God and a Savior.” And in ignorance of the righteousness of God in Christ, there is no answer as to how He can be both a just God and a Savior. God doesn’t save anyone at the expense of His justice. An unjust god is no god at all – it’s an idol.

C. Consider God’s Love – Even as sinners, we strive to engage all that we are, every attribute and faculty of our being to insure the well-being of those we truly love. E.g. – I have little doubt that most of you, like me, would sacrifice your own life if necessary to save one of your beloved children and grandchildren. But the popular concept of God’s love would have us imagining that unlike ourselves, He stops short of engaging His infinite abilities to insure the well-being, the salvation of what is presumed to be all the objects of His love.

To repeat an illustration I’ve used in the past, consider for a moment a young mother and her toddler enjoying a sunny summer afternoon lounging around a swimming pool. Suddenly the toddler stumbles into the water and is on the verge of drowning. The mom, a former lifeguard, immediately dives in and rescues the child because she loves him. Can you possibly imagine this young mother, wise and capable enough to save her own child from drowning, opting not to engage her abilities to do so? Why, she could reason that she had warned him not to get too close. And given that stubborn, rebellious, fallen nature with which we’re all born, practically demanded then that he had to get too close. So, should she let her disobedient, but beloved child drown simply because it was his own free-will decision to venture too close to the pool’s edge?

No, we'd say lock her up for such neglectful actions. But that's exactly what today's popular false version of so-called "christianity" implies about God. It says that He fails to save many of what are presumed to be the objects of His unchanging, everlasting, unconditional love. Although we may not recognize it, this thinking accuses God of one or more of the following:

1. If it is assumed that He loves everyone, including those He condemns to hell, then He must not be all-knowing or not wise enough to have foreseen the obstacles to their salvation. Or if not that, it must be that ...
2. While He is presumed to love all, including those that perish, He must not be powerful enough to overcome the obstacles and difficulties in order to save them – perhaps not powerful enough to overcome those sinners more stubborn or obstinate than I imagined myself to be. Or if not that, what are you left to conclude except that...
3. His love is certainly not perfect, unconditional, unchangeable and everlasting. Actually, it is worthless – for although He is infinitely wise and powerful, He chooses not to intervene and engage Himself to insure the well-being of these presumed objects of His love, allowing many of them to perish according to their will, leaving what many believe to be God's own will as an unfulfilled pipe dream. I hope this helps you see how such deadly misconceptions of God's way of salvation (a false gospel – contrary to the doctrine of Christ) – how it is actually a denial of the true God Himself and thereby equates to idolatry.

D. What about His Immutability? In Malachi 3:6, God says, ***"For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."*** God changes not, but such a reactionary god – one who reacts to the sinner's decision or choice – by definition must change His mind in response to that which they chose. That's not the sovereign, immutable God of the Bible. That would be an idol.

E. What about His Holiness? God is holy. Holiness is the very excellency of the Divine nature. It speaks of the perfection of every attribute of His character that sets God apart in every way. His justice is a holy justice (It's perfect and unerring). His wisdom is a holy wisdom, etc. Here we see how denying the perfection of any of God's attributes is a denial of who He is – and so an idol to be repented of.

Nothing but perfection and excellence can proceed from holy God. So God's character is not one dimensional as if His mercy can override everything else – as if He will set aside His holiness, or His justice, or be less than all-powerful or all-knowing so that He can save us (show mercy) in the way that fallen men and women naturally would choose to be saved –

...based on something they do (or some decision they make) to make the real difference that gives them the glory (and room to boast). No, “***...He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.***” (I Cor. 1:31).

The only way God can be true to who He is (both a just God and a merciful Savior) is through the imputation of the righteousness that Christ, as the Representative, Substitute, and Surety for His people, single-handedly established in perfect satisfaction to God the Father’s law and justice by His doing and dying on the cross – the righteousness revealed in God’s Gospel of grace, the Gospel that is believed upon by every elect, justified, redeemed, and born again sinner by the power of God the Holy Spirit, a faith that is always accompanied by repentance from the god we once prayed to – a god who cannot save – an idol. You see, the living and true God is One who (1) is true to all of the impeccable qualities of character that belong only unto God and (2) as a living God, exercises those qualities of character, engaging Himself on behalf of all the objects of His everlasting love.

VI. Closing:

As with all our messages, I pray that for someone who hears them, that God’s Spirit will do a heart work – grant them the blood-bought gift of faith and repentance that is so graciously given to all of God’s elect at God’s appointed time – a work I hope and pray and rejoice in knowing that He already has done for many (if not all) of you. And we pray for this so that God might receive all the glory, that Christ might be exalted, that all boasting in the sinner might be excluded, and so that we might enter into religious fellowship and rejoice with them – as Paul put it, knowing of their election by this distinguishing mark – because they too have “***...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.***” (I Thess. 1:9).

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself – the Bible.