

Repentance from Idolatry

I Thessalonians 1

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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. Introduction: Over the past few weeks, we've all seen the many Nativity scenes that are typically displayed this time of year, reminding us of how many who profess to be "Christians" pay special attention during this season to the historical birth of Jesus Christ, born in a manger over 2000 years ago. But once you get past the historical facts of His birth, there exists a smorgasbord of doctrinal opinions regarding who He was (and is) and what (if anything) was accomplished by His birth, death, and subsequent resurrection from the dead. But listen – it's not our opinions that matter. In fact, since the Bible declares that we're all born in spiritual darkness, we should conclude that our opinions must be (and will be) changed if we're delivered out of that spiritual darkness by God's grace. This should cause us to more diligently seek to understand what God has to say in His word about Jesus Christ – who He is and what He has accomplished because none know God the Father but through the Person and work of God the Son.

To some, the significance of that baby born in a manger lies in the fact that He grew up to be merely an example by which we should live our lives. Many others believe that by His life, death and resurrection, Christ made it possible for sinners to be eternally saved, but only if they will do their part so as to make the real difference as to whether they're ultimately saved or lost.

In thinking about the many sinful thoughts (or the sinful lack of thoughts) concerning Jesus Christ, I recalled a scene from the movie, "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby." This was a somewhat irreverent, satirical comedy (a spoof) where the main character, Ricky Bobby, is a stereotype, a caricature, of a southern redneck race car driver. Well one night at the dinner table, Ricky Bobby returns grace before the meal and begins his prayer with "Dear baby Jesus..." And as he repeatedly addresses the one to whom he is praying as "baby Jesus," an argument ensues about which Jesus he should pray to. And Ricky Bobby makes it clear that he prefers to pray to the cute little baby in the manger rather than the hairier adult version. Now I'm sure some are offended by this, thinking it to be irreverent (and it is), but the scene is presented in such a silly and comical way so as to not necessarily suggest to the audience that any reasonable person actually would hold to such a ridiculous and narrow view of Christ – as being no more than a "baby Jesus." And granted, the holy Savior's name should not be invoked in such a frivolous way.

So why do I mention this scene from a fictional movie? Well listen. It's because I want to emphasize to you today, that there are real-life notions of Jesus (of His Person and work) – views that sadly are held by the vast majority of so-called “Christians” – views that are indeed just as offensive, irreverent, shameful and dishonoring to the God of the Bible as the obviously ridiculous fictional example I just mentioned. And I'm speaking of doctrinal views that are not only in error, but actually deny the God of the Bible. That's idolatry. It's to imagine God to be altogether different than the one living and true God of the Bible. And I hope to show how that is so as I speak today on the topic of “Repentance from Idolatry.” Our primary text today is the 1st chapter of I Thessalonians if you'd like to be turning their in your bibles.

By God's grace through the work of the Holy Spirit, those who are saved change gods. And today I want us to see that this is the essence of the initial repentance experienced by all of God's adopted children in Christ – they repent, not just of doctrinal error (though, like me, it may include that). They repent, not just of their sins and shortcomings (though they do). They repent, not just of a former life style of immorality or of indifference (though many do), but a distinguishing characteristic of all true Christians is that they repent of their former idolatry.

And to help illustrate this, I'll show how my own former doctrine (teachings concerning Christ that remain popular today), was not just in error, but how by God's grace it exposed that the “god” I was worshipping, the “god” of my imagination, was no God at all. Now, many of my (and your friends), relatives, and acquaintances still adhere to such false doctrine. E.g. – many believe as I once did the myth that was passed on to us – that Jesus Christ died for the sins of every one, without exception. Now I enjoy the company and social fellowship of some of these folks and it's partly because I really do care about them, that I can't enter into religious fellowship with them, because I don't want to encourage their continuance on what I now know to be the broad road that leads to destruction.

Those thoughts prompted the question which led me to this topic today: How can those who do agree with us on many true, doctrinal facts (such as the truth of particular redemption to name just one) and yet count so many others to be of like-minded faith even though their doctrine stands diametrically opposed to theirs? How is it they can do what many of us can't – embrace them as fellow “Christians”? Does doctrine matter? God makes it clear that it does through the apostle John who wrote, “**Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.**” (2 John 9). So doctrine does matter.

So what gives? What is the missing element among those who adhere to similar, true, biblical teachings and yet who readily count others as fellow believers even though they stand opposed to their doctrine? The answer is repentance.

They may have repented of something, but God has yet to grant them genuine faith and the initial repentance from their own idolatry – the repentance which always accompanies genuine, God-given faith. Apart from this work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart we won't even recognize the idol from which we need to repent. So where this repentance is absent, we can know that the Holy Spirit has yet to change their hearts and minds, not yet having convinced them of sin, and righteousness, and judgment as God describes the Spirit's powerful work in regeneration and conversion (the new birth) in John 16. I know some may consider these to be rather bold assertions I'm making – so enough of my assertions. Let's check out God's assertions.

II. Text – I Thessalonians 1: In I Thessalonians 1, we are given distinguishing characteristics that are true of all who are saved (all who have been given spiritual life). Beginning in verse 1 we read, ***“Paul, and Silvanus (Silas), and Timotheus (Timothy), unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. ² We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; ³ Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; ⁴ Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.*** (A literal reading of the verse would be, “Knowing, [brethren – beloved of (or by) God], your election.” And as we go through the rest of the chapter, Paul tells us how he knows them to be among those chosen unto salvation in Christ, God's elect, saying...) ***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.***

That word “power” is the same as that which we find in Romans 1:16 where Paul wrote, ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*** Its root word is like our word for dynamite. This Gospel came not in word only but in miraculous power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance. It blows things up. It turns your world upside down. It's not just the mental agreement with the doctrinal facts of the Gospel – but it goes to the heart – to our minds, our affections, and our wills – the Holy Spirit giving us a new heart and a love for this new-found truth. And it came in much assurance. By the work of the Spirit, these embraced with the heart what they came to know as the only sure and certain way of salvation – a way that cannot fail because it's completely conditioned on the infallible work of our Savior. What could be more assured?

Continuing in our text in verse 6, Paul goes on to say ***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. 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 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 like-minded 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.”***

And here to these believers in Thessalonica, he's telling 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 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 resemblance to one another in this sense – they fit the pattern of those who believe – as we read here, even ***“...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 – 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 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 through Christ alone). Verse 9 - 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;***

Few in our day will admit to ever having been an idolater and that's because none of us will naturally recognize (apart from a work of God's Spirit) our own idolatry. Consider how even our religious thoughts, when we first become serious about our eternal destiny, expose us to be idolaters.

As I've said in the past, this is even evident as we consider children (such as some of ours) who are fortunate to be raised in a church where sound Gospel doctrine is taught. How are they brought to repent of an idol?

Well, recall the account of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16 who, when he first sought salvation, asked Paul and Silas the question natural to us all, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" No matter what we may have been taught, our natural inclination when we get serious about our eternal destiny, is to mistakenly think there must be something we can do to save ourselves. And God's Gospel, when applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit dispels that notion, showing us how that would be to usurp the role of the Savior, presuming we are the ones powerful to save ourselves and not the god (as we naturally imagine him to be in our minds) – as one who is unable to save us unless we cooperate – unless we do something to seal the deal.

As I noted earlier, in John 16, Christ said the Spirit would come and convince those who are saved of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Then He said ***"...of sin because they believe not on me."*** To think you're saved (or that anyone else could be saved) because of anything or any decision that proceeds from you is to trust in that (in your doing) for salvation – not trusting in the doing and dying of the Savior. That's not believing on Christ for salvation. So when Paul answered the jailer by telling him to believe on the Lord Jesus and Christ be saved, he was correcting the mistaken presumption embodied in the question as to what must he do by saying, "There's nothing you can do to be saved—you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ – on His doing, not yours."

Now, no one knowingly will continue in idolatry. We won't worship and place our eternal destiny in what we know to be a false god – an idol. But that takes the revelation of God-given faith in the new birth with its accompanying faculties of spiritual life in order for any of us to perceive the reality of our former idolatry. The Bible proclaims that repentance, a radical change of heart and mind, a 180 degree reversal, must and does take place in the hearts and minds of God's elect in each successive generation when the Gospel comes to them in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance. The scripture is clear that the way that seems right to us by nature is a way that ends in death (Prov. 16:25). So clearly for the saved there must be a U-turn taken somewhere along life's journey.

We often quote from Acts 17:31. In Acts 17 at the end of Paul's famous sermon delivered on Mars Hill, he noted in verse 30 how God ***"...commandeth all men (not just some, but all men) every where to repent: ³¹Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."*** This speaks of a righteousness that we cannot produce for ourselves.

The standard by which all are judged is the perfect, justice-satisfying merits of the obedience unto death of the Lord Jesus Christ (His righteousness). And we're assured of that by His resurrection because just as sin demands death, righteousness demands life. The sins of God's elect imputed to (or put to the account of) Christ demanded His death as just payment for their sin debt – debt which He willingly incurred. And His perfect work of righteousness demanded that He live along with all those for whose sins He died – those to whom His righteousness is imputed – or put to their account. Based upon His imputed righteousness they live both spiritually and eternally.

And so when the Holy Spirit attends the Gospel message with “power” – with the dynamite that changes everything as it pertains to our thoughts of God and how sinners are saved – we align with God's standard of judgment – we find we must have His very righteousness, as it is set forth in the Gospel that Paul said was the “power” of God unto salvation, adding in verse 17 of Romans 1 “***...for therein is the righteousness of God revealed.***”

Just as God commanded all to repent in Acts 17:30, in 2 Peter 3:9 we're told it is God's will for all of His “beloved” (as His elect children are called in verse 8) to repent as it goes on to say in verse 9, “***The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.***” So, (1) God commands repentance and (2) it is God's will that all of His chosen children in Christ will repent. And this, God's will that they all come to repentance, cannot (and will not) be thwarted. God's will shall be done!

In the Romans 1 passage I mentioned, we see that faith is depicted as a revelation of God (“***...for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.***”) So by faith, the sinner turns to God. And if we turn to something which beforehand had not yet been revealed then of necessity it involves turning away from the direction we were heading, down the broad road that leads to destruction wherein we blindly worshipped an idol of our imagination.

There are as many different idols as there are false notions about God; however, we can learn something that is common about the nature of the idolatry that all believers turn from when we consider the description in I Thessalonians 1:9 of what God's elect are brought to turn toward. Here Paul says that he knows they are elect of God because they have “***...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. For God to be God, He must be sovereign, just, love, all-powerful, all-knowing, holy – infinitely great 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 reality of (or the necessity) of having the righteousness of God imputed to them – the perfect satisfaction to justice which Christ alone established at Calvary, 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. – as they perceive God to be) does not act or live according to 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 spiritual blindness they are walking contradictions. Consider some of the attributes that are unwittingly denied by the majority of so-called “Christians” who tragically insist (as I once did) that Christ died for everyone.

1. Sovereign – To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is God. He is in control. It is to acknowledge as we read in Daniel 4:35 that He does “***...according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him what doest Thou?***” 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 modern day “Christianity?” The god I once worshipped was a helpless being, 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. They preach that God the Father purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died 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 sin, without Christ, and passing into a hopeless eternity, making their god an abject failure – unable to fulfill that which he has purposed.

I recall an invitational song our church choir used to sing. The lyrics began with, “The Savior is waiting to enter your heart – Oh want you let him come in.” This communicates that God wants to save you but that actually you’re the sovereign over your own salvation. To deny the sovereignty of God in salvation – i.e. denying what He says, that He “***...will have mercy on whom <He> will have mercy...***” (Rom. 9:15) – is to embark on a road that ends with atheism – because a god who is not sovereign is no God at all – not worthy of being worshipped. This is because sovereignty characterizes His whole being. He is sovereign in the exercise of all of His attributes – His power, His mercy, His love, His grace. Sadly, many presume the will of their Creator is subordinate to the “sacred” free will of the creature.

2. Consider the justice of God – God is just. Think of what believing that Christ died for the sins of all mankind implies, knowing that many of these will perish in hell. Only an unjust and ruthless monster would send any folks to hell whose sin debt allegedly had already been paid by Christ. The belief that Christ died for all without exception exposes an erroneous concept of God which by default requires one to view God as unjust even though in our spiritual blindness we fail to recognize this (and other) slanderous assaults on His character. Many will reply as I once did, “I just didn’t think of it like that.” Right – that is to have no regard for the honor of the holy character of the one true God of the Bible.
3. Consider God’s Love –. As mere mortals, we willingly engage all that we are, every attribute and faculty of our being to insure the well-being of those we truly love. Many of you have heard this illustration in the past but I think it bears repeating. Consider for a moment a young mother and her toddler enjoying a sunny 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 makes a wise judgment to dive in and rescue the child she so dearly loves. Can you possibly imagine this young mother, wise and capable enough to save her child, opting not to do so – to let her beloved child drown, simply because it was his own free-will decision to get too close to the pool’s edge? That’s exactly what today’s popular misconception of how God saves sinners implies about God. It says that He fails to save many of the objects of His unchanging, everlasting love. This accuses God of one or more of the following:
 - a. 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 foresee the obstacles to their salvation. Or if not that, it must be that ...
 - a) 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. Or else we must conclude that...
 - b) His love is certainly not perfect, unconditional, unchangeable and everlasting. Actually, it is worthless – for although He is infinitely wise and powerful, He opts 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 – not the doctrine of Christ) – how it is actually a denial of God Himself and thereby equates to idolatry.

4. 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 – by definition must change his mind in response.

5. 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. 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 – an idol to be repented of. Nothing but perfection and excellence can proceed from holy God. So God's character is not one-sided 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 show mercy and save us in the way that fallen men and women naturally would choose to be saved – by 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)

To worship a god that does not act so as to save sinners in a way that is consistent with what must be true about God is to worship an idol. Being ignorant of (or not having submitted to) the righteousness of God, is to by default to be going about to establish a righteousness of your own as described in Romans 10:1-4. And in that ignorance, they worship a god who cannot save (as God describes their idol in Isa. 45) – for the one living and true God cannot save any sinner at the expense of even one of His holy attributes. 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 single-handedly established in perfect satisfaction to God the Father's law and justice – the righteousness revealed in God's gospel of grace, the Gospel that is believed by every elect, justified sinner by the power of God the Holy Spirit.

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 on behalf of all the objects of His everlasting love.

So what about those who would seem to agree with true Gospel doctrine but who, as the Prophet put it, cry peace, peace where there is no peace (i.e. – count others as saved who deny the Gospel doctrine of Christ)? The only conclusion is that they have yet to recognize their own idolatry so as to repent, even though they may intellectually agree with many true, gospel doctrinal facts.

Though perhaps more well-learned than others, they expose the absence of the spiritual faculties whereby they can discern the evil, idolatrous thoughts of God that automatically accompany belief in a false gospel – a false way of salvation. If they had repented of their own former idolatry, they could not count those who oppose God's Gospel to be of the same household of faith.

It's real simple. If you woke up at night, looked out the window and discovered that a dear neighbor's house was on fire, would you call them up and say, "I just wanted to tell you good night. Sleep tight and don't let the bed bugs bite." No – you would warn them of the imminent danger they were in, but not if you've failed to see the danger yourself.

III. Closing:

To some, the Gospel comes to them in word only. Clearly, Gospel facts can be learned apart from being taught of God through the powerful regenerating, converting work of the Holy Spirit. And the accumulation of right knowledge, a mere intellectual assent to truth, by itself provides no reason to be concerned for the souls of others, certainly not others who you might imagine simply haven't advanced to what you assess to be simply a little higher level of learning. Absent the heart work of the Spirit, such knowledge only serves to feed our sinful pride.

But there is good news! Leave that idol behind for there is a living and true God – One who has engaged all that He is – His infinite power, wisdom, justice, mercy, and every other holy attribute so as to insure eternal life for all of the objects of His infinite, everlasting, unconditional love. So I pray that God's Spirit will do a heart work on someone who hears this message (the work that so graciously visits all of God's elect at God's appointed time) – a work I hope and pray He already has done for you. And we pray for this so that God might receive all the glory, that Christ might be exalted, that 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.