

Will You Leave the Light on for Him?

A sermon based on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever stayed at a Motel 6 before? There's something I've always liked about that hotel chain...not that they have the most comfortable beds or the tastiest continental breakfast or the fastest internet speed or even the friendliest customer service. But the thing that I like...their slogan. Does anyone know what it is? "We'll leave the light on for you!"

You had a long day at work, had to work overtime, and you're just exhausted, but there's just something so comforting about seeing that light still on at home. The teenager goes out with some friends, and her parents say, "We'll leave the light on for you." The child having night terrors, so Dad plugs in the night light to provide safety and assurance. When I was a kid, making the long drive to my grandparents house, we'd always get there late at night, but oh, how excited we'd be to see the Christmas star lit up on the silo from a mile away, knowing we're almost there.

There's something comforting about not having to be in the dark. Knowing someone's there, waiting for you.

Jesus is coming. On the darkness of Christmas, he'll be the real star shining in Bethlehem. But he's also coming again, to a world covered in the darkness of sin. When he come back again, the darkness will surely flee and be gone. But what about now? What about until he comes. As you trudge about this darkened world and watch and wait for Jesus to return, will he be able to see you? Will you keep the light on for him?

That's really the heart of Paul's encouragement in this section of 1 Thessalonians. We're right at the end of his letter, which always seems to be the part in his letters where Paul likes to give an assortment of final instructions to whichever group of believers he's writing.

But these words provide just as much encouragement and instruction to this group of believers as well. His words are so timely for the season of the church year we're in, Advent, anxiously waiting for the coming of our Savior (the first and second).

So, it's really no coincidence Paul was writing this section on the heels of End Times talk. You see, in the last part of chapter four and the first half of chapter five, Paul described for the Thessalonian believers what to expect when Jesus returns, much of the same stuff we've been talking about for the past month as well.

So, what instructions does Paul have for that group of believers and this group of believers? Well, let's work through his list.

"Be joyful always." Ok, simple enough. Be happy all the time. In another of his letters, to the Philippians, Paul shares the secret of how you can achieve true joy all the time. It's when your life follows the acronym J-O-Y...Always put Jesus first, think about the needs of others after that, and, finally, put yourself last. And furthermore, as believers, we know our joy isn't dependent on our lot in life. No, it comes from what Jesus has done for us, and that results in constant joy.

Paul's next instruction? "Pray continually." I think I've shared before how prayer has been called the spiritual pulse of believers. It's that important in our lives. It's the way we communicate with our loving God, and so for us, it's not an emergency request line, only for use in the most dire of situations. Prayer is an every day, every situation thing. You could even pray right now!

"Give thanks in all circumstances," Paul tells us. Just like the reason we have joy every moment of our lives is because of what Jesus has already done, we can give God thanks constantly, no matter what the circumstance, whether things are going great or not so great, whatever the circumstance because of what Jesus has done.

A pretty easy list, wouldn't you say...although, I think we'd all have to admit the "always, continually, every circumstance" aspect of those commands isn't something we've accomplished perfectly in our lives. Our frequent/even infrequent complaining, anger, sadness, sorrow, ingratitude is enough to display that.

And that's not even getting to the tough part of Paul's instructions here for our Christian living. Look at the next verses: ***"Do not put out the Spirit's fire. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil."***

Do you understand what Paul is getting at here? Here is the lifestyle Jesus wants every one of us to be living. Not just being joyful, thankful, praying all the time. He doesn't just want those outward attitudes and actions to be right. He wants you right on the inside as well. He wants this fire, your faith in Jesus, which the Holy Spirit has kindled in you through your baptism and God's Word, your faith which the Holy Spirit wants to keep fanning, strengthening through God's Word...Jesus wants this fire of your faith in him to keep burning. He wants you to leave the light on for him.

And how does that happen? Again, Paul says, ***"Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil."*** It all has to do with God's Word, which here Paul calls "prophecies." Don't disrespect God's Word. Test any teachings people are claiming to be God's Word or in line with God's Word to see if it truly is. If it is, hold on to it, grow from it. If it's not, get away from it.

Is that happening with you? In Matthew 7, Jesus warns us, ***"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."*** There are people out there today who are preaching what they claim to be God's Word (some even under the name of Christian). It even sounds good, something you think God would say. What are you doing with that?

Are you putting it to the test? The word "test" here is the Greek word used for testing the genuineness of such things as gold and silver. If there were any impurities in these precious metals, they failed the test. The litmus test to anything you hear is, of course, God's Word.

Are you doing that when you hear something that sounds like it matches up with God's Word? Here's an example. A "pastor" wrote this to a Christian blogger the other day, ***"I'm a pastor and I have to say I've read your work for a while and I find it very troubling. There is no tolerance, inclusiveness, or love in your writings...Churches should be focusing on how to welcome people in, whether they happen to be gay, trans, feminist or any other group you denigrate... Christians in a committed same-sex relationship and others in the LGBTQ community are following God's design for their lives. That's the message the church needs to spread. God is love. Love is love!"***

What do you think? Maybe this one's too easy for you. Or is it? Homosexual Christians are following God's design for their lives sounds a lot like they're simply being who God created them to be. Doesn't God's Word say something like that somewhere? It sounds about right. Or, how about "God is love"? God's Word definitely says that!

What would testing all those words according to the Bible show? One, God created the first humans perfect...but sin has tainted every birth since...being born with homosexual tendencies is not from God (God does not create sin). And, while, yes, 1 John says "**God is love,**" God's Word also makes it clear God hates...God loathes sin. A church, a pastor who teaches God loves and accepts any person, no matter their lifestyle choices, is not a Christian church or pastor.

Again, maybe that one was easy for you. But not everything you hear is. What you are hearing today, what you are reading today, are you testing it? And if so, what are you basing the test on? God's Word (hint, that's the right and only answer)? Emotion...how it makes you feel? Logic and reason? Influence from the world? I'll admit, I'm guilty there.

Not doing that, not going to God's Word at all, not always being joyful, thankful, praying, as God's Word tells us to, any of that...all of that is us treating God's Word with contempt...not giving it the respect it's due.

And what's the big deal about that? If the fire of your faith in Jesus is not being fanned by the Spirit and built up through God's Word, what happens? If you don't tend a fire, it slowly starts to die down. Or, as the Sunday School kids know so well, Satan tries to blow this gospel light of faith in us out. Is he succeeding? Are you leaving the light on for Jesus?

John the Baptist (in Luke's gospel) warned how the "**ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**" If we don't leave the light on for Jesus, if the fire in here goes out, we would rightly expect to fail God's test, be found impure, and be thrown by God into the inescapable fires of hell.

The fire of the Spirit...where has it gone? What's it going to take for you to get back the energy to be waiting and get excited about Jesus' return and excited to live a sanctified life, to follow God's will for you in Christ Jesus?

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned," the prophet Isaiah foretold. And in due time, John's gospel tells us, ***"There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John [the Baptist]. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through [that light] all might believe...The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."***

When our fire of faith was dying, when our light was fading, when we were wandering around in the darkness of sin, with unbelief closing in on us, the true light came into the world.

And, like the Thessalonians, we know the example and work of Jesus, who shined as the light of perfection when he lived a life in perfect harmony with God's will. We know Jesus, who carried his cross and all sin of all time in joyful determination, bent on the world's salvation...your salvation. We know Jesus, who just three days after being shrouded in the darkness of Calvary and his humiliating death shone in the blinding brightness of his divine majesty when he rose victorious from the grave.

Friends, we've seen him, the Light of the World, the light of our salvation, through the sweet gospel, God's loving Word of love, forgiveness, and peace to us.

And it's that same loving God who has given us the light, who has enflamed in us the fire of faith in Jesus through that same sweet gospel. And now, it's that same loving God who calls you to, as Paul writes here, keep your **"whole spirit, soul, and body...blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."** He's calling for us to keep the light on for Jesus until he returns. Or, as Paul writes in Ephesians, **"You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light."** How can we do that?

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells the parable of the 10 virgins, who were waiting for the Bridegroom to come at the wedding feast, and it was up to them to make sure that their lamps were trimmed and had enough oil...that their lamps would be burning when he (representing Jesus) came. Can we do that ourselves? Can we keep the Spirit's fire burning?

We can't, but listen to Paul's prayer, which is my prayer for you, and I hope it's your prayer as well: **"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through...the one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."**

God is the one who has washed you clean through the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross. God is the one who starts the fire of faith...who enlightened you through his Word. And now, God is the one who continues to stoke the fire in you and who regularly reignites you to live a sanctified life as well, which includes being joyful always, praying continually, giving thanks in all circumstances, treating God's Word with respect, testing all teachings, rejecting the evil, holding on to the good, living according to God's will.

Friends, the fuel for the fire is there. Multiple Bible classes, worship offered every week, sermons online, daily devotions available on the internet, tracts out and books on the Bible out back, the Bible in audio format, Bibles in the back you can take if you don't have your own, Meditations booklets, monthly newsletters...and that's only scratching the surface. God lovingly provides the fuel to feed your faith in Jesus, to keep the fire burning, to make sure your light is on and strong as you wait for Jesus to come. What will you do with it? In thankfulness to Jesus and his love, we use it!

And here's the blessing. As Christians grow in faith, the Holy Spirit gets involved in every area of their lives. They learn to trust their Savior more each day. Lukewarm faith will eventually be replaced with a strong trust in Jesus and a strong desire to live for him...as children of the light.

"We'll keep the light on for you." Again, there's something quite comforting in those words...not having to be stuck in the darkness...knowing someone's waiting for you. The true Light is coming. His loving sacrifice has broken through the darkness of sin in your life. Through the fuel of God's Word, the Holy Spirit is stoking your fire. And now, it's not even a question if your light of faith will be shining when Jesus returns. God is faithful. God will do that. When Jesus comes, you will be blameless. Your light will be on. You'll be waiting. Live in that comfort. Be joyful in that always. Amen!