

Sermons & Presentations

Title: Vocation

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

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Great day to you,

Some weeks past, I may have mentioned some of the story of Father Kirill, an Orthodox Priest who lives in southern reaches of Moscow.

Rod Dreher, the author of the book I've mentioned to you "Live Not By Lies", was able to interview Father Kirill, and the question he asked him was "How does an honest man live under totalitarianism?"

"With difficulty," was the answer with a laugh, "Of course it's difficult, but thanks be to God, there were people who were doing their best to build their lives in such a way that they could live in truth. People understood that if that was going to be a priority to live in truth, then they were going to have to limit themselves in other ways – the progress of their careers, for example. But they made a choice and resolved to live by it."

Father Kirill was one of six children, living in a world where the soviet ideology had taken over everything, and his parents lead him to steer clear of as much of it as possible.

As a child, he'd been interested in history, and that was what he wanted to study, but his father told him that "in the Soviet world, trying to be involved with history and not be involved with soviet ideology is impossible." And so, Father Kirill instead studied geology. He said, "Lot's of anti-Bolshevik families sent their kids to study the natural sciences to avoid contamination with the ideology as much as possible."

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In that world, of course, Father Kirill wasn't 'Father Kirill' at all. The soviets killed some 20,000 orthodox priests through their reign. So, he was indeed a geologist. One day, as a student, an opportunity came for him to participate in a sea voyage that was to go from Vladivostok on the east coast of Russia all the way down to Australia, Singapore, back through the Suez Canal and then up through the Black Sea to home. He was excited about the trip but then turned it down.

In order to travel that way, and participate in the trip, he would have to join the Komsomol and be a member. Kirill turned it down and proposed a friend in his place.

To this day, that friend is a world traveller. Kirill, of course, is now a priest and tends the memorial garden where over 21,000 political prisoners, including 1,000 priests and bishops, were executed. He pastors a new church there, built in honour of their martyrs. In the end, he found his vocation, but to survive and to stand as a Christian under the oppressive ideology and regime where he lived, he needed to make sacrifices.

We've been looking at 1 Thessalonians and talking about what helps Christians stand. We described 'standing' back at the start of this series by noting that the Thessalonians were people who produced work by their faith, who laboured out of their love, and who endured even severe suffering because of their hope in Jesus Christ.

And we've talked about a number of things that helped them stand:

We're more able to stand when we have good teaching that comes with a display of the power of the Holy Spirit, and as we experience the Holy Spirit at work within us, we come to a deep conviction that is resolute and resilient.

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We are more able to stand when we have good models of the faith to imitate as we face things which we must endure.

We're more able to stand when we're woven into close relationships with our family of faith.

We're more able to stand when we trust in Christ and the destiny He has assigned to us, and when we understand that God has assigned to us certain tasks, and that he has assigned us to certain times – even the purpose will be for us to participate in Christ's suffering.

We are more able to stand when we see others who are standing, especially if we played a role in the development of their faith.

And Doug talked last week about the necessity of a Holy Life, something measured by Christian and scriptural standards, and not the standards or mores of this age. If we reject the holy life to which God is calling us, and for which we have been sanctified, then we lose a key part of what enables us to stand.

Today Paul gives more practical instructions on standing when living under pressures of a place like Thessalonica, Moscow, or even here in Kanata today.

Let's start with some foundational stuff. Human beings were designed by God to play a certain role in creation. And because of the fall, because sin entered the world, our ability to play that role has been compromised. Each and every individual human being from conception through death is called to be an Image Bearer of God. We're to reflect God to creation in all kinds of ways. God is creative, so we create – we work creatively – that will be important for our passage today - and of course human beings are also procreative. God is rational, and so we try to reason and think. God is loving, God is

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love itself, and so we love and develop intimacy with one another. God is a King, and so we are to exercise His dominion over creation, taking and using it for good and virtuous purposes that fulfill His design.

All of these things are ways in which glimpses of God can be seen in us. You may have heard me describe it in terms of the ancient world, where a King who ruled a town would set up a statue of himself in the town square – and that way, by seeing the Image, everyone would know who the ruler of that place was. So, God makes a Garden, and he sets us as His image in it.

But of course, we rebelled, and we thereby defaced His Image in us, hiding Him from creation, if you will, in a sense – and so all of creation has collapsed into disorder and rubble. And one of the first things that arose from that collapse was animosity between image bearers, and murder – the act of Cain which most viciously denies the Image of God in another.

The Image of God is a person's identity. And that identity, as an Image Bearer of God, is the ground for a person's dignity, liberty, and their responsibilities. And because every individual person bears that Image and so is to be known in terms of that identity, every human being is equal before God. If you lodge an individual's identity in anything else, other than the Image of God, you inherently differentiate dignity, liberty, and responsibilities, and so you scuttle equality. If you do that, it is only a matter of time before murder enters the picture again.

We live in a day, you have heard me say, that trafficks in false identities – that uses other things as markers of identity – and the consequence is tribalism and polarization. That is the cult of our day – the oppressive pressure that challenges every Christian's ability to stand in this culture.

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God designed human beings to play a certain role in creation. Through the last 200 years, we've had a long line up of people looking to redefine, and so redesign people, to play a certain role in their new society. The vision of sexless citizen drone, attached to and defined by the state alone, has deep and disturbing roots.

I know that you feel that pressure. Our high school students feel pressed to accept beliefs that their church and the faith of their family rejects.

But our own culture has its challenges too. In the west, markers of success, wealth, the car we drive, the wine we drink, the neighbourhood in which we live, the people with whom we are connected. Who we marry. Or, maybe most infamously in the west, not merely our job, but our careers . . . our paychecks . . . all of these can be markers of false identities, too. We are not what we do, or how much we achieve.

This kind of thing was a challenge for the new Christians in Thessalonica too.

Thessalonica was a city throbbing with demands. Some of them were overtly religious and idolatrous. To practice your job, in Thessalonica, you would perhaps need to be a part of a guild, and to be a part of a guild would mean participating in that guilds cultic practices. Publicly offering sacrifices or prayers to false Gods in order to be able to work.

If you were above the menial trades, there were different kinds of demands. Some Romans thought working with their hands was beneath them, Cicero thought it vulgar. But upstanding Roman citizens were to make sure they stood out in other ways; they were to have a kind of ambition for social approval and esteem. In fact, some Romans would have patrons, and the patron-client relationship meant that people would invest their energies to socially uplift their patron in order to be associated with a socially

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positive personality. Participating in that social posturing meant being up to date on the latest gossip about others, perhaps, or being in the know about political or important social affairs, or the latest news from Rome.

And for the new Thessalonian Christians, it would not be long before you begin to realize that following Jesus was going to put all that jeopardy. You're not going to be influential, or connected, or powerful, or erudite if you agree to die to this world and live in Christ Jesus instead.

When Paul writes here that they are "to make your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you . . ." Paul is telling them, effectively, to throw their Roman lives and identities under the bus.

They're going to remain busy in their work, but not busybodies on the social scene. The call to quietness of life is a challenge also to us in the days of a culture that wants our vocal participation in their cult. It's a challenge to us, sometimes because we want to capitulate. But also, sometimes because we want to fight. We want to stomp our feet and make a scene. We want to strike a blow for what we imagine is the good we represent.

Jason, the Christian in Thessalonica mentioned in Acts, and all the other believers with him had to sort out how to live in new ways, because to become a Christian is to die to every identity the world offers, and to be reborn in Christ bearing His Image – as we were originally designed to do in the Garden. And in Thessalonica, you cannot do that by throwing your political weight around and being front of the line on every public issue. To enter that fray will tempt you into other kinds of false identities of power and personal influence. And unless God tells you to do it, Paul's advice on quiet lives should carry weight for us.

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Usually when we talk about work, we're talking about vocation – vocation connected to the word vocal – vocation as something God has called you to do. A vocation is not a source of identity. A vocation can only really be pursued when our Christian identity is intact. And our passage today sets the call for a quiet life and work next to a greater first call: the call to love one another in the family of God.

Yes, we're to love everybody – even our enemies. But Paul here is setting the boundaries for the community of people who are having the Image of God restored in them by the power of the Spirit as they follow Christ. Our identities, and our vocation and work, is first to be framed by love.

The way we work can express that love. Our generosity, hospitality, and diligence and devotion arise not just out of cold duty, but out of our deep sense of who Christ has made us to be. And that means, made in His image, we'll begin to love like He loved. If you have that rooted in your identity, the risk that you become your work is diminished. Even if you lost your job, you'd begin searching for the next opportunity to continue expressing God's image in you in loving service.

Our loving service may indeed be quiet, then, not wrapped up in the massive crisis of our day. Not for show or position.

And Paul sees this as a means to two things:

The respect of outsiders, and the ability keep ourselves from dependence on anybody.

Living under the pressures of powerful ideologies and cultures that are opposed to Christianity – living as missionaries – means making sacrifices so we can invest in the relationships that allow the Gospel to be communicated.

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First, that requires respect. Hard work, excellence. The willingness to take on small or menial tasks.

Chynna Philips – nanny who prayed for her fervently.

Conversion experience at 12, and again – the fruit of those prayers?

Imagine hotel staff praying for every room before and after guests. Imagine workers on an auto-line praying for every family that will ride in one of those cars.

Image artisans sowing the things of Christ into their art and work.

Second independence.

We're not to become tied to things that limit our ability to serve Christ – or to feel like we have to make compromises because we're afraid.

God's vocational call may not be your job.