

Forever- Maintaining an Eternal Perspective
Sermon 4: Like a Thief in the Night

Passages: Matthew 24:42-51
1 Thess. 5:1-24

This is the final sermon in our series entitled, "Forever- Maintaining an Eternal Perspective". As we have followed Paul's theological thoughts through his first letter to the Thessalonians, one thing we have noticed: Paul talks a lot about 'forever'! He has his eyes focused on eternity!

And that's exactly how he ends his letter—with his eyes still focused on eternity! You see, in this last chapter, Paul continues to talk about Jesus' return. This time, he tells us that Jesus will come back "like a thief in the night".

Verse 2— "...for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. "

Notice that Paul is simply repeating what Jesus said in Matthew 24! Jesus said that He will come back when people are least expecting it. Jesus will return at the very moment when most people are happy with their lives-- when people don't think they need God. In fact, they'll be boasting about their own man-made "Peace and safety!" That's why Jesus' visit will surprise so many people! He will come when they don't want Him!

Now, Paul remembers Jesus' words. And so, he reminds us of the phrase, 'thief in the night'. He wants us to keep awake...to keep our eyes on eternity. He wants us to servants who are ready for Jesus' return.

You know, as Christians, we often hear these words about Jesus' return and we tend to think about them in an individualistic way. I mean, we tend to say to ourselves, "How wonderful! Jesus has saved me. Jesus is coming back for me. I will be with Jesus forever. Jesus is going to take me home!" I remember when I was a brand new Christian back in 1975 and someone gave me a book entitled, "Thief in the Night". I remember, as I was reading it, how I thought, "This is great! Jesus is coming back for me! Hallelujah!"

But, now that I've been a Christian for a while, I can see that this type of thinking was very immature! It was self-centred! You see, although we become

Christians as individuals, Christianity is never an individualistic religion. It's not simply about me and God. Rather, it's about us and God!

The point is that Jesus is coming back for us! And that's really important to remember. In fact, that's exactly what the Apostle Paul is writing about in this last chapter of his letter to the Thessalonians. Paul is telling the Christians in Thessalonica that Jesus is returning for all of them. Jesus is coming back for His bride, the church. Together, we will be with the Lord, forever!

Listen again to verses 4- 5.

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.

And now, verses 9-10.

⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

Jesus is coming back for us all. And because He's coming for us all, we, together, must prepare! In other words, in this final chapter, Paul is encouraging unity!

Let's go through the chapter slowly:

As we have already noted, in verses 1 to 10, Paul encourages the Christians in Thessalonica to actively watch and wait for Jesus' return. And so, Paul says to them:

V 6—"Be alert and self-controlled!"

V8—"Be self-controlled, putting on faith, love and hope..."

These words are for us as well! As the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to actively watch and wait. That means that, together, we must resist evil. Together, we must walk in the light and not in the darkness.

But that's not all we do. As we look forward to Jesus' return, not only do we refrain from evil-- we also engage in doing what is good, particularly towards each other!

Listen to verse 11.

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.”

I want to stop for a moment and ask you all to reflect on this verse. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well are we doing this? Has someone encouraged you today? And have you built someone up today?

Of course, some of us may not know how this is done! Some of us may come from a culture that never affirms people. You may have parents that never said anything positive about you. It may be difficult for you to encourage or build up someone else because no one has done this for you! This is serious! We all need encouragement; we all need to be built up! Why? Because life is cruel; people are cruel; but Jesus is never cruel! And because Jesus has made us His brothers and sisters, we now have the possibility to become like Him! By the Spirit of God, you and I can be like Jesus!

Think about it! Jesus was loving and kind; he encouraged the faint-hearted; He built-up the weak and suffering; He lifted us up and made us His friends. Now, with our eyes on Him, filled with His Spirit and looking forward to the day of His return, we can be like Him! We can “Encourage one another and build each other up...”

What this also means is that we now have the ability to stop criticising and tearing down our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sure, this may be what the world does, but it is not how Jesus wants His church to operate!

This leads us directly to verses 12-13.

¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

Leaders are the ones who usually cop the worst part of our verbal abuse. That’s because leaders are easy targets—they put themselves out there. Because they speak publicly, give their opinion and share their ideas, they make themselves quite vulnerable. But, there’s no other way to lead! And that’s why it’s so easy to tear them down.

Today, we gave out gifts to our leaders. Leaders are people who lead...who take initiative. Leaders are people who step up and serve! They serve in the Sunday School room, teaching our kids. And because of that, they deserve our respect. Our Parish Councillors are also leaders. They have worked hard all year to balance our budget and make financial decisions on your behalf. They deserve our respect. Cell leaders put in a great deal of time and prayer into leading their cell groups. They make themselves vulnerable, exposing their own weaknesses and failures to their cell group members. They deserve our honour and respect. The same is true for our musicians, our ESL workers, our gardeners, and those who lead by example in the kitchen.

They have all made themselves vulnerable! That's why it's so easy to criticise them! But, before you do, let me repeat verse 13—"Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."

Why do we honour those who lead us? We do this now, because, in the future, on the day when Jesus returns, He will honour them in a far greater way! "Well done, good and faithful servant!" That's why we unite around our leaders; that's why we honour them! Because we have our eyes focused on the coming of Jesus.

Of course, Paul has still not exhausted the subject of Jesus' return.

Look at verse 14.

¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

There are a lot of people who think that a church is a place where they come to receive from others. It's the classic 20-80 rule. Twenty percent of the people do all the work while 80 percent watch. It's sad, because that's not what the church was meant to be! It's not like a grocery store where you come to 'purchase' a sermon, or a Sunday School lesson for your children. You don't come to church to 'purchase' a bit of worship, or a Bible study.

As Paul says in verse 14, coming to church is not so much about receiving as it is about giving. That's why Paul says, "Warn those who are idle!"

And if you say, “But, I have nothing to give”, Paul does not give in. Instead, he says, “Encourage the timid”. If you think you have nothing to give, it’s only because you’re too afraid to give! Everyone in this church has a place in ministry; So, find your place...and give yourself to the people of God.

We are in this together, as we wait for Jesus to return.

Of course, Paul still has more to say about this. Look at verse 15.

¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

The greatest enemy of our unity in Christ is unforgiveness. You know, if someone wrongs you, you always have two options: (1) Either you can go directly to that person, forgiving them and working through the issue, or (2) you can pay that person back for their wrong... by gossiping about them, getting people on your side against them, stewing over the issue until they crack under the strain. Of course, only the first option will maintain our unity! As we look forward, together, to the return of the One who forgave us, we realise that there is no other way for us to live except by forgiving each other!

But, there’s still more that Paul wants to say about Jesus’ return. Look at verses 16-18.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Here’s some more advice on living together until Jesus returns. Paul says, “Be joyful”—That means, be happy that you’ve got each other! Paul says, “Pray continually”—That means, never stop praying for one another. Paul says, “Give thanks in all circumstances”—That means, be thankful to God for each other. Be thankful for your shared experiences, both good and bad.

Moving on to verses 19-22, Paul again has our unity in mind.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.

We need the Holy Spirit’s fire to keep us united in Christ. We also need people with the gift of prophecy so that we might continually hear from God for the

good of all. And we need the corporate gift of discernment to detect whenever evil might be lurking. This is to protect us as we wait for Jesus to return.

You see, it's all about being together, growing together, maturing together, and being protected together as One Body... until Christ returns.

This is really important advice for us in Penshurst! You see, what Paul is saying is that our unity does not come from speaking the same language or having the same culture. Our unity is not based in whether we are on the same economic level or whether we live in the same size houses. Our unity is not dependent on whether we all go to the same cell group or whether we all have the exact same doctrinal understanding of the Bible. Our unity is in Jesus and the fact that He is coming again! As we focus on Him, we discover how much we have in common! And that's what motivates us to love each other, as He loves us.

I love Paul's letters. In almost every one, Paul finishes with a benediction. He does it here. And guess what he focuses on? He focuses on the return of Jesus.

Verses 23-24.

²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

I thought it might be fun to end this sermon by practicing what Paul tells the Thessalonians to do. In verse 26, he tells them to "Greet all God's people with a holy kiss."

I'm not sure exactly what that looks like, but why don't we all give it a try.