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Thursday, November 07, 2013
<http://www.fbcweb.org/doctrines.html>

Personal Study of the Bible-40 (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15: 7 spiritual virtues)

We are now in step five of the six fundamental principles for personal Bible study of Paul's epistles (1: Read the epistle *straight through* at one setting; 2: notice the setting of the epistle; 3: study the introduction of the epistle; 4: notice the outline of the epistle from the introduction; 5: make a *verse-by-verse* study of the epistle; and 6: meditate upon and *digest* the *results* of your study). We have noted that all of Paul's epistles begin with doctrine and end with exhortations to spiritual virtue. We have also been noting the importance of spiritual virtue in our Bible classes at FBC. Recall that I have been pointing out that there are two kinds of salvations and two kinds of righteousnesses in the Bible. If I asked you point blank: "Are your righteous?" What would you say? If you were biblically and theologically informed, you would ask what kind of righteousness did I had in mind. If I was talking about being righteous in your standing before God based on faith alone in Christ alone, the answer is a resounding "Yes"! If I was talking about your temporal life right now in terms of sanctification, what would your answer be? If salvation righteousness is gained by faith, how is temporal righteousness (James 5:6) gained? Take the unrighteous *character* (not forensic standing before God, many in list below are believers with a perfect, forensic, eternal righteousness before God in their standing) listed in

2 Timothy 3:2-7 For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, 4 treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; 5 holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these. 6 For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, 7 always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

We know that one gains absolute righteousness as far as standing before God solely by faith in Christ whereby God justifies the *ungodly* (Rom. 4:5), but how does one move from the unrighteous *character* listed in the above passage to righteous *character*? How does one overcome the evil of being lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossipers, without self-discipline, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, playing church but not really believing in the power or absolute truth of Christianity?

Again, how does one go from the unrighteous character above to a righteous character/virtue in Romans 12? For example, consider the contrast of the previous passage to the exhortations in Romans 12:9-14 "let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; 11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, 13 contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not."

In 2 Timothy 3:2-7 we have unrighteous *character* whereas in Romans 12:9-14 we have exhortation to righteous *character*, i.e. spiritual virtue. So how does a believer go from having unrighteous character to righteous character? Simply by taking in more doctrine? If that is the case then why do some believers, even after decades of doctrine, continue to be by nature gossipers (not people who may gossip, but gossipers in that that is their nature), or lovers of self (not that they are just guilty of thinking of self too much at times, but in their very nature they are self-lovers), or lovers of money (not people who may be distracted by money now and again, but people whose entire characters are of being money-grubbers).

Unfortunately, salvation from the temporal effects of sin (= evil character among other things) is never achieved by simply listening to Bible doctrine or reading your Bible. The only way to develop righteous character is by *doing*! Only by doing righteous deeds in fellowship with God does one become righteous in character. Unless there is execution of the spiritual life, one does not achieve temporal salvation from the negative effects of carnality and sin: a temporal salvation that leads to a virtuous character. This is what spiritual virtue is all about. If you want to have an honest character, you must be honest; if you do not want to have a character of being a gossip, you must stop gossiping; if you do not want to have a mammon-focused soul, you must stop living for mammon. All virtue is cultivated, not so much by the mind, but by the will. Confession of sin alone does not really deal with the problem of the will. What does not deal with the will never solves the problem of the will/desire.

All of this to stress the importance of spiritual virtue as emphasized by the apostle Paul in his epistles. In our last lesson on 1 Thessalonians we noted the spiritual virtues in a verse-by-verse study. We noted the exhortation to spiritual virtue in 1 Thess. 4:3-5 regarding sexuality. Let's note the following virtues that Paul lays out in chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians:

- *Highly esteem pastors who have charge over you*, 5:12-13. The believer who really values truth, values pastors who bring him truth—whether that truth is palatable or not. The believer who loves truth and the Lord more than self will appreciate the truth even when it hurts. The believer who loves self more than truth or God will find ways to criticize a sermon that does not flatter him.
- *Admonish the unruly*, 5:14. There are always those who out of step with the direction of the church. They would rather criticize, criticize, and criticize. Think of how many church splits would be avoided if believers admonished the troublemakers, who think they know better than the pastor what his job entails. “Admonish” means to warn these unruly people of the consequences. Trouble-makers rarely talk to the pastor; instead they complain to fellow believers. If they had character they would talk to the pastor. Because they don't have virtue, they would *rather* stab him in the back, cf. how Glenn Carnagey was treated at Patrian by those he spent so much time helping.

- *Encourage the fainthearted*, 5:14. The Greek word here means “small souled.” These are probably baby believers who need encouragement with regard to their problems. You are to be an encourager to these believers by assuring them that God is in control of all of the details of their lives as well as their destinies. This certainly would apply to your children as they go through difficulties.
- *Help the weak*, 5:14. The weak would refer to those believers who are weak either due to some spiritual weakness or weaknesses regarding health or difficulties in life.
- *Be patient with everyone*, 5:14. People are different, we all have different personalities; it is important to be patient with each other.
- *See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people*, 5:15. It is unfortunate that within the flock of God, the most painful disappointments are from those within the flock. Believers can malign, gossip, and ostracize fellow believers. Instead of planning on how to get back at some believer who hurt us deeply, God says that we should never retaliate—this certainly applies to our spouse—it would certainly apply to frustrated wives who regularly talk very unfavorably about their husbands (another phenomenon among some “doctrinal” believers). Vengeance belongs to God. Let Him take care of the situation. Pursue the things that are good, noble, and excellent—that is if you want good, noble, and excellent character: if you want to be that kind of person.

I have two aims in going through these two verses: one is illustrating the practice of verse-by-verse study of the English Bible where you look at each word and the other is to get us to reflect on the nature of spiritual virtue. Spiritual virtue is all about character. The above mandates are not just isolated mandates, they are designed to develop true Christian character, a righteous character, through the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. The goal is to create an intrinsic righteous character. Forensic (declarative, judicial) salvation is external (it is the righteous standing before God based solely on the righteousness of Christ) does not by itself change a believer’s character. The only thing that can do that is sanctification salvation, which, like all virtue, is impossible without knowledge/doctrine, however knowing that one should be more loving, knowing that one should not gossip, knowing that one should seek the good even for our enemies, does not make us those kind of people: knowledge alone does not character make. To attain a virtuous character requires acts of virtue. Acts of spiritual virtue lead to righteous, virtuous characters . Acts of vice lead to unrighteous and corrupt characters. Everyone has a choice in what kind of person he is becoming. In case you are tempted to think it is unbiblical to view righteousness of a believer in terms of character and virtue, consider what the Holy Spirit records about the character of Jesus’s stepfather, Joseph, in Matthew 1:19: “And Joseph her husband, *being a righteous man*, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly.” How do you think he became a righteous man? This righteousness is certainly more than salvation righteousness.

*In ‘Ehyeh,
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