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Faith Bible Church
Wednesday, November 27, 2013
<http://www.fbcweb.org/doctrines.html>

Personal Study of the Bible-45
(1 Thessalonians 5:16-22 –Philosophical insights into ethics)

With your reading and rereading of 1-2 Thessalonians (hint: read them again, every time you will *see* new fresh truths), the basic structure of these books should be firmly established in your soul. Though there are undoubtedly some questions on some of the details that take a while to fill in, you know firsthand that both of these letters have two parts: doctrinal (eschatology: rapture and second advent) and exhortations to virtuous living. We have been noting the eight virtues of 1 Thess. 5:16-22. We noted the first four in the last lesson:

1. *Rejoice always.*
2. *Pray without ceasing.*
3. *In everything give thanks.* **THIS IS PARTICULARLY RELEVANT DURING THIS THANKSGIVING SEASON.**
4. *Do not quench the Spirit*

What I would like to do in this lesson is touch on the other four virtues and then provide some philosophical insights into one's mental framework of virtue:

5. *Do not despise prophetic utterances.* The Greek word behind "despise" means to think of something as of little to no account, not very important (same meaning in the English word because it tracks the same reality). There existed the gift of prophecy as a temporary gift given to the church before the New Testament canon was complete, after which the gift would become inoperative (1 Cor. 13:8). The church now has the completed Bible and so it no longer needs the gift of prophecy. It is interesting that 2 Thessalonians was written to correct false views of eschatology. If they had not despised or disregarded Paul's message on the Rapture, they would not have become confused into thinking that they were in the tribulation (which caused some to quit working). The application for today would be that no believer should ever downplay (despise) the prophetic truths in the Word of God. Careful attention to prophecy would enlighten many contemporary deceived believers regarding the prophesy of increasing evil in government and in local churches (read 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 4:1-4)—evils which many Christians actually support financially and philosophically. Oh well, it is not like God did not warn us.
6. *Examine everything carefully.* No believer is to be gullible. Every rational believer has the ability to examine *everything*, not just some things! by the light of the Word of God. It is unconscionable for any believer to put all of his trust in another man with reference to *God!* whether it be a pope or a pastor. Again, for those who just trust others, it is not like God did not tell you otherwise. Read Isaiah 8:20; 1 John 4:1. Satan is a genius in counterfeiting God's Word and regularly passes off his ideas as God's ideas. Christianity is filled with satanic doctrines coated in Bible verses. You

as a Christian must become philosophically savvy (a Realist) enough to be able to see the distinction between the voice of man and the voice of God.

7. *Hold fast to that which is good.* Once we test teachings against the Bible, we can hold on to that truth with confidence that this is what God says, Reality. Philosophically this is going to require epistemological realism. Also note that we are to “hold fast” to the good (true/good/beautiful). First, we gain truth, then we retain it. Only after we have done *our own extensive thinking* can we have settled convictions that we can know with certainty and hold fast to—to be faithful to the good!
8. *Abstain from every form of evil.* There is so much evil around us, not only in society but also in the contemporary church. Christians are to keep themselves from moral evil as well as doctrinal evil. We are to stay away from foul thinking, behavior, and foul teaching/doctrine in the church (e.g., liberalism or prosperity gospel). Christians should never support any organization that promotes evil. Evil is often very subtle. The only way any believer can abstain from evil is personal knowledge of the Word of God that is enlightened by the ministry of the Holy Spirit and philosophical realism, which the Bible presupposes. One simply cannot think very deeply about these or any other issues apart from philosophical realism, which, again, God expects.

The biblical Christian philosophical realist not only understands the crucial importance of fellowship with God for the unhindered ministry of the Holy Spirit to work in his life, he understands the importance of really trying to rationally understand the realities of the Word of God instead of just “going through the motions.” For example, the Christian philosophical realist is going to be able to understand the philosophical framework of these virtues. Since this is the Thanksgiving season, let’s use the mandate of “give thanks for all things” as our example in the three options regarding the philosophical or mental framework for virtue:

1. Deontological (deon = obligation) view of ethics. This is the command theory of ethics. The motive according to this view in performing ethical acts is because one “ought to,” in other words “Rejoice in all things because God said so” This mindset exists predominantly in legalistic Christianity where things are done simply because God commands them: “we are to do A, B, or C because God said so, period, over and out!” This is not the biblical philosophy as clearly demonstrated by God condemning Job’s friends for this attitude and then turned around and said Job was correct in what he said about God, even though Job’s friends attempted to vindicate God and Job criticized God. Read Job 42:7. More on this later.
2. Teleological (telos = goal or end) view of ethics is that standards of good are determined to be right or wrong depending upon whether they progress toward a goal/good that is worth striving for. An example of this would be someone saying we need to “rejoice in all things because it will make us happy.” This is unbiblical as it relativizes good in just making it the goal in human nature. This is the dominant philosophy in our utilitarian culture (cf., Joseph Fletcher’s situation ethics in the 1960s where love, not absolutes, dictate ethics and morality). Many Christians fall into this error in attempting to obey mandates “*merely* because of the goal = to make

them happy,” e.g., “I study my Bible so I will be happy.” “I obey God not because it is simply a command (deontology) but because it will make me happy (that is the greatest goal = teleological).”

3. Virtue ethics includes what is good about deontology (God’s absolute standards) and what is good about teleological ethics (goals and goods designed in human nature). According to virtue ethics, there are absolutes (deontology) and there are certain character traits designed inside human beings that are connected with those absolutes. The focus in virtue ethics is on virtues and the formation of character, and away from just outside rules and regulations. The virtue ethicists argue that it is not enough to teach what is right and wrong (deontology) like just commanding believers to rejoice in all things and to love God and others. They likewise affirm that human conduct or nature is not enough to get man to true good; it is too relative. The virtue ethicist recognizes both the external good (deontology) of God’s absolutes and the internal “good” (teleology) in man’s nature and the need for man to nurture the kind of character that lead people internally to do the right and avoid the wrong. As far as this “good” inside man, it needs to be developed: for the unbeliever it consists of a basic understanding and capacity for basic morality as an image bearer of God. As far as this Good inside the believer it refers to the new nature and the indwelling and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, who gives the believer the character and the desire to live according to the external commands of God with a pure heart. More on this later.

By understanding the three basic mental frameworks by which one obeys the commands of God, the believer can avoid false or evil motivations in obeying God’s Word. He does not obey the mandates of God “just because God said so.” He does not obey the commands of God “because it will make him happy.” He obeys the Word of God out of virtue, character, which is but the product of God’s grace inside Him. He obeys them because he possesses the virtue or character to see and love the true good and *rejoice* in doing so. Virtue ethics for supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love have an external source, internal source, and a goal, all due to God’s grace. More on this later.

*In ‘Ehyeh,
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Genesis 17:1 Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless [develop spiritual virtue].