

Last week we saw from 1 Thessalonians that Paul cherished the time he spent with the Thessalonians, but his visit was cut short. During his short stay, Paul taught them the gospel by explaining right doctrine as well as exhorting them to live rightly in accordance with this doctrine (4:1). For Paul, discipleship is the intersection of right doctrine and right living. You can't have one without the other. Right living without right doctrine is what cults have. Mormons are kind, organized, and dedicated, but they do not have correct theology. In our church, we tend to emphasize good doctrine over right living. What we believe does not influence our lives as much as it should. Paul tells us that we must have both correct theology and live godly lives. This is the heart of Christian discipleship, a life redirected by our faith.

Verses 1-12 discuss the idea of discipleship. Paul addresses two topics in this passage, sexual purity and love between the members of the church. I won't go into detail about these topics. Rather I want to point out two general aspects of discipleship that Paul mentions in this passage. First, in v. 12 we see that our daily life should win the respect of outsiders. People should be able to see our lives and be drawn to our God. We must live in a way that causes others to respect what we believe in. This point is also stated in Titus 2:7-10. We must live to attract others to God. We must take this responsibility seriously. Every day we should live to bring God glory. We must remember that first and foremost we represent Jesus, not our race, gender, class, family, or social group. Christians should be noticeably loving, kind, patient, and honest. People should be able to see what Jesus is like by observing how we live. Our faith and doctrine tell us what Jesus is like, and we must respond by imitating Jesus in order to represent Him. You should be winsome. It is your responsibility to do everything possible to win people over for Christ. Do you recognize this as your daily responsibility?

The second aspect of discipleship is that it involves continual growth. In v. 1 and v.10 Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are in fact living the right way, yet he urges them to do so more and more. These verses form an *inclusio*, which colors the way we see the verses between them. This right behavior that Paul describes must be done more and more. We must always continue to pursue right living and guard against stagnancy and complacency. Today, there is

such an emphasis on the fact that God loves us the way we are. We sometimes forget that although God loved us and gave His Son for us while we were sinners, He did so in order that we could be transformed, to live a new righteous life through Jesus. He loved us while we were broken, but He doesn't want us to stay that way. We must always pursue godliness. We will fail many times, but we must keep struggling and striving. When we fall, we must get back up. Though we are weak, God's strength will help us persevere. The NASB translates the phrase in v. 1 and 10 as "excel still more." In my old church in Berkeley, I disciplined a small group, which we named the "eX-Men" because the aim of this group was to train them to excel more at living a life that brings God glory. We all must continue to excel more. Don't get comfortable with where you are. There is always much more room to grow. Many of us can be so disciplined when it comes to things like studying, working, exercising, dieting, driving, or being on time. But how disciplined are you in your pursuit of God? For me, the area of growth would be controlling my emotions and not being so easily upset by things my family might do. In what ways are you trying to grow to influence others for Christ? Don't settle for mediocrity. Don't be complacent. Jesus is the standard of righteousness for which we must strive. We must learn about Jesus and we must live accordingly. Discipleship is the perfect interaction between right thinking and right living. We must have faith and at the same time live in such a way that draws people towards God. We must continue diligently in this pursuit of godliness and never stop growing. It is not easy, but it is rewarding when our lives bring others into God's kingdom.