

HOW TO STAY CLOSE TO GOD

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
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Let's Begin

Someone once said, "Faith never means gullibility. The man who believes everything is as far from God as the man who refuses to believe anything." The Thessalonians were in danger of believing almost anything. As we have seen, their obsession with end time events cost them sober reflection on sound doctrine. Paul had to straighten out their crooked theology. On the other hand, today we live in an unprecedented age of skepticism. Men question belief in just about everything. Still the Apostle's word rings as true for us as for the Thessalonians of the first century.

As we finish the correspondence Paul sent to Thessalonica, let's focus on three practical principles which will help believers stay close to God. Note the outline below:

- I. Believers Must Focus on Prayer to Stay Close to God (vv. 1-2)**
- II. Believers Must Trust God's Promises to Stay Close to God (v. 3)**
- III. Believers Must Follow God's Prescription to Stay Close to God (vv. 4-18)**

I. Must Focus on Prayer to Stay Close to God (vv. 1-2)

The Apostle opens his final chapter with a call to pray. He writes, "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you: And that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith" (vv. 1-2). In his call for the Thessalonians to pray, Paul's first concern is to "pray for us." Even an apostle depends upon the prayers of God's people! And, we must understand that every believer is at the same level. We all need the prayers of one another. Note also the tremendous compliment it is when someone asks you to pray for him or her. Why? For the simple reason that respect concerning your prayers is being silently affirmed. When people ask for your prayers, they are in essence saying, "I believe God hears your prayers."

What was it which Paul considered significant enough to pen to the Thessalonians? First, the Apostle asked the Thessalonians to pray for the spread of the Gospel message. He desired that "the word of the Lord may have free course." The Greek term translated "free course" is a word taken from athletic games, a word basically meaning "to run" or "to sprint." Indicative of a swift advance, Paul desired the Gospel to freely sprint all over the Roman empire. "His Word runneth very swiftly," the Psalmist wrote. (Psalm 147:15). As the Gospel freely runs its course, God's Spirit moves upon hearts, and lost souls come to Christ.

Second, Paul desired for God to get all glory—"be glorified." When the Gospel is freely preached, and the Holy Spirit has ample "elbow room" to work as He wills, God is magnified and glorified. People see what the Word does in people's lives. God is glorified when the Word transforms sinful human beings and makes them new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Even so, according to Paul, prayer must be an integral part of the entire process. Prayer keeps us close to God. Prayer moves heaven to

Reflection Connection

Do you have a set time to pray for the spread of the Gospel in your community? Does your church have special times of prayer, asking God to open up the people's hearts in your area and to defeat the powers of darkness hindering the Gospel message? Explain.



work for men and in men. Behind every victory of the Word of God is a victory of the prayers of God's people. The church which advances for the glory of God is a church which advances on its knees. It is a praying church. No one can win the battle alone. The most powerful preacher on earth knows he is at the mercy of praying people. Will they pray for him? Remember, even Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, called directly by the resurrected Christ, to be an Apostle, needed the prayers of God's people. How much more do we need prayer!

When the church of Jesus Christ prays, all the power of hell falls before the words of God's messenger. Constant, unceasing prayer for God's leaders is what will propel the church to victory in the 21st century. Indeed constant, unceasing prayer will keep the believer close to God.

Second, the Apostle asked the Thessalonians to pray for the safety of the messenger (v. 2). Paul desired to be "delivered." The word carries the idea of being rescued from danger. As outspoken as the Apostle was, he made many enemies, especially from Jewish leaders who questioned Paul's "sellout" to the Gentiles. Satan's greatest tools are the human instruments he employs to hinder true Gospel preaching. The "unreasonable" methods Paul's enemies used did not stop them from doing their dastardly deeds. In fact, they were not only "unreasonable," they were also "wicked" as well. Hence, they possessed few boundaries which hindered their evil work in obstructing the Gospel Paul preached. "All men have not faith," the Apostle proclaims.

Therefore, God's people must pray for the protection of God's servants. The greatest weapon at our disposal is prayer (Eph. 6:10-17). One principle Christians may never sacrifice if they would stay close to God—the *principle of prayer*.

II. Believers Must Trust God's Promises to Stay Close to God (v.3)

While believers must pray in order to personally stay close to God (and to keep God's men close to Him), believers must also learn to have a deep trust in God's promises. In short, Christians must *believe* God daily. Note the Apostle's words, "But the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep *you* from evil" (v. 3). God's promises are the Christian's daily spiritual nourishment. We feed on His Word. His promises sustain us and make us spiritually whole.

We feed on His Word.

First, the promises of God inevitably teach us Who God is. In this passage, God is the "faithful." God's very character is the basis for our Christian confidence. Paul writes elsewhere, "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). To know our Lord is faithful when everyone and everything else is unfaithful is amazingly refreshing to one's soul. Given time, people—all people—will let us down in one way or another. We can rest assured, Jesus won't! Earlier Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do *it*" (1 Thess. 5:24). God is forever faithful.



Reflection Connection

Reflect on two of your favorite promises of God. Say them slowly, digesting every syllable. Now put the promise in the form of a prayer and offer it to the Lord. If you can, lead the entire group in a similar spiritual exercise during the study time.

Next, the promises of God teach us what God does—“stablish you.” The Greek term translated “stablish” is *sterizo*, and means “to set firm,” “to forge.” God forges us, sets us firm in Him. We become immovably anchored in Him and through Him. In addition, this anchoring takes place on the inside; that is, in our hearts. Hence, we are kept by God’s power from “evil.” Peter says, we are “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:5). Obviously, the “evil” from which God keeps us is Satan himself. God puts a guard around us, a hedge so to speak. Recall the devil’s words to God concerning Job, “Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side?” (Job 1:10). Satan could not get to Job because God guarded his servant’s life.

If one is going to stay close to God, one must learn to believe God’s every promise. If God is faithful enough to save us from our sin, He is surely faithful enough to guard and protect our lives each and every day. We must believe His promises.

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III. Believers Must Follow God’s Prescription to Stay Close to God (vv. 4-18)

Not only is prayer significant in keeping us close to God, but trusting God’s promises is equally significant. However, if believers are to walk closely with the Lord, they must also follow the pattern for their life God offers in Scripture. God gives His people a prescription by which they may live a life pleasing to Him and spiritually satisfying to them.

God’s prescription begins with a commitment to do His will. Paul writes, “And we have confidence in the Lord touching you, that ye both do and will do the things which we command you. And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ” (vv. 4-5).

Paul plainly says, Christians are designed to do God’s will (v. 4). And, since we are designed to do God’s will, we cannot be *passive* in obeying God’s will. We must make up our minds, deciding we want to do God’s will. Referring to God’s will, someone rightly said, “Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.” Obedience is the key if believers are to stay close to God.

In addition, we must also understand God will not leave us to ourselves to obey Him. In other words, He promises both the power to obey and a clear understanding about what we are to obey. The Bible clearly says, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Prov. 3:5-6). God “directs” our path. He removes all obstacles. If we want to obey God, He obligates Himself to see to it we are able to obey Him.



Finally, God calls us to be *productive*, to busily serve Him in every sphere of our lives (vv. 6-18). Given the lengthy section Paul writes concerning laziness, the Thessalonians undoubtedly faced a crisis in their work ethic. Paul begins, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies” (vv. 6-11).

While we many times make humorous remarks about being lazy, the Bible remarkably has several injunctions against the slothful (cp. Prov. 6:10-11; 19:15, 24; 20:4; 23:21; 24:33-34). In fact, the Apostle counseled the Thessalonians to *avoid* the lazy. Why? Simply put, because the lazy have

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a tendency to disobey God’s Word (vv. 6, 10). They walk not after the Divine “traditions” the Apostles established. Instead they walked “disorderly.” Note Paul was not giving his own personal opinion when he refers to “tradition.” Rather he referred to the words of the Lord Jesus, the commands of Christ. Moreover, Paul insisted the slothful usually disregarded God’s man (vv. 7-9).

Reflection Connection

Do we place a premium on hard work or is laziness a cultural trait of modern Christians?

Next, Christians are not only to *avoid* the lazy, but Christians are also to *admonish* the lazy. He continues, “Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count *him* not as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother” (vv. 12-15).

Three key words are found in these verses—*command*, *exhort*, *admonish*. And, these key words imply two significant applications. First, we are to *instruct* the lazy (vv. 12-13). Christians must be taught how they should live. Working quietly with a calm disposition forges an inner peace in one’s heart. Believers create means by which to earn his own keep and eat his own bread.

Second, we are to *confront* the lazy (vv. 14-15). Laziness is a moral crime which must be addressed. Some may need a strong rebuke. Hence, Paul counsels the Thessalonians to “note” the lazy man. However, marking one as lazy is not designed to stigmatize him, but to restore him. They are not to be treated as enemies; rather they are to be admonished “as a brother.” Too many times the church condemns when it should forgive and avoids confrontation when it sorely needs to decisively deal with an issue.

Paul ends his correspondence to the Thessalonians with an appeal to the peace



of God, “Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord *be* with you all. The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all. Amen” (vv. 16-18). Indeed God owns the franchise on peace. And, peace comes to all believers through His amazing provision of grace.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul admonishes the Christians at Thessalonica to avoid “busybodies” (v. 11). The Greek term translated “busybodies” is *periergazomai*, which comes from two other words meaning “around” and “work.” The idea Paul is expressing is, one is going around busily doing everything but actually doing nothing. Busybodies are occupied with many tasks which have no significant value.

Wrap Up

Only when believers live close to God may they find peace and security in a world like today. We find the Apostle Paul exhorting the Thessalonians to make prayer a lifestyle commitment, to pray for one’s self and the men of God He sends to care for our soul. Furthermore, we must develop a deep seated trust in God’s promises to us found in His Word. Each promise carries with it spiritual nourishment with our name on it. Finally, neither prayer nor trust is a passive exercise. Instead, God expects us to be active, productive believers. In fact, a slothful Christian is an oxymoron according to the Bible.

