

Paul's Identity Check  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
Rev. Jeff Allen  
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On Thursday afternoons, I lead a class called "Living the Questions." It's basically an opportunity to hear a variety of theologians present some new ways of approaching our faith, including our understanding of God, scripture, and other doctrines of the church. This past week, our topic was Paul. One of the theologians made the comment that Paul wrote his letters to specific groups of people, addressing specific situations. So, in this theologian's view, we are, in a sense, reading someone else's mail when we read Paul's letters. I think that's a pretty interesting lens through which we can read Paul's letters: as if we were reading someone else's mail. So how might that influence our understanding of today's text?

Scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians was the first letter written by Paul, and possibly the first book of the New Testament to be written. They believe it was written by the year 52, which meant that Paul was writing to the generation of people who had actually been around during the time that Jesus was alive. They knew of Jesus' promise to return, and they thought it would happen in their lifetime. Apparently the Thessalonians were concerned about when it might happen because Paul makes several references to Jesus' return in this letter.

Paul reminds them throughout his letter that they will not know the day that it will happen, and to illustrate his point, he makes two comparisons. First, he says that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, and then he goes on to compare it to the time of delivery of a child. Well, I've never had a thief break in during the night, thanks be to God, but I do have experience with the unexpected nature of child delivery.

I was driving home for lunch on a beautiful Friday afternoon. It was May 4, 2007. The only thing I was thinking about at the time was what I was going to have for lunch once I got home. As soon as I pulled out of the church parking lot, my cell phone began to ring. It was a call that would change not only the path I would take while driving, but the path of my entire life.

Sandi was on the other end of the phone, and she told me that when she went to her doctor's appointment, they said they needed to keep her at the hospital because our sons were on their way – five weeks early. It was the beginning of May, and as much as I talked about the boys probably coming early, I have to admit that I really wasn't expecting them to come until mid-June!

All I really remember of my response was that I kept repeating, "Okay, okay, okay. Wow!" and then asking "Okay, what do I need to do?" Sandi calmly instructed me to stop by the house,

pick up the bag she had already packed and I should probably throw a couple of things in a bag for myself. You see, unlike me, Sandi was prepared! She knew that this day would come, and she had her things together. And that's essentially what Paul told the Thessalonians. We won't know the day, so our task is to simply be prepared.

So how are we to be prepared as people of faith? For Paul, it was a matter of self-identity.

As a culture, we are very adept at defining ourselves. We claim for ourselves a vast variety of identities that shape who we are. When I think about myself, the identities I might claim would include husband, father, son, brother, pastor, friend, male, white, college graduate, Buckeye fan, fisherman. All of these, in some way, shape who I am and how I act in the world. Some of our identities are voluntary and sometimes they're thrust upon us. Either way, though, those self-definitions can be helpful or hurtful. Some self-definitions are limiting, some are freeing. Some set us apart from certain groups, some bring us together.

The search for personal identity has been the subject of a number of interesting stories, books, movies and TV shows. There's a new show on NBC this season called "My Own Worst Enemy." In it, Christian Slater plays a government spy who volunteered to have a microchip implanted in his brain that would allow him to have a completely separate identity as a cover. He therefore lives two completely different lives, one as Henry and another as Edward. When he's Henry, he's a very good-natured, decent family man who knows nothing about espionage. When he's Edward, he's a government secret agent who has no problem killing, lying, or sleeping around. Before you get too interested in the series, I should tell you that it's been cancelled. The last episode will air December 15<sup>th</sup>. It's been interesting to see Christian Slater play two different characters as they deal with their completely different identities even though they share the same body.

In today's text, Paul speaks of his understanding of our own dual nature when he encourages the Thessalonians to claim their identity as children of light and children of the day, not of the night or of darkness. You see, Paul seems to have this understanding that we are sort of like Christian Slater's character. He seems to say that there are two different ways of being in the world. We can be children of the day and of the light or we can be children of the night or of darkness. As people of faith, we can place our self-identity in the reality that we are children of the day and of the light. We can live that reality.

In today's text, Paul talks about the real difference between day and night, darkness and light. Ever heard the saying, "nothing good happens after midnight"? That seems to be what Paul's getting at here. He says that people sleep at night, and when people get drunk, they tend to do it at night. But that stuff doesn't happen during the day.

Now Paul isn't really trying to wage a campaign against drinking or getting drunk here. Instead, he's calling us to be clear-headed and self-controlled. If the day of the Lord is coming unexpectedly, we need to be in full control of our faculties, and not like we are when we're sleepy or drunk.

Paul seems to understand that sleepiness leaves us as much impaired as alcohol does. We're finally figuring that out as a society these days. In 2006, the National Sleep Foundation conducted a survey on the sleep patterns of adolescents ages 11-17. The poll indicates that the consequences of insufficient sleep affect nearly every aspect of teenage life. Among the most important findings:

- Adolescents who get insufficient amounts of sleep are more likely than their peers to get lower grades, while 80 percent of adolescents who get an optimal amount of sleep say they're achieving A's and B's in school.
- Among those adolescents who report being unhappy, tense and nervous, 73 percent feel they don't get enough sleep at night and 59 percent are excessively sleepy during the day.
- 28 percent of adolescents say they're too tired to exercise.<sup>1</sup>

I don't think the implications are simply focused on teenagers though – we could all learn from the results. Lack of sleep can have serious consequences. We're not at our best when we're sleepy. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that drowsy driving causes 100,000 police-reported crashes each year and 1,550 fatalities. New Jersey currently has a law on the books listing drowsy driving as recklessness under vehicular homicide statutes.<sup>2</sup>

So when Paul says to be sober, it's not simply an admonition against drinking, he's saying that we should be at our best. And for Paul, being at our best is about living into our true identity. Remember, we are children of light not darkness, day not night.

You see, for Paul, we are fundamentally changed by our faith. Through our belief in Christ, through our following Christ, we no longer live as people of the night, living in darkness. We are living out our identity as children of the light.

During a conversation this week, a colleague of mine gave me a new way of thinking about this reality. He was saying that darkness is simply the absence of light. There is nothing that emits darkness. Darkness is only created when we take away all the light.

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<sup>1</sup> "America's sleep-deprived teens nodding off at school, behind the wheel," March 28, 2006, [sleepfoundation.org/site/c.hulXKjM0IxF/b.2428023/k.8425/Americas\\_SleepDeprived\\_Teens\\_Nodding\\_Off\\_at\\_School\\_Behind\\_the\\_Wheel.htm](http://sleepfoundation.org/site/c.hulXKjM0IxF/b.2428023/k.8425/Americas_SleepDeprived_Teens_Nodding_Off_at_School_Behind_the_Wheel.htm). Retrieved June 1, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Non-Drowsy Discipleship" [www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com), accessed November 15, 2008.

I think that's a great way of understanding our self –identity and our journey of faith. We are, through our faith, in our fundamental nature, children of light, and yet we still experience darkness. But as we continue to fill ourselves with God, the source of light, as we develop our faith, as we continue to grow closer to God, we become less and less impacted by the darkness, and we become more and more able to reflect the light of God to the world around us. As we live into our identity as children of the light, we add love and faith and hope to our lives and to the lives of those around us.

Paul concludes this part of his letter to the Thessalonians by saying that God didn't destine us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation. Christ died for us so that we might live with him. So, Paul says, we should go about building each other up and encouraging one another, not tearing each other down.

And all of that is our call to discipleship for this week. Let us live into our identity as children of the light. Let us live the good news of love and faith and hope. Let's build one another up. Let's encourage one another. In this way, we will live with Christ and Christ will live through us. And the world will not be the same. May it be so! Amen.