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1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Learn to Say “Yes!”

Did you know that one of the fastest growing religious movements in America today is a move away from faith in the God of the Bible? According to a recent American Religious Identification Survey of 54,000 adults, which is a huge sample size, the number willing to identify themselves as atheists or agnostics rose from 2 million in 2001 to 3.6 million in 2008, almost double the number.

More alarming is what happened when they removed the labels of atheism and agnosticism (After all, who likes to be labeled?) and asked the question: Do you believe in God?—the “No” votes soared to 18 percent which means there may be as many as 40 million of our fellow countrymen who no longer believe in God. In fact, the numbers are so high that evolutionary psychologist, Dr. Nigel Barber, argues that atheism will replace religion sooner rather than later.

Of course, I don't believe that for a moment. I think there's also evidence to suggest that the faith of many is growing stronger than ever before, which means we may be living in both the best of times and worst of times with more religious conflict ahead of us than we've ever imagined. But my question is why such an increase in unbelief? And generally, there are 3 reasons people do not believe. 1) They have been through great hurt or loss, and they blame God for it. “After all, you could have kept this from happening to me, God!” So they give up on God and live in unbelief instead, which is rarely satisfying. In that case, what's the best way to help such a person back to faith? Not criticism and condemnation, but patience, understanding, and love. The second reason is they haven't grown up in an atmosphere of faith, so even though they may want to believe, they're full of doubts because no one has ever given them a reason to do so—in which case our job, as 1 Peter 3:15 puts it, is to “be ready always to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is in you.” But more likely than the first two reasons is the influence of the culture around us.

For example, I read a terrific article this last week by Holly Ordway, a college professor and skeptic, recently converted to Christ. In it, she gives her opinion for the popularity of atheism. She says, “At the heart of atheism is an appealing premise: My will, not your will, be done, God!” She adds, “If atheism is true, and there is no God, then everything really is all about me and what I want. No wonder it strikes such a chord in our self-obsessed culture.” She says, “Put your finger on the pulse of our modern culture, and it throbs with ‘me, me, me.’ Advertisements tell us: ‘Indulge yourself! You deserve it!’ Flip open a magazine or browse the best-sellers and you'll find 10 easy tips on how to get what you want right here and now. Put one way, this is selfishness. But the spin on it in our post-Christian culture is that it's empowerment, self-actualization. We're told to follow our hearts, seek our deepest desires, and do what feels good because, if atheism is true, there is no ultimate purpose to life and we might as well indulge ourselves.” But she warns, “The downside of focusing on ourselves is that

we slowly become less real and less present to each other and even ourselves and discover in the end that while promising easy self-fulfillment, atheism delivers nothing but despair."

I think she's right! When historians write about the character traits of this generation, words like patience, persistence, perseverance, endurance, resolve, and tenacity won't be on the list at all, not even at the bottom and at the top of the list will be an all-consuming concern for self-esteem, self-assertiveness, and self-realization. We're low on commitment and high on personal worth and the relational carnage that comes from it—children born out of wedlock, marriages that break easily, friendships that are short-lived, and churches dying from lack of qualified leaders and dedicated members. By the way, if you wonder if you're a child of your culture, all you have to do is test yourself by asking: How do I respond when significant people in my life fail to respect me and reject my ideas? You say, "How do we overcome these things?" The only way to make a difference is an authentic, high level commitment to Jesus Christ! Holly concludes her article like this. She says, "Following Christ is harder and more costly than atheism. In fact, it costs everything. But it also happens to be true. Jesus told his disciples to count the cost. So why are afraid to recognize that there's a cost. In the face of atheism, we must not be afraid to speak the truth. The Christian life is the way of the Cross. So let us reject the idolatry of personal fulfillment and remember that Christ calls us to come and die with Him."

Last week, I kicked off a 4-week study on community with a message in the park called "Learn to say No," in which I emphasized the need to set boundaries that keep us and our children from drifting back into the immorality that marked our lives before we met Christ as well as those good things that keep us from having time for the things that truly matter like praying together as husbands and wives, teaching our children the Bible, and investing our lives in the only institution that will last forever, and that's the church of Jesus Christ, all of which brings me to my topic for today and that's the need not only to say "No" to unholy and unimportant things, but also the need to say "Yes" to Christ and to the things He says are important. And the way I want to proceed is by explaining what that means in 3 practical ways, the first of which has to do with our commitment to one another as fellow members of God's family. So here it is—

Teaching Point #1: Saying "Yes" to Christ means caring for other members of God's Family. Cain was the first person to pose ask question. After killing his brother Abel, God called out to him, "Where is Abel, your brother?" To which he flippantly replied, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to that question of course is: Yes, I'm my brother's keeper, and not just in a biological sense; it's true of anyone who loves Christ the way I do." Jesus made this point himself when his mother and brothers interrupted his teaching to get a word with him. Pointing to the crowd around him, he said, "These are my mother and brothers and sisters, for whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister." Paul referred to the same thing in Galatians 6 where he wrote: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men and especially to those who are of the household of faith." And in that sense, becoming a Christian is like getting married because while you may not realize it at first, when you get married, you not only gain a husband or wife, you also get a new family with all the obligations that come along with it. And the same thing is true when you say "I do" to Jesus! You gain a whole new family of spiritual brothers and sisters for whom you're responsible. So let me take a moment to test your knowledge of these new responsibilities with a little Bible trivia. The question is: How many "one another" commandments

are there in the New Testament? Anyone care to guess? Are there 10, 20, or maybe 30 “one another” commandments? The answer is: “None of the above” because there are actually over 50 “one another” commandments in the New Testament. For example, here are just 20 of them if you’d read them with me—

- Accept one another (Romans 15:7)
- Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)
- Be at peace with one another (Mark 9:50)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- Be patient, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2)
- Build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Carry one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5)
- Confess your sins to one another (Colossians 3:9)
- Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
- Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10)
- Instruct one another (Romans 15:14)
- Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16)
- Love one another (John 13:34)
- Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13)
- Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21)
- Use whatever gift you have received to serve one another (1 Pet 4:10)

And now for those of you who’d like extra credit, here’s a bonus question: Where is the best place to put these commandments into practice? The setting of a large group like this on Sunday morning or the closeness of a small group that meets once a week in a home for Bible study, fellowship, and prayer? I don’t know if you know this but that was the secret of both the 1st and the 2nd Great Awakenings. The leaders of these movements like Wesley called on their converts to meet together regularly for Bible study, prayer, and encouraging each other in their spiritual walk, and the result was a revival that swept across the nation like wildfire. And we need the same thing today because without another great awakening, I don’t have much hope for Shelton or the rest of our country either. And it’s never about just the preaching and the worship. It is always about Christian brothers and sisters making a commitment to meet regularly together for Bible study, prayer, and to hold each other accountable for their spiritual growth. The truth is if you’re relying upon a once-a-week worship experience to keep you close to Christ, it won’t happen. Spiritual growth is something that’s attained in the context of a small group of believers caring for each other like members of their own family. So if you haven’t made that commitment yet, I plead with you from the bottom of my heart, “Do it today!” Make a commitment this very morning to start or join a small group where you can say “Yes” to Christ by growing together with other members of His family. That’s teaching point #1. My second teaching point is this—

Teaching Point #2: Saying “Yes” to Christ means working together to expand His Kingdom. To illustrate that, I’d like to look at one of the truly great churches in the New Testament described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1. Listen as I read beginning with verse 4. He says of them: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out **(trumpeted forth)** from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it.” The church at Thessalonica was one of the most dynamic and dedicated churches of its day—so much so that Paul says their faith and good works were like the blowing of a trumpet that was heard throughout the empire, so that he himself had no need to say anything about the miraculous change in their lives because it was already being talked about everywhere he went.

And in many ways, that’s been our church. I remember talking to Jamin York some time ago, who serves among the people of Tibet, and he said he’s been in some of the most remote places on earth and had people ask him, “Where’s your home church?” And when he says, “Shelton First Baptist,” they’ll say, “O, I’ve heard of that. Isn’t that that small town in Washington with the church that sends out missionaries all around the world?” And that’s true! We have. We’ve enjoyed some great glory days in the past! 3 worship services on Sunday morning with a regular attendance of 700 and more than 1,000 at our Christmas and Easter services at the high school! We’ve also given hundreds of thousands of dollars to support missionaries and mission projects around the world. But is that where our greatest days lie, a dozen years in the past? I don’t think so. I envision far greater things in the future than we’ve seen in the past—hundreds of lives being touched in our own community through thousands of acts of kindness, so that this building is once again bursting at the seams with 3 services on Sunday mornings and the leaders of NC and our Latino ministry wondering where they’re going to put all the people God gives them as well. I also envision a day when we’re sending out a whole new generation of missionaries to one or more of the 13,000 people groups who still do not have a Bible in their own language. I see us doing these things not to make a name for First Baptist Church of Shelton, Washington, but to spread the fame of His name, because that’s what God wants for the name of His Son! He wants us to spread the fame of His name to every people group under heaven.

But it’s going to take something powerful for that to happen that goes way beyond what we could do in our own strength. For example, did you know that the American people are by nature some of the most generous people on earth? I read an article the other day which said that 1.6 million more Americans volunteered in 2009 than in 2008 for a total of 63.4 million people donating more than 8.1 billion hours distributing food, building houses, tutoring students in low income neighbor-hoods. All of which is good and praiseworthy, but what I’m talking about is some-thing even more powerful than that. I’m talking about people filled with the Spirit of God “spreading,” as C.S. Lewis put it, “the good infection of Christ’s new life within us,” so that lives are changed not only for time, but for all of eternity.

And what's it going to take for that to happen? Look again at Paul's letter to the Thessalonians because he gives us the answer in verse 2. He says, "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Did you catch those 3 key words he used? Paul says the life-giving fountain out of which this great movement of God sprang was their faith, their hope, and their love. Sound familiar? And I had to ask myself as I read that, is that our reputation among the people of Shelton, Washington? When people talk about our church or drive past the outside of our building, do they say to themselves: That's where the most hopeful, joyful, and loving people in town go to church? And I'd like to think they say that about us, but I also know that we've been through several heartaches over the last several years and we've lost much of our joy and some of our hope. But friends, whatever we do, let's never lose our love for each other, because once we lose that, the downward spiral is complete and our best days really are behind us. But the contrary is also true. If you want to know how to regain our momentum and surpass what we've done in the past, the answer is simple, though not easy. The answer is for each of us, from the top down: elders, staff, teachers, small group leaders to once again pray for and pursue with all the energy and humility God gives us the faith, the hope, and the love for Him and His family that we once had, and the breakthrough won't be long in coming. But again, it won't come without a cost. And that's the third teaching point I want to emphasize this morning—

Teaching Point #3: Saying "Yes" to Christ means adopting a radical, wartime lifestyle. Notice what it cost the Thessalonians to follow Jesus. Verse 8 says: "For they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us, how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead—Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come." What did it cost the Thessalonians to follow Jesus? The first thing it cost them were their idols, which would have included their gods made of wood and stone. But there was always more to it than that. It also included their sexual immorality and all the other perverted behavior that accompanied the worship of idols. In fact, I'd remind you that according to the Bible, anything that takes the place of God and steals our affection for Jesus Christ is an idol which means it can be anything, even the good things God gives us like our good health and good looks, our loved ones (Remember how God tested Abraham by asking him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice?), our time, our money, our recreation. That's why I call it a radical lifestyle—because it's the determination that absolutely nothing in this life is going to dilute my affection for Jesus Christ!

So let me ask you. What would that mean for you? What things might you have to give up—not because they're wrong in and of themselves—but what do you need to give up in order to be fully committed to Jesus Christ and His plan for our church? Your TV time, your gym time, your pub time? Your overworking, overeating, overspending, or oversleeping? The fact is: We all stumble in many ways, but by God's grace we can pick ourselves up each time we fall and recommit ourselves to a radical, wartime lifestyle of worshipping Him alone as our God and Savior. And the reason I call it a wartime mentality is because it's not only radical, it's self-sacrificing—but only for a short time. I'm not old enough to have lived through WW II, but I heard the stories from my parents and grandparents of how they rationed butter, sugar, meat, fuel oil, gasoline, and whatever else was needed for the war effort. And it wasn't fun, but everyone did it because defeat was unthinkable and victory imperative. They sacrificed for a short period of time which was soon followed by a tremendous period of post-war peace

and prosperity. That's my point as well. Like the Thessalonians, we need to put away our idols and serve the living God, understanding this: The sacrifice won't last long. WW II lasted 4 years. The war in Iraq has lasted twice that long. And our wartime sacrifice may last longer—70 or 80 years, but that's nothing compared to the peace and prosperity awaiting us!

And here's the even better news! We

Some of you are doing that already

Wartime mentality—keeps us from pride of self-denial or sadness of sacrifice

Do so with a purpose and temporary—WWII examples > post-war prosperity

Our sacrifice is temporary—10 years in Iraq, 80 years on earth—peace and paradise

Conclusion

Quiz: Are you more concerned about being right as being righteous? As concerned about being respected as being respectable? As concerned about being in control as being controlled by the Holy Spirit?

In his book *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, John Ortberg tells of a young man named John Gilbert. At age five, John was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy, a genetic, progressive, debilitating disease. At age 25, the disease finally claimed John's life.

Every year John lost something. One year, he lost the ability to run, so he couldn't play sports with the other kids. Another year he could no longer walk straight, so all he could do was watch others play. He lost the ability to do all the outward things that we think of that make us human. Eventually, he even lost the ability to speak.

John Gilbert suffered far more than what most of us can imagine during those years. Groups of students humiliated him because of his condition and because he had to bring a trained dog to school to help him. A bully used to torture him in the lunchroom where there were no supervising teachers. No one ever stood up for him; maybe they were afraid for themselves; who knows?

"What a silly species we are," John writes. "We all need to feel accepted ourselves, but we constantly reject others."

But John had other moments in his life, too. Once he was invited to a National Football League fundraising auction. When it began, one item in particular caught John's eye: a basketball signed by the players of the Sacramento Kings professional team. John so desperately wanted that ball that when it came up for bid, he felt his hand raise up in the air. Not having the funds to participate, John's mother quickly brought it back down.

They watched the bidding go up and up and up. It rose to an astounding amount compared to the value of the ball and especially compared to other items at the auction. Finally, a man made a bid that no one else could possibly match, and he won the prize.

The man walked to the front and claimed the basketball. But instead of going back to his seat, the man walked across the room and gently placed it into the thin, small hands of the boy who had desired it so strongly. The man put that ball into hands that would never dribble a ball down a court, never throw it to a teammate, never fire it from the foul line. But those hands would cherish it for as long as they lived.

“It took me a moment to realize what the man had done,” John writes. “I remember hearing gasps all around the room, then thunderous applause and weeping eyes. To this day I’m amazed. Have you ever been given a gift that you could have never gotten for yourself? Has anyone ever sacrificed a huge amount for you without getting anything in return—except the joy of giving?”

Action Point: What steps can you take to say yes to one another to ensure that the Lord adds to the number in your sphere of influence who are being saved? List practical ways.

Leader’s Note: *Some ideas: Be willing to invite a Christian family and a non-Christian family from your neighborhood over for dinner or a game night. If you are in a small group, plan a social night where you invite non-Christian friends or neighbors. If your small group is doing a relationship-oriented study or a felt-need study, tell a neighbor about it and invite them. Invite friends and neighbors to a service or fellowship at church. Be willing to serve your neighbors. Get to know your neighbors – what kinds of music do they like, what kinds of movies, what types of sports or hobbies or interests do they have?*

Invitation—one another’s > LG and prayer room, radical commitment to expand the Kingdom both here at home and around the world