

# “Quench-Free Living”

μη σβεννυτε το πνευμα

1 Thessalonians 5:19 (read vv. 12-24)<sup>1</sup>

What do you think about when you hear the word, “quench”? The first things that come to my mind are ads for various kinds of drinks that “quench” thirst.

And when I think about quenching thirst, I think of a mission trip some years ago to build a small house in a slum in Mazatlan, Mexico. It was really, really hot, and we were working in the sun, so we drank orange *Gatorade* to quench our thirst. We drank so much of that *Gatorade* that we literally had orange sweat. I imagine that that’s more than you wanted to know about it.

Some of you might think of “quenching” or “smothering” a fire, which would be an appropriate use of the word, but I’m not sure I’ve ever used “quench” in that way.

I’ve learned that one of the uses of “quench” is to describe the rapid cooling of red-hot metal in water, which increases the strength of the metal. Such “quenching” is usually followed by “tempering,” which reduces some of the brittleness produced by quenching.

And I’ve discovered that the word, “quench,” is used for the emergency dumping of the liquid helium that produces superconducting magnets in MRI and similar machines. I think if I’d known more about all that was going on inside that rather innocent-looking “doughnut,” I might have been a bit less happy to spend so much time in one.

Some variation of the Greek word for “quench” (σβεννυμι) occurs a number of times in the New Testament, and one of those appears in our text for this morning.<sup>2</sup> While quenching thirst is a temporary matter, σβεννυμι is used in the New Testament more along the line of “extinguish” or “put and end to.” Most translations render 1 Thessalonians 5:19 in today’s reading as “*Do not quench the Spirit.*” We’ll look more at that in a bit, but first I need to set the stage for our text.

Our Journey through the Bible has now brought us to Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians from Corinth within just a few weeks of each other, probably in A.D. 50-51. Here’s the back story.

Paul was making his second missionary journey, and he had recently crossed over from Asia into Europe as the result of a vision that resulted in the establishment of a small church in Philippi, the first Christian congregation in Europe.<sup>3</sup> As we noted a couple of weeks ago, Paul’s preaching stirred opposition in Philippi that resulted in his spending the night in jail . . . and leading his jailer to Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Paul continued making his way down the northeast coast of Greece to the wealthy provincial capital of Thessalonica, where the city was soon caught up in riots fomented by Jewish folk who fiercely objected to Paul’s teaching that Jesus was God’s promised Messiah. After that riot, the believers in Thessalonica spirited Paul away to Berea, the next town down the road, under cover of darkness.

On the next Sabbath, Paul went to the local synagogue to proclaim once more that Jesus of Nazareth is God’s promised Messiah, and we’re told that “*the people [of Berea] were of more*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 16, 2020. This is the only sermon I’ve ever written whose title begins with the letter “Q.” 😊

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 12:20, 25:8; Mark 9:43, 47-48; Ephesians 6:16; **1 Thessalonians 5:19**; Hebrews 11:34

<sup>3</sup> Acts 16:9

<sup>4</sup> This sequence appears in Acts 16-17.

*noble character than those in Thessalonica, since they received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11).*

Those folks in Berea set a good example for us to follow, even today. It doesn’t matter who your preacher or Bible teacher may be, either now or in the future. The thing to do is to “receive the Word with eagerness . . . and examine the Scriptures daily to see if what you’re being taught is so.” We’ll come back to that in a bit.

Well, when the Jewish objectors in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching down the road in Berea, they moseyed on over to cause trouble once more, and Paul had to move farther down the coast, this time to the great port city of Corinth. It was from Corinth that Paul wrote the letters we call 1 and 2 Thessalonians. We’ll look at the first letter today and the second letter next week. As we did last week, we’re going to go mostly verse-by-verse, so I hope that you’ll keep your Bible open!

In order to understand the challenges Paul faced as he nurtured this first generation of Gentile believers, we need to remember that while a few of these first-century believers were Jewish and were familiar with what we know as the Older Testament, most of these new believers were Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus out of paganism. The documents we know as the New Testament were being written in real-time in response to these growing evangelistic efforts, but at this point, the various letters had relatively limited and local circulation.

As Paul made his way from city to city, the dangers of syncretism, that is, simply adding Jesus onto whatever one had believed before without jettisoning those previous beliefs, were problematic pretty much everywhere. Theological confusion and disagreement tended to be the order of the day, and Paul’s letters were mostly trying to straighten out all the confusion about doctrine and ethics—what to believe and how to live—in the lives of individual believers and in local congregations.<sup>5</sup>

First Thessalonians reads a lot like the kind of “newsy” letter we might write today, and as usual, I encourage you to sit down and read the whole thing. It’s just a few pages.

In chapters 4 and 5, Paul addressed some of the Thessalonian misunderstandings Timothy had just reported to him, rather like the report Epaphras had brought about the troubles in Colosse that we looked at last week. In Thessalonica, some of the folk had not abandoned the sexual immorality of their previous lives (4:3-8). Because of the expectation that Jesus’ return was imminent, some had quit their jobs and were just hanging around mooching off the rest (4:11-12, 5:14). And some were worried about the believers who had died since coming to faith, but before Jesus’ return. What would happen to them (4:13-5:6)?

There’s a lot to consider in all that, but this morning we’re going to focus on a few things Paul wrote as he concluded this letter. We’ll begin with 5:12 as we make our way toward “the Quench.”

***12 Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to give recognition to those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup> and to regard them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.***

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:12; Galatians 1:6-7; Matthew 7:15-23; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:6-9; Acts 15; Galatians 2; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3 John; 1 Timothy 4:1-8; 2 Timothy 3:6-9; 1 John 2:3-6, 9-11, 4:1-3; Galatians 1:6-9, 3:1, 5:1-2, 12-15

It appears to be a fairly universal human failing that in nearly any organized group of humans, 20% of the people do 80% of the work. We see evidence of that in every area of life, and we certainly see it in churches today.

Paul wrote often to the churches about the fact that we each have gifts and abilities given by God's Spirit, and that God's purpose is for us to each be hard at work investing those gifts for the building up of the Body and for the advance of the Kingdom.<sup>6</sup> You'll remember that Jesus told parables that made the same point.<sup>7</sup>

In these two verses, Paul is focusing on the 20% who were doing the hard work of servant leadership in caring for the larger group. We know that Paul sometimes appointed leaders to represent him in local congregations, and, while we don't have a record of such appointments in Thessalonica, there may have been some wrangling about who was going to lead the group. Paul admonished them to "Respect and support your leaders, and don't argue! Be at peace!"

One of the best ways to avoid leadership battles is to share leadership. The OMI Clergy take turns being the Convener of our meetings, and we at CBF take turns being the Moderator and exercising other kinds of leadership in the congregation. While we do vote on things in order to make decisions, we try to reach a pretty solid consensus before bringing anything to a vote.

That's generally how Baptists make decisions, but that's not how many other faith groups make decisions. Some faith groups have a top-down, hierarchical structure in which local congregations basically "do as they're told." Other faith groups have local "elders" who set policy and make decisions for the congregation.

Both of those approaches are efficient, but they are not as effective as our congregational polity is for developing mature leadership throughout the congregation. But whatever structure a congregation follows, Paul's word is to "Respect and support your leaders, and be at peace!"

***14 And we exhort you, brothers and sisters: warn those who are idle, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 See to it that no one repays evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.***

Here we see references to those who have quit work in expectation of Christ's Return, to those who are worried about loved ones who have died, and to those who are struggling with their previous habits that are not appropriate in a lifestyle that looks like Jesus. Some of the Thessalonians needed rebuke, some needed encouragement, some needed redirection, and some needed a "kick in the pants."

As one of my teachers was fond of saying, **Growth = Care + Confrontation**. Care without confrontation (where it is needed) is sentimentality and bland "niceness." Confrontation without care is meanness and ill temper. But when Care and Confrontation are joined with a Teachable Spirit, then growth takes place. That's how life in the Body of Christ is supposed to work.

And so it is that when you and I offer feedback to one another, we need to do our best to offer that feedback in the way we'd want to receive it ourselves were we to exchange places. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "*If someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted.*"<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4, among many others.

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 25:14-30.

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 6:1

Each of us is a work in progress—always—and we need to be both patient and gentle with one another. Christians are not persons who do not sin. Christians are persons who sin more than we want to, and we are called to encourage one another as we all continue our efforts toward growth. I think it was I think it was Thomas a Kempis who said, “Don’t be angry that you can’t make others what you want them to be, since you’re also unable to make yourself what you want to be.” Patience! *Now!*

***16 Rejoice always, 17 pray constantly, 18 give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.***

This is a very interesting part of the letter, and we’re sneaking up on “the Quench.” These three short verses are familiar and are often quoted, because they’re a pretty good description of what a group of Jesus Followers ought to be like. They are, in fact, a good description of our own congregation, for which we give hearty thanks to God!

Followers of Jesus ought to be **joyful**—not with a frothy, pep rally kind of joy, but with a **joy** that grows out of a settled and proven trust in God. Such **joy** grows out of that personal, intimate relationship with God we call “praying without ceasing,” and this is the verse from which that phrase comes.

It’s important to remember that Paul doesn’t tell us to give thanks FOR everything, but IN everything. Some things that happen to us are not pleasant. Some things that happen to us are not even God’s will—they’re the result of our own sin or other people’s sin. But because we know that God is love, that God loves us, that God is trustworthy, that God is sovereign, and that God keeps promises, we are able to move through whatever life throws at us, not “somehow,” but TRIUMPHANTLY.

But again, this is not a pep rally sort of triumph. This is the sort of triumph that knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that “*neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”<sup>9</sup>

***19 Don’t stifle the Spirit.***

***20 Don’t despise prophecies, 21 but test all things. Hold on to what is good.***

***22 Stay away from every kind of evil.***

And now we’ve come to “the Quench,” which the *Christian Standard Bible* translates as “stifle.” I’m going to make a rather broad application of “the Quench,” but first we need to see what Paul was saying to the Thessalonians.

Remember that the participants in these New Testament churches were all new, first-generation believers. They were only recently introduced to the joys of our salvation and to the power of God’s indwelling Spirit, and they sometimes struggled to put it all together (as we often do to this day).

When Paul wrote, “*Don’t stifle the Spirit,*” or “*Don’t quench the Spirit,*” he used a present-tense verb that might also be translated, “Stop putting out the Spirit’s fire.” While no word for “fire” actually appears in this text, you’ll remember that when God’s Spirit came at Pentecost, there were what appeared to be “tongues of fire” over each believer’s head,<sup>10</sup> and so the idea of “fire” has always been associated with God’s Spirit.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:38-39

<sup>10</sup> Acts 2:3-4, 17

Verses 19-21 have to be taken together in order to understand what Paul was talking about. Remember that in those early days, and for a long time afterward, worship didn't include anything like the modern "sermon." Worship gatherings were small, and the conversation was a lot more like what we're doing in our *Zoom* Bible studies on Monday and Wednesday evenings than like what we do on Sunday mornings. Worship was less like a talk or a speech and more like a conversation.

Because excited new believers sometimes misunderstand what it means to live "in Christ," and because some persons have a tendency to monopolize conversations, it appears that the leaders in Thessalonica had "put the quietus" on what we might call "freedom of speech" in worship. That's what Paul was talking about when he referred to "stifling," "quenching," and "despising."

While Paul was encouraging such spontaneous expression as a legitimate and important part of life in spiritual community, he also pointed out that when someone offers something they think is "from the Lord," such statements need to get "the Berean treatment": the church needs to examine the Scripture (in this case the Older Testament) to see whether this "word" is consistent with what God has already revealed.

For example, does this message encourage and build up the community, or is it difficult and divisive? Does this word lift up Jesus or does it lift up the messenger? Such tests are necessary in every age, as God's Spirit leads us toward "all Truth."<sup>11</sup>

Well, time moves on, but before we conclude, I want to make a broader application of "**stifle**" and "**quench**." And we need to add the word, "**grieve**," to the mix.

Paul cautioned the Ephesian congregation not to "*grieve God's Holy Spirit*."<sup>12</sup> That's a crucial insight, because an impersonal "force" such as in *Star Wars* can't be "grieved." This is a reminder that God the Spirit is a *Person*, just as God the Father and God the Son are *Persons*; and you and I are "persons" created in their "image."<sup>13</sup>

In Ephesians, Paul lists a number of behaviors that grieve God's Spirit, including such things as lying, stealing, having excessive anger, cursing, being bitter, being unforgiving, and being sexually immoral.<sup>14</sup> These are the same kinds of things that would grieve the spirits of our own spouses, our parents, or our friends were we to do them. Or to put it the other way around, these are behaviors that would grieve our own spirits were they done by our children or our grandchildren; but there's more.

My friend, there are particular good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do—particular good works that God has prepared in advance for you to do.<sup>15</sup> God has allowed, and will allow, you to experience certain things, both joyful and painful, in order to prepare you—and me—to be better able to offer care to persons with similar struggles—to minister in the world and to Push Back the Darkness.<sup>16</sup> And God guides us toward, into, and through those experiences by the gentle nudges and impressions of God's Spirit who dwells within.

God speaks to us pretty much all the time, but God also gives us the freedom not to listen to God's Voice. God gives us the freedom to ignore and to resist the Spirit within. And God gives

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<sup>11</sup> John 14:6, 16:13, 17:17

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 4:30

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:26-27

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 4:17-5:2

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 2:10

<sup>16</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

us the freedom to refuse to follow the Spirit's leading. God gives us the awesome freedom to say "No."

While we're thinking about this awesome freedom, we do well to remember that there are two words that never, ever go together. Those two words are "No, Lord." If Jesus truly is Lord of my life, then when Jesus gives me instructions through the Spirit within, my answer will never be "No." My answer will be similar to the military radio response, "Roger, WILCO, Out"; which is to say, "I understand. I will comply. And I'm leaving now to get started."

My friends, any time you or I say "No" to God's leading, we are quenching the Spirit. We are closing off the valve that determines what God is able to do in the world through our lives. Any disobedience whatsoever, no matter how small, quenches the Flow.

If we are living "in the Spirit," God will be at work in and through our lives every day. *Every* day. And we'll be able to describe some of the ways God is currently at work.

If your testimony about God's redeeming work in and through your life is not current and up-to-date every day—today—then you most likely have quenched the Spirit by saying "No" at one or more places in the past and you have throttled God's power and activity in your life. You're living on spiritual fumes, not on God's spiritual power.

Are there things you know God has told you to do that you have not done, are not doing, or have left half-done? Are there things God has told you not to do that you are still tolerating in your life? Are there things God has told you to get rid of in your life or in your home or on your computer or on your phone that are still there?

If so, that's why God's fire and God's power are not apparent in your life. And the Good News of the Gospel is that God is still willing to work through your life. God invites you to rekindle the Flame.

My friends, nearly all of us find ourselves in a "Quenching Place" from time to time, but we don't have to stay there. Paul wrote to Timothy, "*I remind you to **rekindle** the gift of God that is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment.*"<sup>17</sup>

Do you want to live "Quench-Free"? Then say "YES!" to God's invitation in your heart . . . right NOW. To live in such a way is to BE the change that God desires to make in the world. To live in such a way is to see amazing things happen rather often. To live in such a way is to Push Back the Darkness. To live in such a way is to live in a Perpetual Adventure.

Do you want that to happen in your life? I do. Let's Roll.

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<sup>17</sup> 2 Timothy 1:6-7