

Sermon for the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity Sunday

Sermon Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:14-24



*<sup>14</sup> And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. <sup>15</sup> See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. <sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise prophecies, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast to what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil. <sup>23</sup>*

*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*

Friedel, the 16-year-old from next door, came home very excited: "I bought myself a new software program! I can do so many things with it. I can discover new interesting games. I can even play with people on the other side of the world who also have this game. And so much more!" "I see..." said grandma. "Can this program of yours also fly? And what does it look like?" Grandma was then a little disappointed when she found out that the software program was hidden somewhere in Friedel's computer and you couldn't see, feel, or taste it. "No, grandma! You can't see, taste, or feel software programs!" Friedel had to explain. "It tells my computer exactly what to do and that's how I can do all the great things that I talked about!" And that's how grandma from next door became familiar with software for the first time. We Christians also have a type of software. Our software can also not be seen, tasted, or felt. And when people hear about Christianity for the first time, they are puzzled and, like the grandma from next door, must also ask: "How does it even work?" It's the same with Christianity as it is with software. What is inside determines how life looks from the outside. That's why when people only ask about what's on the outside, they make the same mistake as the grandma from next door. They ask questions like these: How often do you need to fast to be a Christian; or what rules are there in Christianity; or what special prayers are there so that you can get into Christianity? If there are no outward actions that can define a Christian, it doesn't mean that Christianity is useless. Quite the opposite. You can do incredible things with Christian software. You can even do things that are otherwise impossible for people, such as repaying evil with good. Or having a direct conversation with God, and not just one time; but every day. Yes, not just every day.... but without ceasing. And even

more. Our eyes are opened to see a completely different world that has nothing to do with this world we are now experiencing. The missionary Paul knew about all these things and that's why he couldn't stop talking about God and His great deeds. He experienced how that works in his own life. At first, he was out to kill Christians. And then God changed him... And he went from Saul to Paul. He became a new person. And after that, he couldn't stop talking about these things. That's also why he traveled throughout the world and told about these things. What he said then was very simple: you can sum up the new software program from Paul with one word: Jesus. Jesus and His personal presence within us changes everything. So a Christian is not a person who has new insights. Not even a person who is learning a new religion. And especially not a person who switches from one culture to another culture or learns a new language. Rather, when a person becomes a Christian, it is about people who become new people through Jesus Christ Himself. That's why we as Christians never ask: "What must I do to become a Christian?" Or "how much must I fast if I am a true Christian?" Or "What does God expect from me?" Or "what must I do if I want to be a really, really genuine Christian?" No, all these questions are wrong and whoever asks them doesn't understand how God's software works. This software has nothing to do with what people do rather it has everything to do with what God does for us. That's the key to the Christian faith. Behind every sermon and behind everything that we Christians do, behind every speech of the Apostle Paul and behind Jesus's cross and resurrection, only this is left: It is God who is at work here. And it is God who makes new people out of us. It is God who freed us from the bondage of sin and death and gave us new life so that we may be called children of God. That's why Paul always only preached Christ and Him crucified on his many travels. That was it: through Christ, all of humanity was changed. We can learn that today from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. How did that happen? At first, Paul traveled with his friends to Thessalonica. There, he met people who worshiped pagan gods. When he preached the Word of God in the midst of their community, it was a huge risk. It was a risk because Paul came up with neither convincing arguments nor concrete evidence. No, Paul called only upon God's power, which, like the software of a computer program, couldn't be felt, tasted, or seen. To learn about this power of God, one had to simply try it. For Paul, that was a huge risk and could have gone really badly. And to be honest, there have been ample opportunities where Paul has done the same and the people rejected him, laughed at him, or even persecuted him. It was different in Thessalonica. People came to faith in Jesus. Jesus was the driving force behind the apostle Paul. And because Jesus was behind the speaking and work of the apostle Paul, people came to faith. And that all happened in Thessalonica. Paul is extremely thankful for that and therefore wrote this letter to the Thessalonians. Today, we too are grateful to God for His work. We thank God that He also works in us today and makes us into new people. We thank God that even today people are baptized and thus become new people.

In the sentences above that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, Paul was very specific. He writes not only that our lives change but also describes exactly what it is that is different. And one of the things that is different with us Christians is that we repay evil with good. Now that is really something that our world knows nothing about. In the Jewish world in which Paul grew up, there was a revenge law. This meant that every hurt and every sin required reparation: the law can be interpreted with the words: "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." This law was reversed through Jesus Christ: according to this new law, the exact opposite should be done: that is repay evil with good! We know that we never deserved God's love. That's why we must also love people who we think have hurt us; we must also love people who are guilty; we must also love people who are neglected or ignored by others. To approach people and give them love and forgiveness is difficult! Can I really do good things when I only experience bad things? But here is precisely where God's software comes into play. Just like a computer without

software is useless, Christians are also helpless without software. That means that God must create a new identity in our hearts so that we can do what people normally can't do: forgive and love others! Because it is God who gives us the new identity, we want to always seek Him and His will! That's why Paul says here that we should pray without ceasing! Because on our own, we can't love and forgive. When we pray, we admit that we, by ourselves, don't have strength but need God. When we don't pray, we basically say that we don't need God and His strength. Without prayer our world is godless! Without prayer we are godless! Is our life godless? Then we are like a computer without software. God gives us the ability to love and forgive other people. And He also gives us the ability to see our world from a completely different point of view, from the end. We don't look at what is happening here and now, rather we look at what lies ahead when Christ comes again. Normally, we are so connected to our own lives that we are involved with the many challenges and attractions of our world. Worrying about food and drink, house and job, the right to remain in Germany, family and friends are all important things. We occupy ourselves with such things. But what drives us is not in these things, but in the future. Our home is not in this life. Our home is with God. And so, we look far beyond this life. We look even further than our grave. And there we see magnificent fellowship with God. We look forward to that happy reunion! We look forward to the day when we will see God face to face.

The congregation in Thessalonica experienced all this in their lives. Christ was living in them so that they could go with confidence to their neighbors and pass on this love. In this connection with God, the Thessalonians continuously called upon God in prayer and asked Him for help. The congregation in Thessalonica was very small and insignificant. And yet, through God, they became very important. Wherever God Himself calls people and blesses these same people with His gifts, people listen. You don't need to think about how you can explain the Gospel to people or how to have a better appearance in the congregation. All that happens by itself because it is God Himself who speaks through the church and calls people to living faith. We don't even need to ask how big a church is or what strengths it has. Our strength is in God. And He uses us. Therefore, I know for sure that His plan for me is good. And for that I'm thankful. Amen.