

High Praise

1 Thessalonians 1

Today we begin a six-week series in the book of 1 Thessalonians. The church in Thessalonica was essentially a healthy church. Throughout this letter Paul acknowledges and affirms their spiritual maturity.

There **were** issues in the church at Thessalonica: there was some confusion theologically about the return of Christ, and sexual immorality was an issue to address. Paul wasn't blind to their deficiencies; he would challenge them to "excel still more" in their walks with God.

And YET **Paul didn't withhold praise** out of fear that it would make them complacent or proud. The entire first chapter of 1 Thessalonians is devoted to rehearsing the church's virtues, conversion, and reputation. He basically gives unqualified praise and thanks for the believers at Thessalonica. After reading this first chapter, the believers in Thessalonica would have been encouraged in powerful ways because Paul, their father in the faith, had noticed and affirmed what God was doing in their midst. This affirmation would have been very satisfying. Instead of producing pride, it would have humbled them and reminded them that walking with God is superior to their old way of life.

Here at Faith we are committed to "expository preaching," which means that we teach through specific passages of Scripture attempting to expose the meaning of the text and then discussing its significance for our lives. One aspect of expository preaching is to allow each passage of Scripture to have the same function in our lives as it was supposed to have in the lives of the original readers/hearers. In Galatians 1, for example, Paul warns the Galatians not to follow a different gospel than the one he preached. If I were preaching from Galatians 1, my message would be a warning to us not to abandon Paul's gospel. The function should be the same.

Therefore, this morning I want 1 Thessalonians 1 to have the same function in our lives as it was supposed to have in the lives of the Thessalonians. I want to notice and affirm what God is doing in our midst. I want you to leave here today with a sense of satisfaction in what God is doing. Instead of producing pride, what I share should humble us and remind us that walking with God is superior to any other way of life.

Please believe me when I say that I **know** that Faith E Free has its deficiencies, blindspots, worldliness, pockets of disobedience and apathy, etc. I could write a book about our individual and corporate failures; actually it would be a multi-volume set with very small print; it would be interesting reading. Every pastor I know could write a similar book about the churches they serve.

But please know that I could a much larger book that detailed ways that you have been faithful to your calling and have excelled in walking with God and representing Him to others. Honestly, I love what God is doing here at Faith. In coming weeks there will be plenty of challenges from our study of 1 Thessalonians, but today please receive affirmation and encouragement about what God is doing here in our midst.

I've grouped Paul's high praise for the Thessalonians into three broad categories.

Observable Virtues (*1 Thessalonians 1:1-3*)

Verse 1 records a variation of Paul's standard greeting to churches:

1 Paul, Silas, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

In chapter 5 Paul will tell the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" or "pray continually." Here in verse 2 Paul writes that he, Silas, and Timothy thank God and pray continually **for them**:

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.
3 We 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.

Knowing that the Apostle Paul remembered and mentioned them before God must have been a powerful encouragement to the Thessalonians. Specifically Paul remembered three observable virtues: faith, love, and hope. Paul mentions this triad of virtues in several other places (5:8, 1 Cor. 13:13, Galatians 5:5-6, Col. 1:4-5). Here Paul emphasizes how these virtues were expressed in a very tangible, observable way.

He first mentions "your work produced by faith." The New Testament uniformly tells us that genuine faith produces works. After writing that we are saved by grace through faith, not as a result of works, Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10 that "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for** good works. . ." James wrote that faith without works really isn't saving faith (James 2:18-26). When Paul remembered the Thessalonians in prayer, he could easily recall their "work produced by faith."

Second, he mentions "your labor prompted by love." The term labor has the connotation of strenuous effort and sacrifice. This is the normal pattern in the New Testament: those who have received God's love in Christ turn around and show that same sacrificial love to others (1 John 4:8, 16). In chapter 4 Paul will commend them for their love again. There he will mention that they have been taught by God Himself how to love. At the same time he will urge them to "excel still more."

Third, Paul mentions "your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." The term "endurance" is often translated perseverance; if you have perseverance you don't give up and you don't abandon your faith when circumstances are bad. The Thessalonians' perseverance was inspired by their "hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Hope isn't merely optimism or wishful thinking; hope is confidence about the God's faithfulness in the future. If you have hope, you are confident that God will be faithful to you throughout your life and into eternity. The Thessalonians confidence/hope was "in our Lord Jesus Christ." In chapters 4 and 5 Paul will strengthen their hope by assuring

them that all believers will be with the Lord, whether they are dead or alive when Jesus returns.

Examples: As a pastor I have the privilege of observing faith, love, and hope in the lives of many. . . plus I'm pretty nosey. Here are a couple of examples:

There is a high school senior here at Faith who has to do a senior project related to her eventual career. Since she wants to be in some type of vocational ministry, she is writing a Bible study that clearly explains the gospel. She wants to have a tool she can use to share Christ with her classmates and friends in a clear and compelling way. I don't know what were like in high school, but sharing Christ with my friends was the last thing on my mind. But this young woman has experienced the love of God in Christ so profoundly that she has to share Jesus with others. This study she's writing will be a good work that flows from her love for others.

The past couple of weeks I've talked with a couple of people who are dealing with very extreme situations in their families. Honestly, their faith, hope, and love amazes me. I can't share details, but they are trusting God in ways that 99 out of a hundred people wouldn't. They are persevering through these trials because they have hope, a confidence that Jesus will take care of them. The only explanation for these virtues is the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Genuine Conversion (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6)

In these verses Paul rehearses the Thessalonians' conversion from paganism to devotion to Christ.

4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you,

Paul first mentions his confidence that God had "chosen" them. For some it is tempting to ignore this truth because it brings to mind debates about God choosing us vs. us choosing God. But the Scriptures don't really engage that debate, at least not as we do. The Scriptures declare that each person needs to engage his/her will and believe in Jesus to be saved **and** that those who have believed can be confident God has chosen them. The Thessalonians needed to live as a community of believers confident that God had chosen them. If God had chosen them as His people, at least a couple things were true: 1) they should therefore live for Him (not for themselves), and 2) God would sustain them and eventually complete their salvation (at the return of Christ - see chapters 4 and 5). Instead of making a church prideful, this conviction that God had chosen them should prompt a church to be humble and obedient. (Something similar was true for the nation of Israel in the old covenant - see Deuteronomy 7:7-9)

Paul tells the Thessalonians that he knows God had chosen them because their conversion was genuine. In verse 5 he recalls how the gospel was presented and how the gospel was received.

5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

Of course Paul and the other apostles preached the gospel with words; Acts 17 records how they specifically explained that “Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, saying ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ’” (Acts 17:3). Maybe you’ve heard Francis of Assisi misquoted as saying, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” That’s not the teaching of the NT. In Romans 10:14 Paul asked rhetorically, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” The gospel has to be preached in words.

Paul points out that the gospel came to the Thessalonians not simply/only with words “but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.” Paul wasn’t dispassionate when he preached Christ; he spoke about Christ with deep conviction because he was empowered by the Holy Spirit. And his life backed up the message. We’ll see next week in chapter 2 how Paul imparted not only the gospel but his very life.

In verse 6 Paul talks about how the Thessalonians received the gospel wholeheartedly:

6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

It’s been said that “what you convert someone **with** is what you convert them **to**.” For example, if you appeal to someone by saying, “Put your faith in Christ and you will have an easy life,” and then they experience hardship or opposition, they’ll think, “I didn’t sign up for this” and fall away. But the Thessalonians had seen Paul chased out of town by the leaders of the synagogue who were filled with jealousy and rage; and they saw how Paul was also chased out of Berea also. As I mentioned last week, Paul told new believers, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The Thessalonians saw Paul persevere through tribulation and imitated him when they experienced their own tribulations (see 2:14-16).

Examples at Faith:

I can think of an international student who came to Christ while at K-State; she was raised in a different faith. Initially her faith in Christ was very troubling to her parents, but she loved her parents well and showed them great respect. She persevered when they threatened to disown her. She has persevered; she experienced joy in the midst of suffering.

I think of a man who came to Christ around age 60. Somebody in the church had long conversations with him about Christ. He would have described himself as an atheist; he believed that Christians were the dumbest people on the planet. He became convinced of that Jesus had died for his sin and risen from the dead. He put his faith in Christ and experienced the joy of the Holy Spirit for the first time in his life. He experienced immediate deliverance from addictions; this isn’t everyone’s experience but it was his.

His wife, however, resented his newfound faith. She basically told him that he'd have to choose God or her. In a powerful combination of grace and truth, he told her, "I would give my life for you but I can't give up my God for you." She eventually divorced him. Through the pain and the betrayal this man has continued to walk with God and pour out his life for others.

These are genuine conversions that remind us that we are chosen by God to walk with Him and to represent Him in this life.

Example and Reputation (1 Thessalonians 1:7-10)

In these verses Paul notes that the Thessalonians not only imitated his example; they also became an example to others.

7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

The church at Thessalonica were now an example and encouragement to believers Macedonia and Achaia, two regions within Greece. This was the reason Paul planted churches in each major city in Asia Minor, so that they would represent Jesus to surrounding communities. In this way Paul multiplied his influence (really the influence of Christ).

8 The Lord's message rang out 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, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Paul was hearing from people all across the region about the reception that **they** (Paul and Timothy) had received from the Thessalonians. People in other cities already knew about the Thessalonians' faith; they knew that the Thessalonians had turned away from dead idols to serve the one, true, living God; they knew that the Thessalonians were living in anticipation of the return of Christ (something Paul will address in some detail in chapters 4 and 5). The gospel was having a ripple effect which one commentator likened to "dropping a stone into the center of a quiet pond" (Byron, *Story of God Bible Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 46).

Because of their faithfulness to God, the Thessalonians' reputation spread all across Greece. Paul commends them for their example and reputation. This is the norm in the Bible.

God's people should provide a tangible example of how to live. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

The Bible has a rather nuanced attitude toward a person's reputation. On the one hand, Jesus said, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26, ESV). It's not good to be so enmeshed in "the world" that we never speak the name of Jesus, never take a stand for righteousness, and therefore never offend or challenge anyone.

On the other hand, Proverbs 22:1 says that "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold." Luke 2 tells us that as a child Jesus "kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). As well, one of the requirements for elders is that they "must have a good reputation with those outside the church" (1 Timothy 3:7). While our reputation isn't **everything**, if we walk with God, being full of faith, hope, and love people will notice.

Examples:

Reputation. When I meet people around town, eventually they ask me what I do. When I tell them that I'm a pastor at Faith E Free, they often say, "I think I know somebody who goes to church there."

- One time somebody told me, "My doctor goes to your church. He prayed for me before I went into surgery."
- I've met some of your employers, employees, and coworkers. It's very common for people to express their appreciation for your work and for your friendship.
- This summer we asked each of you to give \$20 to a "For Manhattan" fund. Half of the money would go into Faith's compassion fund; the other half would be given away to two organizations in town that do good work (BBBS and Emergency Shelter). You gave \$24,000. Your giving allows us as a church to be generous.

Example. I spent some time thinking about ways that various ones of you provide an example for others.

- Finishing Well. Some of us are thinking about what we'll do once we've transitioned from our paying jobs (some people call this retirement). We have some phenomenal examples of how to do this. A couple of men in our church are trained volunteers with Hospice and Homecare. They walk with people during the last days and weeks of their lives; they show compassion and share Christ.
- Finishing Well. Another man gives time and energy mentoring business students at K-State. He is able to draw upon a lifetime of experience. Of course there are opportunities for spiritual influence in this role as a mentor.
- Finishing Well. One member who had a long career in the Army has founded (along with his daughter) an organization that helps veterans and servicemembers make the transition to civilian life. It's called S.A.V.E. - Servicemember Agricultural Vocation Education. As you know, many need to learn employable skills; many need various types of healing. Some of you know much better than me that there's a need for a young generation of farmers. SAVE is creating a pathway to farming for those transitioning out of the military. They've formed partnerships with K-State, with farmers, with businesses, with various agencies. Servicemembers can learn skills related to farming and beekeeping (including woodworking, metal working, and retail

business operations). This is a life-and-death issue for many of those transitioning out of the military.

- Parenting. Some here at Faith who could talk with you about parenting prodigals; they could tell you all sorts of things you should and shouldn't do if your children who are living far from God. Some are great examples of how to raise children with autism or with physical disabilities. They could give perspective and hope. I could point you to parents who have talked with their adult children and apologized for various things in their childhood ("Please forgive me for being angry. . . for not noticing what you were going through as a kid. . . for putting you in no win situations.")
- Suffering. We have many examples in our midst of people who have suffered great loss and disappointment. . . and have kept walking with God. Such examples are invaluable.

I thank God for you - your faith, hope, and love. I thank God for the way you have turned from other ways of life to follow the one true God. I thank God for the example you set and for the reputation you have in our community. May we walk in humility and in obedience this week.