

GOD WITH US
Part 10: EARLY LETTERS
Message 5 – 1 Thessalonians
Paul Encourages a Young Church
1Thessalonians 1-3

Introduction

“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also!” Those words were spoken by certain unhappy residents of Thessalonica after they saw the powerful impact of the gospel in their city. Paul and his team visited Thessalonica on their 2nd missionary journey, as they travelled through Macedonia (Acts 17:1-9). After speaking in the Jewish synagogue for 3 weeks, many people became believers, including Jews, many Gentiles, and some leading women from the city. Then, fierce opposition arose from the non-believing Jewish community, who formed a mob and started a riot. After leaving the city and arriving in Athens, Paul was greatly concerned about the new believers he had left behind in Thessalonica. How were they holding up under the persecution? Had they become fearful and turned away from their new faith? His concern was so great that, after several months, he sent Timothy *back* to Thessalonica to see how they were doing. When Timothy returned to Paul, he brought a glowing report about the faith and endurance of these new believers. Paul was so encouraged! He picked up his pen and wrote his 1st of two letters to the Thessalonian church to let the people know how much he (along with Silas and Timothy, his ministry companions) loved them, and how proud he was of them.

1 and 2 Thessalonians are important for several reasons. First, they give great insight into how Paul conducted ministry, and how he helped people grow. He shared much about his heart for these people and explains the motives behind his actions. Second, both letters give much attention to teaching on the 2nd coming of Christ and the “rapture” – the calling up to heaven of believers who will be alive when Christ returns. Finally, these letters show us what Paul valued most in the lives of believers. He commends this church more than any other, so we catch a glimpse of the qualities that we, as believers, should strive after.

Outline of 1Thessalonians

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Salutation: 1:1

Paul, Silas and Timothy needed little introduction. They had recently ministered in the area and were very well known and loved by the new Christian community.

Personal Reflections: 1:2 – 3:13

In this section of the letter we gain much insight into Paul's heart, his motives, his methods and his *love* for the communities of new believers that he planted in city after city. He spends the opening chapter simply *encouraging* his dear friends.

- Their exemplary faith: 1:2-10

Paul begins by commending them for the way they responded to the gospel. He notes 3 qualities:

"We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (1:2,3).

Faith, hope and love were the highest virtues to Paul (see 1Cor. 13:13). But here it is not just the virtues themselves, but the qualities attached to each one. *Good works* spring forth from real, living *faith*. *Labors* on behalf of others spring forth from *love for one another*. *Steadfastness of hope* is important when the world is

pressing on us, trying to shake our hope in Christ. Paul commends these new believers because their faith was working; their love was laboring, and their hope was unwavering.

Paul then gives these believers the ultimate compliment. He says that they had become *an example* to the entire region!

“You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything” (1:6-8).

The phrase “*sounded forth*” here is a translation of the Greek word *echo*. The word of the Lord had *echoed forth* from the city of Thessalonica to the entire region. Their lives were a living message to all their neighbors, in the face of persecution, of the reality and life-changing power of the gospel of Christ.

The message of the gospel was never meant to be contained in a church building, or in a person’s life. It was always meant to shine forth, like a light on a lampstand, like a city on a hill (Matt.5:13-16). The life-changing power of the gospel should be reverberating from our lives out into our world. So, how is the word of the Lord echoing forth from your life? How is it echoing forth from our church? How is your world hearing the gospel through your life?

Paul began his encouragement by noting 3 qualities: *faith, love and hope*. He ends by noting 3 actions: *turn, serve and wait*.

“For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1:9,10).

Turn – serve – wait. We *turn to Christ* to find our true salvation and to begin growing. Then, we *serve the purposes of Christ* in our lifetime, as He leads us day by day. Finally, we *wait for Jesus*, looking expectantly for our Master to return and say to us, “*Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master*” (Matt.25:21).

Turn – serve – wait. Does that describe your life? Have you TURNED to Jesus to find salvation in Him? Are you secure in that relationship, knowing that you are a child of God? Are you yielding to His initiatives and SERVING His purposes for your life? Have you found your place in the ministry that He is accomplishing in our world, today? Are you WAITING with expectant hope for the day when Christ returns to call you home to Himself?

- Paul's heart for them: 2:1-12

Here we are given one of the clearest explanations of *how Paul did ministry* and *how he helped people grow*. (Note that Paul uses “we”, as he was with Timothy and Silas as he ministered. This is significant because Timothy and Silas were Paul’s closest disciples whom he was modeling ministry to on the ministry trips. They were learning from Paul and following his example.) Read through this section and note the following about Paul’s motives and methods:

- > Boldness to speak the truth, in spite of great opposition (2:2).
- > Dealing with people from a sincere heart (2:3).
- > Living to please God, not people (2:4).
- > Not resorting to flattering speech to win followers (2:5).
- > Not motivated by greed or personal gain (2:5).
- > Not seeking glory for themselves (2:5,6).
- > Being gentle, like a mother; not making harsh demands (2:7).
- > Having a fond affection for the people (2:8).
- > Working to support themselves, to not burden the believers (2:9).
- > Conducting themselves with honesty and integrity (2:10).
- > Exhorting like a father would his own children (2:11).
- > His goal: to help them walk worthy as children of God (2:12).

Look back over the above list. Which of those statements describe how you deal with the people you interact with each day? Which statements do you need God's help to improve on? Remember, passages like this were given by the Holy Spirit not only to be descriptive (of Paul, Timothy and Silas) but also prescriptive (of what we all should strive for). They were self-aware and mindful of their impact on others. How can you treat people more like Paul did? Who is God calling you to minister to today?

- Their exemplary reception of the gospel: 2:13-16

Paul continued to *encourage* and *compliment* this new community of believers. He mentions again how they responded to the gospel.

“For this reason, we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (2:13).

Early in my Christian walk, I heard my mentor Scott give a sermon on 1Thessalonians 2:13, causing me to value and respect God’s Word more seriously. It was a defining moment in my spiritual journey. **“They received the word of God for what it really is – the word of God! NOT the word of men. The word that has the power to perform work in our lives.”** That is why they were so powerfully transformed. How about you? When you read, or hear the word of God, or listen to someone speaking about the word of God . . . does something shift in your heart? Does your heart open wide to receive it as the word of God? The ONLY way we will be powerfully and forever CHANGED is by receiving the word of God as just that – the WORD OF GOD. **“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).**

- Paul’s desire to see them again: 2:17 – 3:10

Paul wrote some amazing words about the Thessalonian church:

“For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy” (2:19,20).

There were qualities about this group of people that captured Paul’s heart, particularly their willingness to suffer affliction because of their commitment to Christ, just like Paul and the other apostles. No matter what their world did to them, they were steadfast in their allegiance to Jesus and His servants . . . and this meant the world to Paul. He went on to express how deeply they had longed to make a return visit to them. Repeatedly hindered from doing so (hindrances he attributed to Satan – 2:18), he sent Timothy to see how they were faring. Timothy returned with a good report:

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, dear brothers and sisters, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith? (3:6-10).

“Longing to see us, just as we also long to see you.” The deep affection was mutual. What encouraged Paul so greatly was that these believers stood firm in the Lord, even in the midst of such great persecution. Paul, Silas and Timothy prayed night and day that God would allow them to make a return visit.

“For now, we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord” (3:8). Here we see what made Paul feel “fully alive” – when people were able to stand firm in their faith. The apostle John felt the same way: **“I have no greater joy than this; to hear of my children walking in the truth” (3John 1:4).** What makes you feel most fully alive? What brings you the greatest joy? I’ve learned something counter-intuitive about investing in people: Sometimes, it feels like the last thing I want to do; but when I do it, I always have the greatest sense of fulfillment. I have come to believe that we are hard-wired to love other people, and to invest deeply in their lives. When we do that, we, like Paul, “really live,” and like John, we find our “greatest joy.” Go ahead, try it. Pour yourself out into someone else’s life and see how God fills your own tank with His JOY.

- Paul’s prayer: 3:11-13

Paul prays that God might allow them to see the Thessalonians, and that in the meantime, their love for people would continue to grow. Interestingly, every chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a mention of the 2nd coming of Christ.

“Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (3:11-13).

Love for people, both Christian and non-Christian, is a major theme in 1 Thessalonians. We learn much about Paul's love for them . . . and he encourages them to love others in the same way. Later in the letter Paul says it again:

“Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the believers who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, dear brothers and sisters, to excel still more . . .” (4:9,10).

Jesus said to His disciples: *“By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).*

How is your love for people, today? Can you ask God to **“cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people?”** These really are the distinguishing marks of Christianity – God's unfathomable love for us . . . and, as a result, our unconditional love for all people. Who is God inviting you to show love to today? A neighbor? A co-worker? A fellow student? A relative? Is it someone who has offended you? Is it someone who is hard to love? Is it someone who is suffering and alone?

Discussion Questions

1. What strikes you the most about the qualities of the Christian community in Thessalonica?
2. Look back at the list of how Paul, Silas and Timothy conducted themselves (p.1,227). Which aspects of their conduct challenge you the most?
3. Take a closer look at 1Thessalonians 2:13. How would you describe your own attitude toward “the word of God” right now. (See comments on bottom of 1,227 and top of 1,228.)
4. Look again 3:11,12. Notice that Paul emphasizes the need to show love not just to fellow believers, but also to all people. God is our e.g. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...” (John 1:12)* Is there someone that you need to move toward, with love? Discuss what tangible ways would be most selfless and kind.