

## “Thankfulness for a Model Church”

September 24, 2017

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

### I. Introduction

As we saw last week, due to persecution that had developed, Paul and Silas and Timothy had to leave Thessalonica quickly so that the persecution wouldn't escalate and destroy the new Christians and the new church they had established in Thessalonica. After enough time had elapsed that the emotions of the moment had died down, Paul anxiously had sent Timothy back to see what had happened after the dust had settled. This letter of 1 Thessalonians was Paul's thankful response to Timothy's glowing report. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul's concern was unfounded. This collection of believers--this infant church--had developed into a model church for which Paul had nothing but praise and encouragement.

But before we go on, I need to make a disclaimer: *I don't know everything about God.* (If I did, I would have to be God.) I don't know how God could love me enough to come and die on the cross for me—for each one of us. I don't know why God is so patient with us and the rest of the world that He doesn't just wipe the slate clean—so to speak—and get rid of all the arrogant, rebellious sinners and start over again. I don't understand how election (or predestination) and free will can work simultaneously, but in God's economy they do. Turn back to **1 Thess 1:4**: “**For we know, brothers, really brothers and sisters, loved by God, that he has chosen you**”—this is election—God chose. Now look at **1 Thess 1:9b**: “**They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God**”—this is choice, free will. Paul doesn't defend it, but here he shows that both freewill and election are at work in bringing the sinner to God. Election doesn't eliminate man's need to choose—Paul wrote in **Acts 20:21**: “**I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.**” From the human frame of reference, according to the Bible, there is one way for salvation—**Romans 10:9** says,

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Now back to Paul’s letter. Since local churches are made up of human beings, saved by God’s grace, no church is perfect. But some churches are closer to the New Testament ideals than others. The church at Thessalonica was in that category. At least three times in this letter, Paul gave thanks for the church and the way it responded to his ministry (1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2:13; 3:9). In today’s Scripture Paul gave 10 characteristics of true or genuine believers in Jesus Christ which were seen in Thessalonians.

## II. 10 Characteristics of Genuine Believers in Jesus Christ

**A. Work produced by faith** The 1<sup>st</sup> characteristic is work produced by faith. Turn to Ephesians 2:8-10. Salvation is by faith, not by works, but works need to follow after faith. James 2:18 puts it this way, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.” Faith produces action. Paul was confident of the salvation of the Thessalonians because their faith was producing righteous deeds/works in their lives, e.g., in 1 Thess. 1:9 he wrote that “you turned to God from idols.” In 2 Corinthians 8:3-4, the Thessalonians were commended for giving to the suffering church in Jerusalem: “For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.” These are 2 examples of work produced by faith.

**B.** The 2<sup>nd</sup> characteristic is **Labor prompted by love.** Love, agape love, is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). In Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Agape love, Christian love is a sacrificial love; it acts in the best interests of the other person—putting others before oneself. It may be a trite saying but it is true: Labor isn’t labor when it is a labor of love. In John 14:15 Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commands.” If one is truly saved, obeying God’s commands won’t be tedious.

**C. Endurance inspired by hope** The 3<sup>rd</sup> characteristic of salvation is endurance inspired by hope. Here hope isn't wishful thinking, it is a firm confidence. People of the world put their hope for the future in all kinds of things; politics, financial security, friends, family, material things but all these things can disappoint and be gone in an instant. The only hope for the future that won't disappoint is hope in Jesus Christ—turn to [Titus 2:11-13](#). Knowing the end of the story, Christians can endure hardship and persecution—in [2 Timothy 4:8](#) Paul wrote: “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” Because of its importance, the return of Jesus Christ is one of the major themes of both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians.

Faith, hope, and love are three basic virtues of the Christian life, and the three greatest evidences of salvation. These spiritual qualities are bound together and can come only from God. But Paul continued to write that there were other indicators of the Thessalonians' conversion that demonstrated their salvation. Beginning with

**D. They received the Word.** “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.”

The Gospel came to them through the ministry of Paul and his helpers. The Holy Spirit used the words of the messengers in great power and the Thessalonians responded by receiving both the message and the messengers. The Word of God reached the hearts and lives of those pagans and unsaved in Thessalonica and transformed them into children of God. The Thessalonians had not only heard the gospel preached, they had seen it lived out in Paul, whose life was an example of the power of the gospel he preached.

**E. They imitated their spiritual leaders and the Lord.** The 5<sup>th</sup> characteristic proving that the Thessalonians' salvation was genuine was that they imitated their spiritual leaders and the Lord. These new believers not only accepted the message and the messengers, but they also imitated their lives. Patterns of holy living began replacing the old sinful ones—turn to [Ephesians 4:22-24](#). In the middle of a

pagan culture, without any veteran church leadership, the Thessalonians had, in the power of the Holy Spirit, become imitators of Paul and Silas and Timothy and most importantly of Christ; they were being transformed. Paul then wrote ...

**F. They had joy in the midst of suffering**—“for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” A 6<sup>th</sup> characteristic that confirmed the salvation of the Thessalonians was their joy in the midst of suffering. In turning from idols to serve God, these believers angered their friends and relatives and this led to persecution. No matter how difficult the circumstance became, these true Christians didn’t lose their joy because the Holy Spirit was their source of joy.

I suspect that their response to persecution was similar to how the apostles responded to persecution in Acts 5 where, after the Sanhedrin had flogged them, ordered them not to preach the Gospel again, and released them, Acts 5:41 says, “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” Mere human joy will die under persecution, but the joy of the Holy Spirit will grow.

**G. They encouraged other churches.** Christians either encourage or discourage each other. The church at Thessalonica became a positive example to all the believers as they encouraged other churches. As we read earlier, Paul used the churches of Macedonia, including Thessalonica, as models for the Corinthian church to give to a missionary offering (2 Corinthians 8:1-18). Even though they were new believers, the Thessalonians set a good example that encouraged the surrounding churches. They gave liberally and sacrificially to help the needy believers in Jerusalem; this too demonstrated their salvation.

**H. They proclaimed the Word everywhere**—Verse 8 says, “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, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us.” From the time the church was founded, it proclaimed the gospel, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, i.e. Greece, but everywhere. Because Thessalonica was on the Egnatian Way, they were able to reach travelers from

many countries. Apparently, the Thessalonians who traveled from the city also carried the Gospel with them wherever they went. Their influence was so clear and extensive that Paul said he had “no need to say anything.” Rather than Paul telling people he met in his travels about what God had done in that city, people were telling him what was becoming commonly known.

**I. They turned to the true God from idols.** A sure characteristic of the Thessalonians’ salvation was that they submitted to a new Master, i.e. they turned to the true God from idols. Salvation means to turn ones back on any pagan religion and to turn to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Thessalonians made a change of direction of 180<sup>0</sup>. They now served the true God instead of idols. The word Paul used for *serve* means to serve as a bond-slave, in other words they willingly and whole heartedly gave themselves to serve the one living and true God. He and He alone had absolute, unqualified authority in their lives.

**J.** Finally, [1 Thessalonians 1:10](#) says that **they were looking for the return of Christ.** In [Acts 1:11](#) angels told Jesus’ disciples that “**This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.**” Throughout the New Testament Christians are reminded that Jesus is coming back and that we need to be expectantly waiting for His return—in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, i.e. Revelation 22, Jesus said three times “**Behold, I am coming soon.**” ([Revelation 22:7, 12, 20](#)). The true believer eagerly looks forward to Christ’s return because he knows it brings to fulfillment and completion God’s eternal purpose, which, as Paul wrote in [1 Thessalonians](#), is to “**rescue us from the coming wrath.**”

### **III. Conclusion**

Paul was able to give thanks for the church in Thessalonica, but that wasn’t true about all the churches mentioned in the New Testament. Consider the 7 churches in the first 3 chapters of Revelation, regarding the Church in Laodicea, Jesus said in [Revelation 3:16](#), “**So, because you are lukewarm-- neither hot nor cold-- I am about to spit you out of my mouth.**” Now we are the church. The characteristics of the church are the characteristics of the individual Christians who make it up. One way to apply this

passage to our situation today is to take these characteristics about the Thessalonian church and turn them into a set of questions to ask about our church (and, for that matter, ourselves).

Are the virtues of faith, love, and hope seen in your life? How about the actions that follow those virtues: *work produced by faith*: Why do you do the good things you do—to earn “brownie points” or because you want to show God how much you love Him? *Labor prompted by love*: Do you truly put God’s and others’ interests before your own—all the time or just when it’s convenient? Jesus said in [John 13:35](#), “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” *Endurance inspired by hope*: How about when persecution comes into your life because you are a Christian, are you able to be filled with joy as you look forward to Christ’s return? In [Matthew 24:42](#), Jesus said, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” Are you keeping watch or have you been lulled to sleep like the 5 of the 10 virgins in [Matthew 25:1-13](#)?

Do you welcome God’s Word? Do you spend time reading and contemplating what He says in His Book—not because you must but because you want to? Do you see the power of the Holy Spirit in your life? Do you see glimpses of God as a prayer request is answered, as a bit of Scripture stands out in your mind, as you see God’s influence in some action in your daily life?

Can people see by your actions and your words that you are a Christian? Putting it a different way, would you be comfortable bumming around for a day with Jesus; taking Him wherever go, sharing your deepest thoughts with Him? Are you ready to share the Gospel with others? Do you really believe [John 14:6](#) where “Jesus said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”? If I were to see a person standing in the middle of National Ave and I did nothing and he got hit by a car, what would he or his family say to me? If you say nothing to people about where they will spend eternity, what will they say to you? What will God say to you? If you truly love them, if you truly serve God, if you truly believe the Gospel message and that Jesus is coming back, how would you reorganize your time, your priorities?

In **2 Peter 1:10** Peter wrote, “**Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble.**” Look at your life, are you truly a child of God or are you just fooling yourself? Make sure Jesus is your Lord and Savior not just in words but also in your actions.