

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (1984 NIV)

Has the Gospel Changed You?

Introduction

In Acts chapter 17, Luke records for us Paul's initial visit to Thessalonica. It was during his second missionary journey. When Paul, Timothy and Silas arrived in Thessalonica, they spent three weeks teaching and preaching in the synagogues. And in response to Paul's preaching some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and some prominent women accepted Christ.

But not all the Jews there appreciated Paul. They started a riot in the city. That very night under the cover of darkness, Paul, Timothy and Silas were smuggled out of town.

They then went to Berea. Their enemies followed them to Berea and stirred up more trouble for Paul, forcing him to flee to Athens. From there, Paul went on to Corinth. Paul was still concerned about the church in Thessalonica—it was a young church and he had to leave it so hastily. It was from Corinth that Paul wrote both of his letters to the church in Thessalonica.

He wrote to a young church whose people were powerfully touched by the Gospel. They lived very differently in their very difficult world. They were a model to other churches at that time. Listen to what Paul says to the church in 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8:

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

What is Paul saying about the Thessalonians? He is saying that all believers can learn something about living the Christian life from them.

Why was the Thessalonian Church a model? Why was their faith worth talking about? What were they doing that was so right?

Paul gives us three reasons why he considers the young Thessalonian Church a model for Christian living. The 1st reason is ...

I. They have works of faith (v. 3).

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith ...

You may ask, "Isn't faith something that is just in your head, something that you believe in and not work for?"

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Yes, having faith is something internal, but real faith never stays internal.

James tells us in James 2:17 that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”.

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10 that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”.

These Thessalonians have a faith that is real and it is leading them to work and live for the kingdom of God. The Thessalonians view serving the Lord in faith as their primary work. And making money is just something necessary to support themselves doing THE work of serving God in their lives. Thus, they view their primary occupation as serving God. And the church and workplace are only contexts in which they serve God.

This greatly encourages Paul because it shows that they do have an understanding that sharing their faith is priority work as they serve God. If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not shared by them, then there will be people lost forever without Christ. Thus, their faith is leading them to work to fulfil the mission of the church in proclaiming the good news of Jesus’ first coming and the hope of His second coming.

Today, many Christians mistakenly think that faith is something that is only for Sunday; that they should not bring their faith outside the church walls or let it interfere with their work. It is as if words like “Hallelujah”, “Lord willing”, or “Amen” are spiritual words to be used only in church on Sunday, but become taboo words for the rest of the week when we are out there in the world.

Christians can mistakenly view their profession/occupation as of primary importance and their faith as secondary.

One time, my church commissioned a group of us to start an outreach point in Toa Payoh. We spent every weekend going round the neighbourhood to get to know people and speak a word for Jesus.

In the midst of doing all that, the Lord called me into the fulltime ministry. After my training, I was called to pastor a church. It did not have premises of its own, but rented a room somewhere for me to use as the pastor’s office.

One of the things I did very often was to go down to meet up with some of the shop owners, get to know them and speak a word for Jesus.

One day, a church leader was trying hard to reach me at my office phone while I was downstairs befriending a shop owner (those were the days before the mobile phone). When Sunday came, she said, “I was trying to reach you on this day at this time. But where were you?”

Remembering where I was on that day at that time, I replied, “Oh, I was downstairs trying to reach out to a shop owner.”

She said with some sarcasm in her voice, “You have so much time to do that on your working day?”

That was one struggle I faced as a pastor in my early years. When I was a lay leader, befriending strangers and speaking a word for Jesus to them was being faithful in ministry. But when I became a pastor, getting out of the pastor’s office, and befriending strangers and speaking a word for Jesus to them was not seen as being faithful in ministry.

Works of faith is not merely doing church work in church, but doing the work of the church in the world. Only then will we be living differently for God in our world today.

Paul gives a 2nd reason why he considers the young Thessalonian Church a model for Christian living.

II. They have labour of love (v. 3).

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love ...

Paul speaks of the labour of the Thessalonians that’s prompted by love. It is one thing to be mentally willing to do the work, but it is quite another to be made weary by it. Why would someone labour for God’s Kingdom? What could possibly be the motivation? Why would a mother labour for the birth of her child? Paul says the motive is LOVE.

But love for who? Well, it is certainly not love for ourselves. In fact, it is precisely the love for self that causes many to refuse to labour for God’s Kingdom.

If it is not love for self, then love for who? It is love for God and people. In the context of the Thessalonians, their labour is prompted by their love for God, as well as their love for people who desperately need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that they would not be eternally lost without Him.

These Thessalonians have a correct view that Jesus is coming back; that there are people who will die before Jesus Christ comes back but have yet to trust in Him as their Saviour. The Thessalonians are willing to labour out of love to save these who are so perishing.

For us, this is where Satan comes in to distract us such that we focus on things other than the eternity of those without Christ. When we lose that focus

and the focus that Jesus could come back at any moment, getting the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the hearts and minds of those who don't know Him will no longer seems that urgent. And if it is not that urgent, we really aren't too willing to labour and exert ourselves.

What are some Christian values very important to you? How would you answer it? Perhaps, values like integrity, compassion, righteousness, purity. There is one value that should be very important to every Christian. In fact, it is also of supreme importance to God. It is so important and so priceless to Him that He sent His Son to die for it. It is the value of a lost human soul. If you and I lose focus on the value of a lost human soul, then we are really letting Jesus die in vain.

This is why it is so important to be continually reminded and encouraged to keep our eyes on those who need to come to salvation and experience the hope that is available only in Jesus Christ.

The driving force behind our labour for the Kingdom must be love for God and love for others. Any other motive will not last. When we are so motivated, we will serve and labour in areas where God is leading us. If we say that we are not gifted to serve here or there, or we think we are gifted to serve somewhere else, then the real reason might be our lack of love.

Story is told of a mother who was running fretfully from store to store on Christmas Eve, trying to get those last-minute gifts. Suddenly she realized she'd lost track of her little 3-year-old son.

In a panic, she retraced her steps and found him standing with his little nose pressed flatly against a frosty window. He was gazing at a Nativity Scene where the Baby Jesus was lying in a manger.

When he heard his mother call his name, he turned and shouted in innocent glee, "Look Mommy! It's Jesus! Baby Jesus is in there!"

The harried mom grabbed his arm and jerked him away, snapping, "We don't have time for all that! Can't you see that Mommy's trying to get ready for Christmas!?"

It's the same with many of us. In busying ourselves to do all those churchy things, we look much for spiritual gifts but with little love/concern for Jesus who came to us as the Gift from God.

Serving to please God does not always require a special gifting (though that's good), but it does always require a love for God and others that moves us to labour. Only then will we be living differently for God in our world today.

Moving on, Paul gives a 3rd reason why he considers the young Thessalonian Church a model for Christian living.

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III. They have endurance of hope (v. 3).

We continually 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.

Paul says that the Thessalonians endured, and we know that they did suffer. Paul writes in 2.14:

For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews ...

What was it that inspired this kind of endurance in the Thessalonian Christians? It was a certain hope.

There are many things we can put our hope in—our money, our home, our job, our appearance, our children, our spouse, our government, etc. But how many of these belong to the everlasting?

If we want to really endure in life, not just for a couple of months or for a few years, then we need to put our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who has no beginning and no end; the one who has delivered us from death to eternal life; the one who is able to carry us through to our eternal home. How do you keep on going in a path of obedience to Christ? How do you keep going month after month for years or even decades when there are emotional, relational, spiritual and financial challenges to be faced? What does it take to hang in there when the novelty and glamour is all gone?

When the limelight is focused on a ministry, it sure looks bright and exciting, and so the ministry picks up people. Then the limelight moves on. Gradually no one seems to be talking about that ministry any more. Other things seem to be getting people excited now.

Does God want ministries only when they have the limelight of church-wide attention? The answer is: No! What then is needed? The answer is: Endurance.

Absolutely needed in the ongoing life of every believer is the power to keep going month after month, year after year, even decade after decade in the path of obedience. And for many of us that usually means long-haul endurance in a particular ministry in spite of emotional, relational, spiritual and financial challenges; even when the limelight, attention and admiration are all gone.

Without the endurance of hope, the work of faith and the labour of love often prove to be no real work for God but only love for the limelight. We do not live

in a generation that puts a high premium on endurance in relationships or jobs or ministry. But God wants His people to endure in the path of obedience.

Each one of us needs a hope that endures because living a godly, Christian life is going to be challenging. And we are going to be wrestling through times when we are labouring, and Satan comes and says, “Why are you working so hard to succeed as a Christian? I have quick and easy options of success for you.”

The Bible tells us that at the end of time, Jesus is to be worshipped as the King of kings and Lord of lords. God’s path for Him to attain that would be the hard and painful way of the Cross.

When Jesus was in the wilderness after His baptism, you remember how the evil one tempted Him? He took the Lord to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. And he tempted the Lord with these words—“All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me” (Matt. 4:8-9).

Satan was saying, “I know God wants you to be King of kings and Lord of lords one day. I will show you a quick, easy and painless way to that success—just bow down and worship me, and you can have all these kingdoms before you. No need to try so hard!”

Our Lord was firm and sure in His reply, “Away from me! I will only serve the Father and not you. I will not bow down and worship you because at the end of time, you will bow down to me as the King of kings and Lord of lords in your defeat.”

God’s way for us is often the path of long obedience, not the road of quick success. Only when we endure this path of long obedience will we be living differently for God in our world.

Conclusion

Responding to the Gospel is more than just receiving Jesus into your life. That’s only the first step. There are people who have received Jesus but stopped right there. Remember, Jesus wants us to experience deeper levels of joy. Jesus wants people to notice the difference He has made in our lives.

A young salesman was disappointed about losing a big sale, and as he talked with his sales manager he lamented, “I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.”

The manager replied, “Your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty.”

So it is with our lives. We are to be so changed by the Gospel that we create a thirst in lost people for the Gospel. The Gospel is to change us so that we can live in such a way as to lead people to want what we have in Jesus Christ.

How has the Gospel changed you such that you are now living differently for the Lord?

The Gospel tells us clearly and simply that ...

- God loves us—He wants us to be with Him forever.
- But we blew it—we sinned and became separated from God.
- God sent Jesus to pay it all for us—Jesus died for our sins to be forgiven and cleansed; then He rose from the dead to show that He conquered over death and to give us new life in Him.
- So we need to believe Him in faith and receive Him into our lives—only then will we be forgiven, cleansed, and given eternal life with God in heavenly bliss on day.

If you have never really accepted Jesus as your personal Saviour, would you do it right now? Do not delay or put it off. If you would like to receive Christ by FAITH, pray this simple prayer in your heart silently as you follow me:

Jesus, I acknowledge that I am a sinner. I believe you died for my sins on the cross, and rose again the third day. I repent of my sins. By faith I receive you as my Saviour. I believe that all my sins are forgiven and cleansed by your precious blood. Help me live from this day with you as the Lord and Master of my life. Lord Jesus, I thank you for saving me. I pray this in your name. Amen!

How has the Gospel changed you?

Let's seek the Lord Jesus Christ each day to transform us by His power as revealed in the Gospel so that we can live as His faithful worshippers, workers, and witnesses in our world. Amen!