

2007-12-30 I Thessalonians ch1 v1-10 (Ignite UK)

¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. I Thessalonians 1:2-10 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

- Soon we will be beginning a study through the book of James and there is much in the way of introducing that book that is immediately applicable here. While it is located near the end of the New Testament, it is actually the first New Testament book written. James, the half-brother of Jesus and a leader in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9) wrote the letter to Jews scattered as a result of persecution (Acts 8; 12). The letter's failure to mention the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which addressed various issues concerning Gentile believer, means that it was written before that council. Subsequently, the book of James is thoroughly Jewish in character.
- As western Christians most of what we study comes from the New Testament and most likely from Paul. Why is this? We are Gentiles and Paul was sent to the Gentiles (Romans 15:15-16). Our thought structures are most similar to the Gentile audiences to whom Paul wrote and subsequently unlike the thought structure of the Jews. Our propensity towards these thought patterns means that most of our theological discussions deal with conceptualization and center around orthodoxy, namely, what is doctrinally sound. However, as Stephen B. Bevans writes, "theology finds its fulfillment not in mere 'right thinking' (*ortho-doxo*), but in 'right acting' (*ortho-praxy*)."¹
- Both of these elements find their place in the writings of Paul; however, our tendency is to focus on right thinking rather than finding the proper balance between thought and practice. Paul's writings are often spoken of in terms of the

¹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002), 72.

indicative, what you must know, and the imperative, what you must do. In writing to the Gentiles who do not share a common theological heritage with Paul, he must establish patterns of right thinking so that patterns of right acting can flow from them. James, on the other hand, is writing to Jews, partakers of the covenants of promise, who all share a common theological heritage and therefore his concern is right practice. This is why James 4:17 reads, “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” because right thinking is assumed and their failure is one of practice.

- James’s emphasis on right living has often garnered comparisons to the book of Proverbs. To our western minds, Proverbs often appears to be random and would greatly benefit from categorization and systematization; however, this randomness is intentional as sections of the book were memorized and the wide range of subjects covered actually equipped the reader to meet the full gamut of events which one encounters in daily life.
- *What does this have to do with I Thessalonians?*
- Martin Luther, speaking of the church fathers said, “What great toil and effort it cost them to gather up a few crumbs, while we with half the labor—yes, almost without any labor at all—can acquire the whole loaf! O how their effort puts our indolence to shame!”² Here we are some five hundred years later with “Christian” books and bookstores and schools and seminaries and countless other resources that could not have been fathomed in generations past. Yet every year in this country three thousand churches die. From 1991-2004 the number of unchurched adults nearly doubled.³ Furthermore, as Ed Stetzer laments, “evangelicals have obtained political power but exercise little moral influence. For many, evangelicals have become a voting block rather than a spiritual force.”⁴ I am convinced that this has less to do with our failure to think rightly, although much in your local “Christian” bookstore could hardly pass as such, and is largely due to our failure to live rightly.
- On a more personal level, I doubt that any of you who have sat under Jonathon’s preaching for the year and a half that we have been gathering are heretics and yet for some reason we are not reaching the unchurched and dechurched on this campus. If our failure to reach this campus is not due to incorrect thinking then it is a failure of practice. It is like the Francis Chan video that we watched several weeks ago where the church is like a football team who huddles up and after the quarterback calls the next play walks back to the sideline and sits on the bench. This passage in I Thessalonians demonstrates what happens when a church both thinks and practices rightly. There is much that we can learn from the church in Thessalonica that will help us become an unstoppable force in our community as they were in theirs.

² John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God’s Triumphant Grace in the lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin*, The Swans are Not Silent Book One (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2000), 76.

³ <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=163> [accessed 12-28-07].

⁴ Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 9.

I. Paul, Silas, and Timothy: Imitators of Christ, Example to the Thessalonians

vv.1-5: ¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

A. In verse 1, Paul's introduction is short and sweet. Compared to the other churches, which Paul helped to plant, this is Paul's dream church. They did not question Paul's apostolic authority, and the gross immorality and heresy that Paul had to address in his other epistles was not present here. In the verses that follow we will see why this is the case.

B. The Greek word for church ἐκκλησία is a combination of two terms ἐκ a preposition meaning "out of" and καλέω a verb meaning "to call." This could be translated as "the called out ones." This is important because Scripture uses this term to describe individuals called out for various purposes, including a riot (Acts 19:21-41). This epistle is written to "the called out Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

C. *Have you been called out? Why are you here, for your personal satisfaction or the purposes of God?* If we are to impact this campus and this city and the nations then we must first recognize the purpose for which God has called us.

D. In verse 2 and 3 we read of their constant thanks, mentioning, and remembering of the Thessalonians in their prayers. Here, three specific qualities of the church in Thessalonica are mentioned.

1. Work of Faith

a. The word used here for "work" can also translate "action." This is not a dead or passive faith it is active faith, which bears "fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8).

2. Labor of Love

a. We know that the greatest commandment is love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40). The Thessalonians toiled, labored, and literally took a beating as they bore these commandments out in their flesh.

3. Steadfastness of Hope

a. Much of the epistles to the Thessalonians deal with eschatology because of their unwavering confident and eager expectation of Christ's return this confidence stands as the driving factor and fuel for the Thessalonians profound witness.

E. Later in verses 6 and 9 we will see that the Thessalonians “received the word” and “turned to God;” however, here in verse 4 Paul stresses the Sovereignty of God as he notes that God has chosen them.

F. Continuing on to verse 5, Paul begins to elaborate how they know that this is so. They know this because they did not merely receive mere words but words that came in the power of the Holy Spirit and “full conviction” or more powerfully “complete certainty,” which is demonstrated by their “steadfastness of hope” in verse 3. Paul now makes a comparison. Just as he knows that they have been chosen by God by the profound effects of the gospel on their lives they too know that Paul, Silas, and Timothy have been chosen by God because of the way they conducted themselves for the sake of the Thessalonians.

G. Their profound witness among the Thessalonians is seen at the beginning of verse 5 in Paul’s phrase “our gospel” (cf. II Thessalonians 2:14). Yes, it is the “the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (II Corinthians 4:4) and yet it is their gospel. The Apostle Paul and his companions so identified with the gospel that they can call it their gospel. It is this gospel that has redeemed them and restored their relationship with God. It is this gospel that is restoring the image of God in them. It is this gospel that they suffer to proclaim and agonize to live out in their flesh.

H. *Do we identify with the gospel like that? Is it our gospel or simply the gospel, that is true and right, yet we fail to identify with it? Can we like Paul say to this campus, “You know that we have been called out by God for His purpose; look at how we live among you, look how we live for your sake?”*

II. The Thessalonians: Imitators of the Christ; Example to the World

vv.6-10: ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

A. In verse 6, Paul transitions between two equal thoughts, which is indicated by the conjunction “and.” The first thought was the gospel, and how Paul, Silas, and Timothy proclaimed and incarnated the gospel among the Thessalonians and how the Thessalonians received their gospel. The second thought, to which we now direct our attention, is how the Thessalonians proclaimed and incarnated the gospel in their culture and how the world received their gospel.

B. Paul begins, “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord” and then modifies this phrase by explaining how they became imitators, namely their reception of the word. Their reception of the word is not new knowledge; however, Paul explains the context in which they received the word. They received it in “much affliction.” The particular emphasis is on the intensity of the

persecution. If you turn to Acts 17, which records their visit to Thessalonica, in verse 5 you will see that a mob of wicked men set the city in an uproar and attacked the household of Jason and dragged several others before the city authorities. Even amidst such persecution they received the word “with the joy of the Holy Spirit,” this is not a situationally based joy but a transcendent joy that flows from their newfound relationship with God.

C. Now if we go back to the beginning of verse 6 and read through to verse 7, while leaving out the modifying clause, which I just explained, then the resulting sentence is as follows: “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord . . . so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” Understanding and applying this is critical if we are to have the same impact in our culture as the Thessalonians had in theirs. The Greek word for imitate (μιμηταὶ) is the word from which we derive the English word “mimic.” Looking back to verse 5 Paul says, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.” It becomes clear that not only were the Thessalonians well aware of how Paul, Silas, and Timothy lived but they went so far as to copy that lifestyle and make it their own.

D. This concept is not foreign to us. We are all familiar of how your speech patterns change as you spend time with different individuals. Prior to meeting Jonathon, “Yeabo!” was not in my vocabulary. Nick always tells me how he meets people that I know who immediately ask if he knows me because he has a tendency to make weird squealy noises. To one degree or another, we all imitate each other. This concept quickly becomes abstract however when Paul says that they became imitators of the Lord.

E. Scripture is quite clear that not only are we to imitate the Lord but even more we have been made in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). This image was damaged in the fall and in Christ, it is progressively restored through the process of sanctification, and will eventually be completely restored at our glorification. Before looking at several of God’s attributes and how we can imitate Him we need to begin by establishing one of the most fundamental truths about the person of God.

F. Throughout Genesis 1 and 2, we frequently read that the creation was good. On this Goldsworthy explains, “There is no suggestion of a self-evident standard of goodness and harmony outside of God . . . God, who is the source of both, must define them by setting forth an arrangement that is the expression of his goodness and harmony.”⁵ Understanding this is of extreme importance when, in Genesis 2:18, we read, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” It is not good for man to be alone because God is not alone; He has always existed in the Trinitarian community. The implications of this will be clear as we examine various attribute of God and how we can imitate Him.

G. God’s attributes are often divided in to two categories: incommunicable and communicable. Incommunicable attributes are those which He does not share

⁵ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 93.

with humanity like Independence, Omnipresence, Omniscience, Omnipotence, and Immutability, to name a few. His communicable attributes are those attributes that He shares with humanity, although He possesses them to an infinitely greater degree, and subsequently, these are the attributes that we can imitate.

1. Knowledge: This is not simply raw data. God is not like Google. Rather this is a personal knowing and God is a community of knowledge. We imitate God when we realize that knowledge is not the memorization and affirmation of a doctrinal statement or abstract concepts but a personal relational knowing (I Corinthians 13:12). Furthermore, this is much more than an individual knowing, it is a communal knowing, there is an organic unity in the church. Christ is the vine and we are the branches. God does not distinguish between the head and its parts and therefore, God is just in allowing us to enter into His heaven.
2. Wisdom: This is different from knowledge in that wisdom deals with the application of knowledge. God always conducts Himself wisely. We are wise not simply when we as individuals make right decisions but when we as a community help one another live wisely (Colossians 3:15-17; I Thessalonians 5:14).
3. Dominion: God is sovereign; He rules with absolute power and has universal authority. We are not sovereign; however, as God's vice-regents we are to exercise dominion over creation. The fall resulted in a dramatic reversal and rather than rule over creation, man is conquered and claimed by creation.⁶ We imitate God when as a community we begin to subdue creation and do God's will.
4. Love: God is not simply a monad loving Himself. He is a community of love as The Father loves the Spirit and the Son, and the Son loves the Spirit and the Father, and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son. We imitate the love of God when we place the needs of others above ourselves and love selflessly, this should occur both in our love for other believers (Acts 4:32-37) and to unbelievers alike (Matthew 5:43-48).
5. Beauty: Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. There is an objective category of beauty and that is godliness. We are beautiful when we imitate God as a community.

H. There are numerous other attribute that we do not have time to discuss now.

I. One of my favorite quotes is from an individual who said, "Early on, [in Jesus' day] we didn't call ourselves Christians, we called ourselves followers of Christ and those outside called us Christians. Now we call ourselves Christians

⁶ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 48.

and they call us hypocrites. The world is turned upside down.”⁷ The Thessalonians were diligent to imitate the Lord and subsequently there was a stark contrast between both their immoral and idolatrous past and the self-righteous legalism of the Jews in that city.

J. Continuing on to verse 7, we see that because of this imitation they “became an example to all the believers in Macedonia [northern Greece] and in Achaia [southern Greece].” The word used here for example often refers to the imprint made by a dye. The Thessalonians became a mold into which the believers of Macedonia and Achaia could cast themselves.

K. Paul continues to elaborate on their example explaining that the “word of the Lord has sounded [exploded] fourth from them” and they have become an example for the whole world. To the degree that “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.”⁸

L. As Paul notes, “⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

CONCLUSION

- Thessalonica was located on the Egnatian Way (Via Egnatia), a major route of commerce and travel, which allowed for the news of their radical conversion and new lifestyle to travel both quickly and over great distances. This university campus serves in a similar fashion as an ideological highway in this state. What students learn here is carried with them as they graduate and take jobs in various places across this state, nation, and world. Throughout Acts, the Apostles strategically plant churches along major trade routes and from these places the gospel spread throughout the world.
- To reach this campus, this state, this nation, and the world with the gospel then we must begin by identifying with the gospel as Paul, Silas, and Timothy did. It must be our gospel and we must take that gospel and imitate the Lord as we incarnate that gospel into our culture. This concept is found throughout Scripture. In II Corinthians 5:20 we see that we are ambassadors, representatives, for Christ and through us God is making His appeal. In Colossians 1:24 we see that, as John Piper says, “Christ intends for the great commission to be a presentation to the nations of the sufferings of his cross, in the sufferings of his people.”⁹ Colossians 1:15 says, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Jesus has restored the image that was damaged in the fall. We must imitate God, bearing His image so that the gospel will transform this campus and so that we

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http://openthedoorway.org/index.php?id=353&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=15&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=30&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=352&cHash=94e3165589 [accessed 12-28-07].

⁸ John MacArthur, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 2002), 27.

⁹ John Piper, *Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain*, October 27, 1996. [Sermon]

and our fellow image bearers may go out from this campus and transform the world.

- LETS PRAY