

Faith, Hope and Love in Action

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10,

Key Verse: 1:3

“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.”

Today we begin to study the New Testament book of 1 Thessalonians. Like Philippians, this is a letter written by Paul and his coworkers to the church that they had pioneered. Thessalonica is a Greek city, as Philippi was. In fact, according to the book of Acts, Thessalonica was pioneered right after Philippi, also on the second mission journey of Paul and Silas. However, most scholars think that 1 Thessalonians was actually written before Philippians, and may even be the earliest book of Paul in the New Testament.

Among Paul’s letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are the ones that say the most about Jesus’ second coming. The theme of hope in that event runs strongly through both books. We won’t get into that much today, just to touch on it. The first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, as we saw when we read it, is very short—just 10 verses, and it kind of looks like the standard greetings and thanksgivings that Paul puts at the beginning of every letter. But if we look more closely, there are some very deep themes running through it. There is a special emphasis on faith in action, that is, faith that works and faith that sets an example.

I. The three graces and their visible expression (1-5a)

Verse 1 says, “Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.” If you read Acts chapter 16, you find that early in the second mission journey, Paul found a young disciple in Lystra named Timothy, whom Paul took along with him for the remainder of the journey. Paul seems to have taken Timothy under his wing very personally to raise him up as a next-generation leader for the church. When Paul is writing this letter to the Thessalonians, he already includes Timothy as a first-rank partner in the gospel along with Silas. As usual, Paul immediately refers to the incredible spiritual status of the believers he is writing to: they are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In verse 3 Paul expresses the profound nature of this thankfulness for the Thessalonian believers. Let’s read it together. “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.” This verse has a very interesting structure. Paul makes a list of three things he remembers the Thessalonians for, and for each one he gives the underlying spiritual motive for it. He says, “Your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope” in Jesus Christ.

Paul mentions three visible, practical fruits they showed: First, work; second, labor, and third, endurance. There seems to be a progression in these three. The first is simply work. Before they met Jesus, the believers in Thessalonica only worked for themselves, or maybe some of them didn’t work at all. But now, they worked, joyfully and willingly, for Christ and his kingdom.

The second visible virtue is labor. To me, “labor” signifies more painful or protracted work. Work can be fun, but labor sounds like work that has become tiresome or unpleasant. When a woman is in the process of giving birth to a child, we don’t say “she’s in work”, we say she is in labor. Not only did the Thessalonians begin to work for Christ, they continued to labor for Christ, even when it wasn’t fun anymore. The last visible fruit is “endurance”. This kind of backs up what we were saying about labor. The Thessalonians kept up their profession of faith, their fellowship with each other, and their good works, even when persecution came, when remaining faithful became an act of endurance in the midst of suffering.

How can we exhibit these fruits? Actually, verse 3 teaches us that they are only the outward manifestation of something deeper going on inside the believers. Work, labor, and endurance were each produced by something else—namely, by faith, love, and hope. These are the three so-called “cardinal virtues” that Paul names in 1 Corinthians 13. There he says that all other spiritual gifts, such as tongues, prophecy, and knowledge, all pass away, but these three, faith hope and love remain.

It says that work was produced by faith. The Thessalonians’ belief in God’s salvation offered to them in Jesus Christ motivated them, out of gratitude, to begin to engage in good works for him and his people. It’s very clear to me that I first began to go fishing on the Princeton campus and try to make one-to-one Bible study appointments with students because I believed that God had chosen me personally and called me out from the world for a specific mission.

As the love for Christ and each other began to grow deeper in the Thessalonians’ hearts, they found strength to continue in labor. The phrase “labor of love” from this verse has become widely used in the English language. The way M. Anastasia serves our family can only be described as a labor of love. It’s been 11 years since she went into labor for our first child Peter, but her labor has continued to the present day.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul put love last and said it was the greatest of the three. But here he puts hope last, saying that it is what produced endurance. When the believers’ suffering became severe and all visible forms of support disappeared from their lives, what could enable them to endure? It was only the living hope that was burning in their hearts.

Work produced by faith, labor produced by love, endurance produced by hope. The lesson here is very clear, isn’t it? The spiritual gifts of faith, which we receive in Christ, produce action. As we know, we are saved only by grace through faith, not by works. The love God has for us is not based on anything we have done or could do to deserve it. But as someone once said, faith itself works. As James said, “faith without works is dead.” On the other hand, if we are wondering why our actions are not what we think they should be, then maybe we should first look at the deeper things in our heart: is our faith firm? Is our love growing? Is our hope centered on the right thing?

Of course, faith, hope, and love are not things that we can just create in ourselves out of nothing. Rather, they are produced by the power of the gospel. Paul mentions next how the gospel had worked in the Thessalonians to produce all those good fruits. Look at verses 4-5a. “For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.” The

Thessalonians began to be changed because Paul preached the gospel to them—the news of Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection. Not everyone in Thessalonica had believed this news, as you can read in Acts 17. But for those who did, it was not just a matter of intellectually accepting a fact. The gospel came to them with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. I especially like the word “conviction” because it means that the truth of something hits you in your heart, not just your head. We often talk about the conviction of sin, the conviction that I am a guilty sinner, as a key factor in a person’s change through the power of the gospel. These verses are a reminder that the goal of the gospel ministry is to change people’s lives from the inside out, so that they produce good fruit that they could not produce before.

II. Examples, Models, and Imitation (5b-10)

It was not just the words of Paul and his companions that produced such a great change in the lives of the Thessalonians. To Paul, the gospel ministry was not just a matter of preaching, but also the lifestyle of the minister among the disciples. Look at verse 5b, the last sentence in verse 5. “You know how we lived among you for your sake.” Here Paul is referring to the example of life that he set during the time he was in Thessalonica. He did not remain distant and aloof from the people he preached the gospel to; he lived among them as a servant. In doing this, of course, he was imitating Christ himself, who came down to live with his disciples and among all kinds of sinners. Paul, like Jesus, set the example of sharing one’s life with the community of faith.

What was the result of this? Look at verse 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.” As the Thessalonian believers saw Paul and his coworkers’ sacrificial, exemplary lives, they themselves began to imitate that lifestyle. And through doing this, they were imitating Christ himself. The most significant way they imitated Christ, verse 6 says, was in suffering. By patiently enduring persecution, they were suffering as Christ suffered. Paradoxically, just as we saw in Philippians, that suffering came along with joy. It must be the joy of being changed and made holy.

When Paul set an example for the believers and the believers began followed that example, the results began to multiply. Look at verses 7-9. “⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 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.” The Thessalonian Christians themselves became a model for other believers. Paul says that their actions even spoke for themselves as a testimony to the gospel, so that Paul did not need to speak for them. Everyone could see their changed lives. Word got around that some people in Thessalonica had become different in the best possible way.

These verses describe a kind of virtuous chain: Paul followed the example of Christ, the Thessalonian believers followed the example of Paul, and then the believers’ example became a model to people everywhere. This is how good influence is spread. We can even say that Christian discipleship is a life of example-following and example-making.

Many educators have agreed that human beings learn best by example. If you want to be a math teacher, as you may know, it’s not enough just to describe the theoretical principles of the subject

and then leave the students to think it through for themselves. You have to work through enough examples with them, so they can build their understanding from the bottom up and gain the practical skill of solving problems.

It's the same for the gospel. It's easy to forget how much the people around us need to see an example of a holy, transformed life. When young people don't have any Christian example in their family, the only example they know about is a life of quarreling continually and breaking relationships, foul and bitter language toward each other, drunkenness and indulging lustful desires, and one destructive decision after another. That's why it's so important for us to invite such people into our lives and show them a new way to live through our example. The importance of setting an example, of becoming a model, should impact the way we make decisions. When we choose a course of action to solve a problem in our lives, we should not just consider whether the actions will produce a result that is good for us. We should consider whether the actions we are planning on taking are worthy of being imitated by others.

In the final verses of chapter 1, Paul summarizes the fundamental change that had occurred in the believers' lives. Look at verses 9b and 10. It says, "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." All the other fruits and virtues the believers displayed were the result of this: that they turned from worshipping idols to serving the living and true God.

In the United States, not many of us have a background of worshipping actual idols, actual statues. A friend of mine from a Hindu background told me that worshipping idols is in fact very addictive. Once you get in the habit of bowing down to some statue for a blessing every time you're about to take an exam or make an investment, it's very hard to stop. Your heart becomes captured and dependent on that idol. We saw in Genesis how Rachel could not let go of her idols, and she almost ruined Jacob's escape by stealing her father Laban's idols from his house. Idols ultimately enslave people and make them display the great foolishness of a life separated from God. But an idol is not just a statue of a pagan god. In the true sense, an idol is anything we cling to and depend on other than God. In that sense, idol worship is still very prevalent even in Western cultures. People can make an idol out of alcohol or some drug, out of money, out of cars, video games—anything besides God that, in our heart of hearts, we are trusting to save us or to make life bearable.

But Paul said the Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the living and true God. I really like the word "turned" in this verse. Actually, the word "repentance" is closely related to the concept of turning. We even sometimes call it "turning your life around." The Thessalonians made a 180-degree turn, decisively severing their relationships with the idols that they had formerly been so dependent on. I hope you agree that throwing away an idol that one has formerly clung to is a great change in anyone's life, and a change that other people will notice.

Lastly, verse 10 says that that worship of the living and true God included a kind of waiting. It says, "and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath." This verse is a hint about what will be one of the main topics of the book of 1 Thessalonians—the second coming of Jesus. Paul describes the believers' life as a life of

waiting for this very event. It means that believers are people who no longer put their hope in a reward from this world.

Today we mainly thought about Paul's description of the good fruit that had come out of the Thesalonians' changed lives. It was faith, hope and love expressed in work, labor and endurance, and it was the life of setting an example for others. May God bless your life to be greatly, fundamentally changed to show the fruits of faith in action.