

LESSONS IN BASIC CHRISTIANITY:

(2) CHRISTIAN WITNESS

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Worship Moment Message

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SCRIPTURE

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a 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 wrath that is coming (1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 NRSV).

MESSAGE

In the pilot for the original science fiction television drama, *Star Trek*, there was an incident in which a spacecraft crashed on an alien world and the only one to survive the crash was a human female. The aliens on that planet took her out of the wreckage and operated on her and saved her life. They fixed her up the best they could, but the problem was they had never seen a human being before, so they didn't know what one looked like. Every part of her body – all of the organs – worked, but she looked distorted and hideous because the people who helped her did not know what a human body was meant to look like.

Now you may well ask, “What does Star Trek have to do with the Christians in the Greek city of Thessalonica?” Well, in a sense, the early Christians of Thessalonica crash-landed. Paul, the Apostle, was only with them for a short time to teach them about the Gospel. So when he was forced to leave, there were gaps in their knowledge. They'd never seen the body of Christ before. They didn't know what a church was supposed to look like. And so

they tried to follow Christ, but in some ways they were distorted. And that's part of the reason why this letter, known as 1 Thessalonians, was written. It was so that these Christians would have a better understanding of what it means to live in the body of Christ we call the church. As a consequence, this letter is rich in lessons concerning basic Christianity.

Paul makes it clear in today's text that the preaching of the Gospel was the practical means by which the church at Thessalonica was brought into existence. Furthermore, this was meant to be the case for any Christian congregation. The Gospel was the instrument that brought our church into being and the spreading of that Gospel became the purpose for which the church was formed. So our text is really Paul's witness to the importance of the Gospel and the connection between the church and the Gospel.

If I had written this letter my outline for this section would have been: What is the Gospel? How do we live the Gospel? How do we spread the Gospel? But Paul follows a different order. He starts with Gospel living and ends with a brief definition of what the Gospel is. I will yield to the wisdom of the apostle on this.

Part of the reason he starts with Gospel living is because he is so grateful to hear that the new Christians at Thessalonica were practicing the lessons they had received. He says:

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope (1:2-3a).

These three words are found elsewhere in Paul's writings: Faith. Love. Hope. (Though not always in that order.¹) The best known of which is 1 Corinthians 13:

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:13 NRSV).

The word "faith" has many nuances in the New Testament. Here Paul gives it an orientation to the past. To have faith, in this sense, means to embrace an established heritage that has proven to be true. The heritage is this: God has chosen the family of Abraham and Sarah to be the means by which he gathers a people to himself. You can summarize the story line of the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation in just four words: "God Wants a Family." God chose the family of Abraham and Sarah to be the

¹ See Rom. 5:2-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5f.; Col. 1:4ff.

means by which God gathers a larger family to himself. God is at work in the world gathering a people to himself. This work is described in Ephesians in this way:

God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5 NLT).

The church is the family of God. Now some in Thessalonica who responded to the Gospel were biological descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Some knew about Abraham and Sarah but were not related. And some had no clue who they were. But what they had in common was this – they embraced the truth of the Gospel and were confirmed or adopted into the same family of God.

Paul speaks of the work of faith. The word is in the singular. It does not refer to specific actions but to an all-encompassing approach. We are to be concerned with how we live all aspects of our lives in light of the faith we have embraced. This is the work of faith.

The word "love" has many nuances in the New Testament. Here Paul gives it an orientation to the present. To labor in love, in this sense, means to have practical concerns for the needs of people here and now. The new Thessalonian Christians rightly grasped that such love was a powerful testimony to the love of God.

The word "hope" has many nuances in the New Testament. Here Paul gives it an orientation to the future. To have hope, in this sense, means having the strength to endure the difficulties of this life because we can look forward to an eternal home and joy-filled fellowship with God and God's people in the world to come. It is to cling to the promise of God knowing that there is nothing in creation that can destroy it.

Past. Present. Future. Faith. Love. Hope. Christian living or Gospel living is to be characterized by the work of faith, labor of love, and steadfast hope.

After talking about living the Gospel, Paul goes on to talk about how to spread the Gospel. He writes:

Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1:5).

In describing how the Gospel is spread, Paul uses the same pattern as he did when describing how the Gospel is lived. Faith, love, and hope become word, power and

conviction. In order to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ we use the word of faith, the power of love, and conviction rooted in hope.

Word can have a double meaning here. It can refer to the fact that when we tell people about Jesus we need to use our own words rather than some canned approach. But word can also be a reference to the Word of God. Whatever we tell people about Jesus must be faithful to what is revealed in the Word of God – the Scriptures.

Power in this context has to do with the demonstration that something is authentic. It doesn't do any good to tell people that God's love can change them for the better if there is no evidence for this in our own lives. Paul cites the Thessalonian Christians when he says:

You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (1:7).

Conviction has to do with a principle that is followed in spite of adversity such as persecution. We are reminded of the words of Jesus:

In the world you will have great troubles. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

The world is in desperate need of hope but short on answers. It is like the man who went into the hospital for tests, where he learned that he had several highly contagious and incurable illnesses. He was quite upset and asked the doctor what he was to do. The doctor informed him there was only one way to treat him. He would receive a private room and would need to eat veal cutlets and pancakes every day. The patient liked pancakes and veal cutlets but asked, "Why do you want me to eat the same things every day? How will they help me?" The doctor answered, "Oh, they won't really help you. They're just easy to slide under the door to your room."

So the world cannot offer us much hope. The Good News is - Christ came to give us hope. And this hope enables us to hold to our convictions come what may.

In order to spread the Gospel we need to use our own words and make sure those words are consistent with what is in God's Word. But we can't just talk about Jesus. We also need to demonstrate the power of his love in our lives. Finally, we need to encourage a response to Jesus based on personal conviction and a confidence to face the future

because we know who holds the future. How do we spread the Gospel? Word. Power. Conviction.

Paul wants to be clear that even if we are faithful in this, our efforts will not bear fruit without the help of the Holy Spirit. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convince people of the reality of Jesus and to enable them to trust in Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 12:3 we read that no one can say Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit. So if you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, be assured you have the Holy Spirit, whether you feel like you do or not.

The Holy Spirit is a person not a thing. The Holy Spirit is not even a force. You cannot have a personal relationship with a force, for example, the force of gravity. Now some of you may think you are on intimate terms with gravity because you have a tendency to drop things or you fall down a lot but that is not the same thing. The Holy Spirit is a person. Jesus addressed him as a person. The Holy Spirit is also divine. When we speak of the Spirit we are speaking of God. And so we say that the Holy Spirit is God making Jesus real to us, showing us who Jesus really is and enabling us to have a personal relationship with him that will last forever. The difference between knowing that Jesus is the Savior of the world and knowing he is your Savior is the personal work of the Holy Spirit.

After addressing living the Gospel, and spreading the Gospel, Paul finally gets around to briefly defining the Gospel. The word Gospel means "Good News." It is a term that refers to the joyous proclamation of God's redemptive activity in Jesus Christ on behalf of humanity enslaved by sin. We sometimes summarize it this way:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16 NRSV).

But what is confusing is that the term "Gospel" also refers to a type of literature – a small book that talks about the life and person of Jesus of Nazareth. Four examples are found in our New Testaments. They are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

So far as we know, the Apostle Paul never wrote a Gospel like Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. But his letters and sermons contain references to God's redemptive activity in Jesus Christ. He did not write a Gospel but he did proclaim the Gospel. In this letter he does this by describing the conversion of the Thessalonians:

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—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming (1:9b-10).

Notice the continued pattern of past, present, and future. In the past we gave our highest allegiance to things and people other than the God who made us. Such heinous rebellion deserved condemnation and death. But God sent his Son into the world to rescue us from this fate by taking upon himself the condemnation and death we deserved. Jesus was raised from the dead and is hailed as Lord. He delivered us from sin and restored our friendship with God and is acclaimed as Savior. By turning from our unfaithful past and committing ourselves to serving God in the present we await the future with joyful anticipation. This is the Gospel which we live by faith, love, and hope; and spread by word, power, and conviction.