

Last Sunday we discussed the guidelines that the Apostle Paul gave the church in Thessalonica and us today for living the Christian life and living in a Christian community. This morning let's see what additional advice Paul gave the Thessalonians and see how it applies to our lives today in the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, all ten verses.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Thessalonica was a major seaport and the capital of the province of Macedonia. It was named for the half-sister of Alexander the Great. The city was located on the major east-west road from Rome to Asia. It was said that the East and West converged there. Thus, the introduction of Christianity and the establishment of a church here was extremely important for spreading the gospel in this region; it was a strategic location. If Christianity could get a foothold here, it could spread both to the east and to the west.

While this letter is brief, it provides some important insight about one of the earliest Christian churches. There is also additional background information on Paul's relationship with this particular church in the Acts of the Apostles. During his second missionary trip, Paul went to Thessalonica from Philippi; his brief stay, no more than a few months, was very successful. However, his stay was not without controversy, as recorded in the 17th chapter of Acts, some unconverted Jews in the city became jealous of his success and tried to seize Paul and Silas, but they escaped.

It is essential that we periodically review the history and characteristics of the early churches to see what we can learn from their successes and failures, and how we compare to them today. I am a firm believer that if we are to grow as a church and serve the Lord as we should we need to return to our roots in the Early Church. Now some of you may be thinking but that was over 2,000 years ago, what can we learn from them? We have grown a lot since then and have become more sophisticated and educated. However, I would argue that you can read all the latest books on church growth and leadership, and follow all the latest fads, but the very best guidance is found in the Bible and the history of the early churches. Look how fast the gospel spread all over the known world at that time from such a small beginning. We can definitely learn a lot from them.

Let's start by looking at some of the issues that Paul was trying to address with the Thessalonians. First, we are told in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians that some of the members believed that Jesus would return during their lifetime, so they stopped working and were letting others support them. This is where Paul said that if a person didn't work, they didn't eat. How many of us have quit working for the Lord because we unfortunately assume that we have already done enough to earn our place in heaven? We falsely believe that we

have punched enough heavenly time cards, and can now sit back and let others carry on the Lord's work here in Rio Rancho. Remember there is no retirement in the service of the Lord; Moses was 80 years old when God called him into service.

Paul also discusses the divisions and disagreements within the church back then. Do we have disagreements in the church today? Didn't Jesus say in John 13:35 that people will know we are His disciples by how we love each other? Unfortunately, disagreements happen in every church. When I was growing up in South Carolina we attended a small Methodist Church. There were only about twenty to thirty members and the church was about the size of this sanctuary but with two aisles. For some reason unknown to their families, my father and Mr. Jeter would not speak to each other and sat on opposite ends of the church. They heard the same sermons on loving each other but didn't listen.

Let's be honest, as human beings we tend to carry our emotions on our sleeves. Is there somebody that you aren't speaking to? Are we not listening to Jesus' call to love one another: to do no harm and to do good? In our pride we tend to forget that we need the fellowship and support of the church as much as the church needs us. While we may disagree on certain theological issues, political opinions, football teams, and other points, we are called to practice agape love, always seeking the best for the other person no matter what. It is good that we have different opinions, but we should never let them get in the way of doing God's will.

Finally, Paul acknowledges the persecution that the Thessalonians were facing. When we accepted Jesus Christ into our hearts and pledged to give our whole life to Him, we opened the door for persecution from the world because we are called to live in opposition to its values and low moral standards. Do you find it difficult to follow Jesus in today's world with all its demands and temptations? While our lives may not be threatened with life or death situations as the early Christians were, over the past few years, we have seen increased opposition to Christianity in our nation. Today, over fifty percent of the people in our country practice no religion. Thus, we each have to make difficult decisions as we strive to be more like Jesus. But don't despair; remember what Jesus promised in John 16:33 – "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Now let's look closely at some of the characteristics of the Thessalonian church and see what we can learn and apply here at High Desert. In the third verse of this morning's text, Paul describes three key characteristics that were often found in the New Testament churches, and hopefully in our church today: their work of faith, their labor of love, and their patience of hope. Their faith was a true and loving faith. They lived and walked each day in faith. Wherever there is true faith, it will always produce results. They trusted God in all that they did. The Thessalonians had discovered the joy of their faith.

They served and worked for the Lord each and every day out of love for Jesus Christ. Of course, no matter how hard we work, we can never earn our salvation; it is a free gift from God because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is offered freely to all who will believe and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. As we sang earlier: "Freely, freely we have received, freely, freely we give." We serve the Lord not out of obligation, but out of love for what He has done and is doing for us. Christianity is not a life to be endured for the sake of duty, but for service to the Lord for the sake of love. The Thessalonians were living testimonies to this fact.

The Thessalonians were undergoing persecution because of their belief in Jesus Christ. However, they remained faithful no matter what hardships came their way because of their hope in Jesus. This hope which was grounded in the promise of eternal life enabled them to endure and keep going. Now this was not wishful thinking, but a firm confidence in the promise that the Lord Jesus Christ will always be with us and will return someday to take us home. As Jesus promised in John 14:3 – "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

A faithful Christian has the power to overcome anything that the world throws their way. When we sing like our ancestors that "my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness," then we can stand up to the world with all its temptations and distractions, and continue to walk with the Lord, to lead the life that He has called us to. A person can endure anything so long as they have hope, for then they are walking not into the night, but to the rising sun. Unbelievable as it may seem, it is possible for a person to live for many days without food or water. However, there is one thing that it is impossible to live without – hope. Jesus Christ is the hope for this world; without Him life is hopeless. The Thessalonians understood this and put their hope in Jesus, and so should we.

Paul wanted the Thessalonian church be a fellowship where God's grace could work in mighty ways; a place where people would be saved and grow in their personal relationship with the Lord. Such a church possesses the deepest peace and the strongest unity. Petty problems are quickly overlooked when the Lord's work is being done. A contagious spirit of enthusiasm prevails in a church where grace is truly at work.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians of his own conduct while he was with them. He not only preached the gospel, he lived it; he walked the talk. Saint Francis of Assisi once said: "Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words." We should live in such a way that we don't have to wear a cross or clerical collar for people to realize we are followers of Jesus Christ. As I have said before, you are a "living Bible." You may be the only Bible that some people will ever read. They will watch how you live and react to the different situations in life. That's why following John Wesley's Three Simple Rules of doing no harm, doing good and staying in love

with God are so critical. As I have said before, more people will come to know Jesus Christ by how you live your daily life than all the sermons that I will ever preach.

Someone once shared with me how their boss commented that they had a sense of power and confidence about them. He asked them what it was and that person replied that it was the Holy Spirit. The boss was not a Christian and was reluctant to accept this explanation; however, this person by their lifestyle had witnessed to him. Do our family, friends and co-workers know we are Christians? Do we reflect Jesus in how we live our daily lives? If we were put on trial today for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict us? Would there be anybody willing to testify for us?

Paul was impressed with what he was hearing about the Thessalonian Church; their hospitality and service to the Lord. The Christian life is to be lived, not just believed. May each of us be able to say with Paul: "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." May we each be like the English missionary whose life was dedicated to serving others. The words engraved on his tombstone read: "This man had the kind of life that only Jesus Christ could explain."

Paul tells the Thessalonians that they had become a model for others churches; word had gotten out about their faith, their labor of love and their endurance. They had become a church worthy of God's praise. A church that matters serves God, witnesses for Him, demonstrates their love for their neighbors by meeting their needs, and keeps the faith alive no matter what. You don't have to beg people to teach Sunday School, sing in the choir, provide refreshments, serve in Pantry, or work on mission projects. In a serving church, volunteers line up to do the work.

Every church of the Lord is called to service and witness. And the Thessalonian Church was a great example to believers all over the province. Paul did not have to tell others about them; they had already heard about their witness, service, and good works. They were an inspiration to other churches. Are we an inspiration to the surrounding community? What kind of reputation do we have? Ask yourselves: "What kind of church would High Desert be if every member was like me?"

Does our church have a witness? Is it an inspiration to others? What do people say about us? A little boy was staring at a big picture of Jesus on the wall of the Sunday School room. He turned to his teacher and said: "It seems that if Jesus lives inside us, He's going to stick out somewhere." Is Jesus "sticking out" of our church? Do others know of our faith, our love, our good works for the Lord? The Thessalonian Church has given us a new hope that one day, when we tell someone about our church, they will say: "I've heard about that church. They really love and serve the Lord there, don't they?"

The Thessalonian Church had some problems, but what church doesn't? Even so, they also had a vital ministry for the Lord. They trusted the gospel, they served the Lord, and they witnessed for Him. Paul was proud of them. They were an excellent testimony to the power of the gospel to change lives; to make a difference for the Lord. Are we a good testimony to the power of Jesus Christ in our lives and the life of this community? Would Paul be proud of us and speak highly of us in one of his letters? But more importantly, is Jesus proud of us and what we are trying to do for Him here in Rio Rancho? May He be willing and able to say: "Well, done, my good and faithful servants." Jesus is watching us; others are watching us; let's keep reaching out in love to this community and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ as we start a new year. Amen