

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Studies in 1 Thessalonians: Effective Christian Listening - 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Hello. Last week we were introduced to the Thessalonian people, their city and circumstances. Three weeks was such a short time for Paul to be with these people (See Acts 17:2), especially remembering that they needed to be taught the truth of God's Word. And yet the Apostle accomplished so much. Now, we are able to look at 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10.

Unity

In his joy in writing to the Thessalonians, Paul would in no way act on his own. There was a unity in the joy Paul had with those who were with him. He gladly shared the good news with them and when he wrote we can perhaps sense him say to Silvanus (or Silas) and Timothy, "I really must write to the Thessalonians and encourage them, for they fill me with joy." His companions could well have replied, "But count me in, count me in! We both rejoice with you, for those believers in the Lord Jesus, in the way they have stood firm to what they have believed, in spite of the difficulties and, perhaps, their lack of understanding about some of the teaching you gave them." "Yes", says the Apostle, "I will try to make some of that clear in the letter too."

Grace and peace

And so he starts with that desire he always had for the gatherings of believers (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Grace, the grace of God, that blessing to which you are not entitled and have never deserved, but God gives it of His own free will; this grace be unto you. Peace also. The peace of God, the peace that controls the mind and maintains a trust in Him, that peace be yours from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Paul delights to bring both the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ together in these things. In the same way today, the Father and the Son act together for the blessing of mankind.

Giving thanks to God

When writing a letter, how often have you begun, as Paul does, with the statement in 1 Thessalonians 2 - "We give thanks to God..." Perhaps our letters are full of the difficulties of the world. But the world was just the same then! Paul knew what it was to be hounded from place to place (see Acts 17:1-15) but he can still say - "We give thanks to God..." (1 Thessalonians 1:2). Why was this? Paul, and all those that were with Him, were so glad that the assembly in Thessalonica had not only received the good news of the work of Christ, but were demonstrating this in their daily living. Theirs was 'effectual Christian living'. This is still required of all God's people today. So he could say "We give thanks to God..." Because of this he prays for them (1 Thessalonians 1:3), remembers them and knows without any doubt that they are true believers. How often we give thanks for good health, freedom from accident and other natural concerns, but the Apostle was much more thankful for the strength and activity of their faith. Surely, this is something we should cultivate.

Power

Now, what is the central thought of the chapter? Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:5. "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." Here is the great work of redemption worked out in their lives. The gospel is often announced in all kinds of meeting places, in churches and in chapels. It comes in words to all who will listen. But when it comes in this way, to some they are just 'words' and to others it has 'power' with it. Some will hear what is said and accept this in a theoretical way. They know the story of the Lord Jesus Christ and His death on the Cross and His resurrection, but that is as far as it goes. The Thessalonians went far beyond this. When Paul preached the gospel, telling them that Jesus died to bear the punishment of God against sin, they each accepted this and said - "For my sin." They, of their own free will, sought forgiveness from sin and desired to do only those things that pleased the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul says "our gospel came ... also in power" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). The power of God to change lives was working in their own lives and it changed them totally. They would never be the same again. Is this so with you too? Then, and only then, can you "give thanks to God" (1 Thessalonians 1:2).

We may well ask from where does this power come? But Paul has the answer, "in the Holy Ghost" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). If the power of God is operating in my life it is because the Holy Ghost, God the Holy Spirit, has worked and is continually working and this is the only source of power. But is there a need to seek this 'special blessing'? No, it is clear from this verse that the "gospel came ... in power and in the Holy Ghost." From the outset, the power of God was available through the work of the Holy Spirit. So the Apostle John speaks of the Holy Spirit in John 16:8: "He will convince the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgement." There is no question of a 'second blessing' when we have already received the power of God, by the Holy Spirit, in salvation. So why, we ask, are we not showing this effectual Christian living as the Thessalonian Christians were doing? Is it because we are hindering the power of the Holy Spirit in our own lives? Paul writes to the Ephesian church, in Ephesians 4:30 "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God." It is so easy to grieve the Holy Spirit where there is lack of self discipline, lack of self judgement, lack of dependence on God. But, of the Thessalonians Paul says "Our gospel came ... in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance" (1 Thessalonians 1:5) It was clearly demonstrated that these believers were daily living in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Work of faith

Now, it is clear that this effectual living was seen in action. Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Paul remembers them in their faith, in their love and in their hope. Three things which demonstrated the reality of the presence of God in them. But there is more. It is not just faith, it is the 'work of faith'. It is an active faith that demonstrates a full trust in God. James says three times in James 2, "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17, 20 and 26). We cannot work to gain faith but, having faith, our works, which are done because we trust God, should demonstrate our faith. So faith in God is proved by what I do. The letter of James illustrates this by referring to Abraham in James 2:21. Abraham proved, or was justified, in his faith when he offered up Isaac (see Genesis 22:1-19, Hebrews 11:17-19). The very fact that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac showed that he fully trusted God. Oh, for the works of faith. Paul says "We give thanks ... remembering your work of faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:3)

Labour of love

But there is more. He remembered their love. No, he remembered their 'labour of love' (1 Thessalonians 1:3), an active love. Here was the love of God, active in them so that they laboured. This took effort which could be painful labour at times. This is true labour, an active concern for one another, for those around. This was an effectual display of what God had done in them, a labour of love. The Lord Jesus told his disciples in John 13:35, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" Perhaps we should all bow our heads in shame as we see so little of this today.

Patience of hope

And then Paul remembers their hope (1 Thessalonians 1:3), again how this was demonstrated in their patience. This hope is not a vague desire that in some circumstances all will be well in the future, but a certain, sure expectation that the coming day will bring glory, fullness of joy, and being actually in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And with this certainty the Thessalonians were ready, waiting patiently for the Lord to bring it all to pass. This is an active hope. Any person with this hope in the forefront of his mind will wish to talk about it!

Paul remembers their "work of faith", their "labour of love" and their "patience of hope" and thus "gives thanks" (1 Thessalonians 1:3), mentioning the Thessalonians in His prayer, for all these things concerned their walk before God, not just before men. I ask myself, is this seen in my life? What a difference the path of the Christian would be if each one showed these characteristics! It is this that Paul remembers of the Thessalonians "without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), a constant joy to him each day.

Step 1: Imitators

Now, in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10, Paul shows how all this "effectual Christian living" has come into being and how it is in evidence. The whole matter is not theoretical only, it is very practical. So when the gospel came to them, in power, through the working of the Holy Spirit, 1 Thessalonians 1:6 tells us that these Thessalonians, Paul says, "became followers of us [that is Paul and his companions] and of the Lord." This is step one. Well, we might say, there you have it the wrong way round. Surely, they became followers of the Lord - first - then of the Apostle and his companions. No, Paul says, "ye became followers of us, and of the Lord." They did not know anything of the Lord without the visit of the servants of the Lord. The practical expression of Christianity, therefore, was first seen in those men and this also helped the Thessalonians to follow the Lord. They became followers, that is, they became 'imitators' (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Because of what they had learned, they wanted to follow exactly the Apostle and his companions. What the Apostle did, they also tried to do because they were anxious to follow him and the Lord. Can you say that others will follow the Lord because of your example?

Moreover, their whole trust in the Lord was in spite of the persecution they sustained during and following the visit of Paul. This trust gave them joy.

Step 2: Examples to others

Then comes the second step. They became examples to others in 1 Thessalonians 1:7. This word is used of a stamp on a coin or the impression of an engraving. How they imitated exactly what they had seen. Their effectual Christian living told its own story to those around. This was not only in Thessalonica but also much further afield. The whole province of Macedonia, of which Thessalonica was a city, and further south into Achaia, also heard of the way these people had turned to God. What a testimony to the whole of Greece! It was not their works or their trials which attracted attention. These may well have been known. But underlying all of these things was their faith, their total trust in God. This is what was clearly broadcast. Yet this goes even further. The very words used in 1 Thessalonians 1:8 lead us to understand that there was a loud unmistakable report, a proclamation of the gospel which reached across the commercial world from the trading city of Thessalonica. Here is the power of God, through the Holy Spirit, at work. A few men, with the Apostle Paul, were chased away in no more than three weeks (see Acts 17:1-9). Satan may have thought that this was another victory but, instead, the gospel now progressed and was spread by those who had so little time to learn all that Paul had to teach them. The power of God was behind it. When this power is allowed to work, there is no failure. Oh, that believers today could allow only the Lord to work in their lives. He would bring the blessing.

This meant that the Apostle and his companions need say very little. Not only was the gospel being spread, but the faith, the total trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, of those at Thessalonica, which accompanied it, was also spread abroad. The work was being accomplished in a way which was out of their hands - by God Himself. And Paul says, "Those to whom we speak are telling us what is happening amongst you"! (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9)

Step 3: Turning to God from idols

The report that was circulated also made clear exactly what had happened. "Oh, those in Thessalonica have begun visiting the synagogue now!" or "They have started gathering together now in some other way." None of these things! Specifically, the Apostle says, "ye have turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9) This is step three. If they had turned from idols to God, this would have put the emphasis and dependence on their own actions. But they "turned to God from idols." He was their great drawing Power. He could sustain their effort. He would keep them in it. There is no comparison between the living God and an inanimate idol.

Step 4: Service

This real power had changed them in their lives, but this same power now directs their outward activity or 'service'. So we have step four. Now what a difference it is to "serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). We may count it a real privilege to be called to the service of the monarch, but this service is for the living God who controls all things by the word of His power (see Hebrews 1:3). Is there any one better to serve than God, who has provided eternal life for all who will trust in Him?

Step 5: Waiting for His Son

Then there is the last step, five. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 says, "And to wait for His Son from heaven." Here again, is their "patience of hope" of 1 Thessalonians 1:3 coming to the fore. They knew they had a future! That future is with "His Son" for whom they are waiting. This is not an abstract matter, this is an assured fact. The Thessalonians were not too knowledgeable on this so the Apostle had to explain this further to them, and also to us, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. But this they knew. Christ is coming from heaven and they, who trusted in Him were looking for and waiting for Him. He might have come in their day. He may come today.

Hebrews 10:37 says "For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come and will not tarry." Are we all ready and waiting for Him? To wait must include patience. According to Matthew 25:13 we know neither the day nor the hour when He will come, but come He will. We need to have that patient expectation that He is coming at any moment, just as the Thessalonians had. They could rely on this because they knew with all assurance that "God had raised Him from the dead" (1 Thessalonians 1:10) The resurrection is one proof.

Yet still there is more! The Lord Jesus was not only raised from the dead; 1 Thessalonians 1:10 tells us that He has "delivered us from the wrath to come." What is this? John 3:36 says, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." The Bible tells us that the time is coming when all those who do not know the Lord Jesus as Saviour must face Him as judge. "[God] hath

appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained" (Acts 17:31).

If He has not paid the price and borne the judgement for our sins then we will bear it ourselves. There is a judgement to come. The wrath is the wrath of God against sinners. This wrath is everlasting and those who do not rest in the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross must face this horror forever. But every believer knows what the Thessalonians knew, that He has delivered us, delivered us from that wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). What joy! This is victory! This is part of the greatest blessing we can enjoy - first He is coming for all who have faith in Him and, second, that the very punishment which was due to us from a righteous God, He has delivered us from it all. We can rejoice; do we rejoice in this?

So we have these five steps. These believers at Thessalonica became followers, imitators of the Apostle and the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 11:1). Then the imprint of their faith went throughout the whole area. They had turned, because of the great drawing power, to God; their effort was actively set on serving the true and living God and, lastly, they were happy to wait for His Son from heaven (1 Thessalonians 1:10). What a tremendous change had taken place. Now their Christianity was a living source of blessing.

May I ask you, as I ask myself as I finish: Is this the condition of your life? Have you begun this life of joy with the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour?

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