

“Gospelizing” the Faithfulness of Christ

Among the Gentiles:

A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians

Diocese of West Texas

Spring & Fall 2010

Study and Reflection Session 7:

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Imitating Christ

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

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 [*pistis*] and labor of love [*agapē*] and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you, 5 because our 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.

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Paul gives thanks for the congregation and encourages them. Paul begins this letter with a customary letter-writing convention of the

first century: giving thanks for what God has accomplished for and among the letter's recipients (Furnish, 40).

- Paul thus sets a much friendlier tone than the one we encountered in our study of the letter to the Galatians, where he failed to include such a "thanksgiving" paragraph because he was very frustrated with his churches in Galatia.
- As we noted in the introduction to the letters to the Thessalonians, there is evidence in the letter that the members of the church are under attack from their Gentile neighbors; knowing this, Paul offers words of encouragement in these opening verses, thus establishing *encouragement* as one of the major themes of the letter (see 2:12; 3:2, 7; 4:1, 10, 18; 5:11, 14).

Paul remembers their "work of faith/faithfulness" (*pistis*) and their "labor of love." In these phrases, Paul highlights the *active* character of the Thessalonians' commitment to the gospel.

- As we have seen in earlier letters, the Greek word *pistis* includes both aspects of "faith" ("trust," "belief," or "confidence") and "faithfulness" (how believers *live* and *embody* their faith).
- We also see that, for Paul, "love" (*agapē*) is not some kind of emotion or inner feeling, but "a total disposition of one's life that involves deliberate choices and determined effort" (Furnish, 42).
- Thus, in this letter, as in all of Paul's letters, there is no hint of any distinction between believing and acting.
- Later (3:12; 4:9-12; 5:15), we hear Paul encouraging the Thessalonians to *grow* in love, not only toward those inside the community, but to outsiders as well.

Paul also affirms the Thessalonians' "steadfastness of hope." As they continue to persevere in their faithfulness and love in the face of affliction, they express their "hope" in the saving power of God.

The gospel came to the Thessalonians in *power*. For Paul, the gospel is not just a spoken “message,” but an *experience* of the power of God and the Holy Spirit that changes people’s lives and reorients them to the service of others.

- The experience of God’s power confirms that God has “chosen” these *Gentile* Thessalonians, a radical departure from the Jewish view of divine election.
- The Thessalonians know that the experience of God’s power reorients people into the active service of others because they “know what kind of persons we [Paul] proved to be among you for your sake” (1:5, emphasis added).

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

1:6 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 [*typos*] 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 [*pistis*] 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 God’s Son from the heavens, whom God raised from the dead – Jesus, the one delivering us from the wrath that is coming.

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

Imitating the Lord. In 1:6-8 Paul introduces a theme that permeates all his letters and teachings: having experienced the life-changing power of the gospel, believers then seek to imitate Christ in the contexts of their own lives.

- Paul imitates the Lord Jesus Christ (see, also 1 Cor 11:1) and serves as a living embodiment of the Lord Jesus Christ for the members of his churches.
- Paul also expects the members of his congregations to imitate Christ.
- In *this* letter (written to Gentiles suffering persecution at the hands of their Gentile friends and family members), imitating the Lord means joyfully enduring persecution at the hands of fellow countrymen (1:6; 2:14).
- In their own imitation of Christ, the Thessalonians have, in turn, become a *typos* for other believers throughout Greece; a *typos* was, literally, a form that had been molded or cast, which could in turn be used to make an impression like a stamp or seal (Furnish, 46).
- Like Paul, the Thessalonians were molded or formed into the likeness of the Lord, becoming examples to others of what the Lord looks like embodied in human lives.
- In v. 8 Paul equates the embodied faith/faithfulness (*pistis*) of the Thessalonians with the “word of the Lord” that has become known throughout the region.

A complete reorientation of life is the “word of the Lord” embodied by the Thessalonians. Having experienced the power of God in the gospel, in 1:9-10 Paul identifies two ways they have reoriented their lives:

- They gave Paul a faithful, hospitable welcome, which included accepting him into their community after his shameful treatment in Philippi (see 2:1) and making room for him to preach and teach them over the course of the many months he was with them.
- They gave up worshiping false gods to serve Israel’s one active God and to wait patiently for the guidance of the risen Jesus in their lives, a path of faithfulness that delivers them from the wrath experienced through human disobedience (Furnish, 51).

Questions for Reflection

1. If you were Paul, writing to *your* church today, what things would you give thanks for? What words of encouragement would you write to your church?
2. What specific “labors of love” might be needed from you and your congregation in the place where you live? What “works of faith/faithfulness” would you need in order to carry out the “labor of love” that you see a need for?
3. Can you identify someone in your own congregation who, like Paul, provides a good example for others of what it look likes to imitate the Lord? What personal characteristics or actions help you recognize that this person is in fact imitating the Lord
4. In 1:9-10 Paul comments on the remarkable welcome he received from the Thessalonians – a welcome so faithful that word of it spread throughout the region. What kind of hospitality is Jesus known for in the New Testament? What are the characteristics or actions of a church that would embody a “word of the Lord?” Can you name a church or an individual whose hospitality has one or more of these same characteristics?