

The Power of Gospel-Driven Ministry, Part 1

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

"You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word," with, "in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but," your faith has gone, "your faith in God has gone forth

everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Every true church is characterized by born-again believers who manifest those three vital Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope. That is to say that every true church is engaged in work, but it's not just a work that's a business; it's not just an activity. This is a work that is faith-generated. This is prompted, generated by belief in God, driven forward by belief in the obedience of faith. There are many works going on in churches all over the country. Not all of them, though, are faith-generated works.

Also, every true church is engaged in labor. Labor is a, a more intense word than the word, work. This is talking about sweat, toil. It's a labor that is sacrificial in nature because it's motivated there by genuine love. True Christians, they're willing to work; they're willing to work hard, and we work to

the point of exhaustion sometimes. We exert ourselves. We sacrifice one another out of *agapé* love. That's the kind of love, biblically, that does what's best for another person.

So the work of faith, the labor of love. Finally, every true church continues steadfastly in hope. Hope. The church endures faithfully in its work. It endures faithfully in its labors because it doesn't look for a present reward. They're not looking, true Christians, a true church, is not looking for an immediate payoff. We look forward to the day that our God will receive us to himself. This is the reward of the Gospel. God is the Gospel. We win him. We look forward to a day when God is going to bring us to him that we might enjoy unbroken fellowship with him forever. That's the hope of the Gospel. That's what keeps us working, keeps us laboring.

The Gospel is not about gaining health, wealth, and prosperity now. As a matter of fact, it's becoming apparent in these days that the Gospel, it may be something that costs us significantly. There's an unbridled activism that's been tearing down any vestige of Christianity in this country for the past

fifty years. And that activism has more recently become institutionalized in both state and federal governments.

As those original activists in the fifties, sixties, seventies in our country, as they have matured, they've gotten into positions of leadership and so they've institutionalized their activism. There's now a revolution afoot, as you know, to embrace any manner of immorality and perversion. That revolution is well underway. The government is ready to enforce it. The society at large, the culture, also eager to join with the government in embracing it, in celebrating it, in enforcing it.

So get ready for the Gospel to cost you. Employers have become increasingly reluctant to hire Christians, and they put pressure on Christians in the workplace to silence their Christianity. Everybody wants to censure us. Everybody wants, wants to push us into the private sector so that we don't talk too openly about our Christianity. They tell us to privatize our religion, and really what they're trying to do is silence the Word of God. They do not want God's voice to have any influence at all, to be heard at all in the marketplace.

But we as Christians, we cannot obey man rather than God. We must obey God. We cannot remain silent. And so it's going to cost us. If we're going to be faithful to God and faithful to his call for us to broadcast the Gospel, if we're going to be faithful to his mandate for us to make disciples of the nations, that means we've got to call people to repent. That means we've got to tell them what sin is. That means we have to point them to exclusive access to God, as exclusively through Jesus Christ. That's going to cost us. That is going to cost us big time.

That's okay with us, though, because if we understand that if it cost Jesus, and it cost Jesus his life, how do we think this is going to go? How do you, how do we think it's going to go for us? If our, if our Leader, if our Master, died at the hands of sinful men, how do we think it's going to go for us? As true Christians, we didn't come to Christ seeking health, wealth, and prosperity in the first place. Not at all. We're not concerned about getting our best life now. As John MacArthur has said, "The only way your best life is now is if you're going to hell." This is not our best life. Right? Our best life is yet to come.

This life, right now, is about the Gospel. It's about extending the glory of God. It's about proclaiming his glory, extending his kingdom through proclaiming the Gospel. We're pilgrims, here, just passing through on the way to our eternal home. And while we're here, we're engaged in the work of faith to win souls for Jesus Christ. We're here, devoted to labors of love, that is, loving God and loving others to the point of even great sacrifice. We're also gonna be steadfast in our hope, enduring suffering as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. If you persecute us, we will multiply. If you jail us, we will sing hymns. If you kill us, we'll rejoice because we're going to be in the presence of Christ.

What is it that explains that kind of an attitude? What is the reason for that mentality, which, frankly, is unheard of in the rest of the world? Look at verse 4. Paul says, "We know, brothers loved by God, that he has," what? "chosen you." God is the only explanation for this. We belong to God because he chose to set his affection on us. He chose to regenerate us by the Holy Spirit. He chose to give us new life, and that new life in Christ is engaged in works of faith, in labors of love, and

steadfastness of hope. The absence of those virtues in someone's life means there is no new life. The presence of those virtues, though, that's the evidence of life. And God is the one responsible for that kind of life.

Paul says in Ephesians 1:4-6, he says, "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." Listen folks, God is the explanation for the church, for its existence, for its persistence, for its preservation to the end. We are and we remain because God has willed it.

The foundation God laid is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's a Gospel that came in Word, in power, in the Holy Spirit, with full conviction, that's verse 5. That's how Paul knew that these Thessalonians were chosen by God, because of their reception of the Gospel. That was the evidence. Folks, not everybody receives the Gospel. When it's clearly explained and clearly understood, many reject it. Most people reject the truth, thereby proving

that they do not belong to God. But those of us who receive the truth, those of us who continue in the truth, you know why we remain? Because it's all of God. This is a work of his. When he does the work, it's permanent, it's unchangeable, it's everlasting. God has chosen us, he's revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

So all glory goes to God for our salvation. All glory goes to him for our endurance in the faith, and for that very reason, Jesus once rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. It says in Luke 10:21, as he was praising his Father, he says this, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

Just like those early disciples, just like those believers in Thessalonica, we also have received the truth as well, "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction." It's from the foundation of that Word, that power, that Spirit, that conviction, from that foundation that's how the church grows. How does the church grow out of this foundation? What is the secret? How does the power of the Gospel



operate? How does the Holy Spirit save and sanctify people for God in and through the ministry of a local church, How does he do that?

Write this down. It's a very simple principle. This is the principle that weaves its way through this text and the rest of these verses, and it's the way in which, humanly speaking, the Word, the power, the Spirit, the conviction, it spreads from one life to another. It's the principle of growth that generates and regenerates and produces everything that we see in God and his church.

It's the principle of, write it down, imitation. Imitation. Not imitation as in a fake; imitation as in imitating someone, right? The principle of imitation and here's how it works; Paul said, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." Christ is the prototype for every Christian. We follow those who followed him. Jesus is the pattern. The Apostles followed him; other Christians have followed them, and so on and so forth until we in our own day, we follow those who follow the same pattern. It's an unchangeable pattern, unchangeable marks of true faith, true regeneration. We would be recognizable to Christians in the

first century for the things they see in our lives, just as they would be here in our day. There's a continuity that goes from the very first Christian all the way to Christians now.

Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:3, he said, "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." He commanded the Philippians, Philippians 3:17, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." It's imitation. It's following. It's looking to them as an example. And that's why Paul he lived very, very carefully, didn't he? He was fastidious about his walk. He was conscious of the fact that others were following his pattern of living.

I think he was conscious of the fact that he, himself, connected to Jesus Christ as the Chief Cornerstone, he was a part of that foundation of the early church. You get the foundation wrong, and the whole building is awry. So Paul knew people are going to be following this pattern of sound words, this pattern of behavior and living. And he told the Thessalonians in the second letter, he told them, "We are giving you in ourselves an example to imitate," and that's because

godly examples, following them, imitating them, it's a command. It's not an option.

We must seek out godly examples, and we must follow them. 2 Thessalonians 3:7 says, "You, yourselves, know how you," here's the word, "ought to imitate us." That's not a suggestion. That's a moral imperative. That's the language of moral obligation: Ought, should, we must.

We've become accustomed to privatized religion in our country, even in our churches, and it's partly due to cultural pressures that want to squeeze us out of the public conversation, so that we compartmentalize our faith, so we have our church life, and then we have a rest-of-the-week life. So there are cultural pressures. But it's also partly due to the fact that Americans tend to have this, to each his own, mentality about the Christian faith.

We want people to follow Jesus Christ in principle, sure, we get really uncomfortable about people looking at our own lives, right, to learn what following Christ should look like.

We want to say, oh, no, please don't, don't look at me. I mean, here's, here's Jesus, here's the Bible and everything, but don't look at my life. I'm so imperfect. Okay. That can be humility because who of us has arrived? Even Paul himself said, I haven't arrived, I haven't attained, I haven't achieved, I'm not there. And yet he said, "Imitate me, as I follow Christ."

Folks, sometimes that's not humility, to point people away from yourself, to turn people from following your example. Sometimes it's based on the fact that you don't want people looking at your life too carefully. Sometimes it's just unfaithfulness. God has called us to live exemplary lives. At some level, I, I know this as a pastor, my family knows this as a pastor's family, we live in a fishbowl. And some pastors say, man, I hate living in a fishbowl. You know what? It's hard living in a fishbowl, but I absolutely love it because you're all looking at me to see if I'm consistent with what I'm teaching. You know what that does? It stirs me on to greater and greater pursuit of faithfulness. I need to live this way, and you know what? You're not off the hook. All of you are living in some form of fishbowl yourselves. People are out there looking at your life to see what you're like, to see how you live, to

see how you talk, to see if your profession of faith is consistent with your practice of faith.

If you're not living an exemplary Christian life, I understand. Just repent. Just repent. Get on the right track. Come alongside with us. We're all doing it together. Call people to follow you as you follow Christ albeit inconsistently, albeit imperfectly. But call people to follow you as you follow Christ. You be an example to other people. That's faithful Christianity. It's the very power and principle of Christian growth. It's right here in the text. This the heart of discipleship, beloved, which is what Christ has called us to do: to go and make disciples. You don't make disciples by just pointing them somewhere else. You say, Come, follow me as I follow Christ.

So let's get started with point one, here: the observation of Gospel-driven ministry. The observation of Gospel-driven ministry. Look at verse 5 again. Paul says, "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you, for your sake."

Paul says, "You know." You know, that's a repeated reference throughout the letter to what the Thessalonians could observe for themselves. That's because Paul and his ministry team, they were with them. They were there personally. They were in the flesh. They didn't conduct mission work by conference call. They didn't do it through Skype. They did it by being there. These were not video-screen preachers; they were there in the flesh. They weren't religious celebrities up on a platform, untouchable from the rest of us common folks, right? They're not viewed from a great distance with no personal interaction, no relationship.

Paul and his companions, they were real flesh and blood people, ministers of the Gospel. Their Christian lives could be seen in living color. People could hear them speak. They could watch them act, be proactive. They could watch them react to situations and pressures, challenges, difficulties, ungodliness. They could see how they acted and reacted. These men, the Thessalonians could observe them up close. They could be known personally, and that's because they shared their very lives with the Thessalonian believers. They were totally open, totally transparent. They held nothing back.

Over and over in this letter, Paul called the Thessalonians to remember to call to mind what they knew to be true. Just look at a couple of verses. Look at 1 Thessalonians 2:1. Chapter 2 verse 1, he says, "For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain." Look at verse 5, "We never came with words of flattery as you know, nor with a pretext for greed. God is witness." So not only are the Thessalonians watching his life. God is witness.

Where's the pretext for greed? Where's, Greed's in the heart. It can be masked to people who see, but he calls God as witness on what's going on in his heart. Remarkable. In fact, look at 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, and just notice how these verses just drip with intimacy, with, with closeness. There's a relationship between the leadership and then this young Thessalonian church. Paul calls them, there, to "remember how," verse 7, "we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us."

When was the last time you heard a pastor or an elder come up to you and say, you know what? I am affectionately desirous of you, and you are very dear to me? You remember," verse 9, "brothers," again calling to mind what they knew, what they could see. "You remember, brothers, our labor and toil. We worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God."

Look at it again in verse 10, "You are witnesses." He's calling them to remember what they saw. You're witnesses, "and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how like a father with his children we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory."

Thessalonians, they knew the character of these leaders. They could see it up close, real life. Paul and his companions, they were on the one hand, they were like tender, nursing mothers with newborn children, sacrificial, sharing their own



lives with them, to only great personal cost, laboring, toiling for their good. The conduct of Paul, Silas, and Timothy was exemplary in every way. They conducted themselves, it says there, in holiness, in righteousness, and in blamelessness. They called the Thessalonians and God himself as a witness to that fact. It's remarkable!

It may seem remarkable to us, but you know what? It's really supposed to be the normal pattern. This is really normal Christianity, right here, that we're talking about. And for it to seem remarkable to us is an indication of our drift. It's really an indictment on us. We need to return to this pattern of shepherding leadership, don't we? Like a father lovingly but firmly exhorts his beloved children, so Paul and his companions, they set the standard for pastors and elders to conduct themselves in like manner.

That's how we ought to be doing it, right there. You say, well, that's the apostolic standard, but that's not the way every Christian is expected to live. I mean, we're not a bunch of stained-glass saints, here. We're just regular people. We have a tendency to want to let ourselves off the hook, don't we?

Make it a little easier for ourselves, drop the bar just a little bit. We can grant that higher bar for Apostles and pastors and elders, etc., if it weren't for the fact that we already read some of the verses that call us all to follow the same pattern. We're on the hook. We've got to live this way, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Regular folks, many of them inconsistent, many of them practicing even ungodliness in the church. He said, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

He commanded the Philippians, as we already read, "Brothers," brethren, brothers and sisters, all of you, "join in imitating me." That is, join with other believers in imitating me. You say, whoa, that's so proud, Paul. You think yourself so high. No. He doesn't because he says in the same chapter, "I don't consider myself as having arrived." Yet he says, "Join in imitating me, keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."

The standard of behavior for the mighty Apostle is the standard of behavior for every regular Christian, me and you. Just regular folks. The standard is Christ. We're to fix our eyes on him. We're to follow along with those who are following

him. There is no lower bar. There is no way to shirk responsibility, here, without being unfaithful.