

The Power of Gospel-Driven Ministry, Part 2

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

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.

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. We're to be examples to others of how to live the Christian life.

Why is that? Why is this so important? Because this growth principle of imitation is all through the New Testament. This is discipleship. We're to disciple others. That is the mandate of the Great Commission: Make disciples of all the nations. This is how God discipled and raises up Christians, through the observation of mature Christians by less mature Christians. That's the principle.

The power of a Gospel-driven ministry it's manifest in the transforming of normal people into godly, exemplary Christian people. That's the principle, those who can be followed, mature Christians who can be looked to for leadership and discipleship. Paul, Silas, and Timothy on their own are nothing special. They're men of flesh and blood; they're people just like us. Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours, right? And yet a mighty prophet of God. He was a man with a nature like ours, though, having been regenerated by the Spirit, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, these men having, having been set apart by Christ for ministry, having been equipped for this work, these men became examples to follow. The Thessalonians had first-hand knowledge about Paul's character, about the character of Silas and Timothy.

Listen, a church is never going to rise above the level of its leadership, is it? Whether in knowledge or in character, you can't go further than the person who is leading you. And through these men, because of their example, the Thessalonian church had every expectation for vitality and fruitfulness far, far into the future. Beloved, in our knowledge and our character. In our character and our competency, we need to be exemplary to you.



Peter commands the elders, 1 Peter 5:3, we're to be examples to the flock. That's because people are watching, as they should. Younger Christians are looking to us as patterns of how to live the Christian life. In fact, they're commanded to do so. The author of Hebrews wrote, Hebrews 13:17, he said, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith."

Your leaders, your pastors, elders, shepherds, consider the outcome of their teaching in the way that they live. Observe their homes. Look at their children. Look at their grandchildren. See how they live. See how they spend their time. See what their disciplines are, their habits of behavior. And consider the outcome of their daily life. Are they producing bad fruit or good fruit? Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." Look at the fruit of their life. As Jesus said Luke 7:35, "Wisdom is justified by all her children." Wisdom is justified, that is, it is demonstrated to be right by its fruit, by its outcome. The benefit of wisdom isn't as much observed in the immediate outcome as much as it is in the long-term outcome. So be patient. Wait and watch. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

This all brings us to a second point. First, the observation of Gospel-driven ministry. Second point, here: the imitation of Gospel-driven ministry. You imitate what you observe, right? We find that in verse 6, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit." The word, imitators, there, it's the word *mimetai*. Okay in the Greek, that's the Greek word, we get the word, mimic, from it. And as the word implies, to imitate or to mimic somebody, it means you observe them, you study them, you even pattern your behavior after theirs, right?

Have you ever seen people who do like comedians who do impressions of famous celebrities and things like that? What is it about them that we really like and appreciate? It's the fact that they get that person right. They've got them down, right? They don't do that just off the top of their head. They have to study that person. They study the movements, the voice inflection, the sound. They study everything, right? And they imitate that, and we find that hilarious.

People who imitate Christ, well they look like him. You become like what you worship, and you want to join in with other people who are worshipping the same Christ, so they can help you along the way. Just as the Thessalonians mimicked Paul, Silas, and Timothy, and those men mimicked the pattern of living set by the Lord himself, in the same way we also want to pattern our lives after godly examples; mature, godly Christians who followed godly examples set for them. Those Christians followed the examples set for them all the way back to the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the head of the church. He's the prototype for all Christian living, right?

There's something very specific, here, though, that I want you to see. Paul isn't just referring to their imitation of the Christian life in general. He gets specific, here. Take a look at verse 6 again because it says that they "received the word," imitating, they "received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit." There are many who would profess to receive the Word, but that profession, when it's tested by affliction, by suffering, by trial, it can wither away quickly, can't it? The real proof of genuineness, it's not just a begrudging resignation to suffering. You know what? Anyone can

growl and, gumb, grumble and complain in the midst of a trial. Any pagan can gut his way through the pain. I certainly did as a young pagan, gutted my way through all kinds of pain. But only Christians can suffer joyfully. Only Christians can embrace affliction and suffering and persecution and, as it says here, “the joy of the Holy Spirit.”

The word, affliction, it’s the word *thlipsis* in the Greek. It comes from a verb that literally means, to press, to squash, to rub down, to squeeze. Have you ever felt that kind of a trial in your life; you felt hemmed in completely, squeezed, pressured? You know what? God is using that to squeeze out the genuineness of your faith. He’s refining you.

This squeezing, this pressure, squashing, we see this picture in Acts 17 when the Thessalonian church itself was planted. These young believers, they didn’t merely face some minor opposition like name-calling and such silly things like that. It wasn’t just about hurt feelings. Jason’s house was attacked. Imagine if a bunch of people from the city surround your house, they break in, and they grab you and drag you out into the streets, accusing with hatred and murder in their eyes.

They dragged Jason before the authorities, and, and they only let him go when they extracted money out of him. That's *thlipsis*, right there. That's affliction. These early believers in Thessalonica, they were pressed down under suffering as the enemies of the Gospel surrounded them, tried to squeeze them in the vice of affliction, tried to rub them out and destroy this young, fledgling church. And rather than recoil from the terror and the fear, rather than doing whatever they could to preserve their health and happiness, which is a natural instinct, right?

The Thessalonians, they leaned into it. Powerful! Young believers, and they endured that suffering. Not only that, but they endured it with great joy. That is not normal human behavior, is it? That's supernatural. You can't explain that reaction any other way. This is a demonstration of the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is something other-worldly that they're seeing right in front of them.

The real proof of genuine faith that comes when we receive the Word, number one; when we receive it in the midst of

suffering, number two; and when we receive the Word in much affliction and additionally with the joy of the Holy Spirit. That is something absolutely remarkable. That is the evidence, the true evidence, of supernatural transformation. That's the mark of regenerative power, the power of the Holy Spirit, the outcome of Gospel-driven ministry.

Listen, every Christian is called to share in the afflictions of Christ to some level. Every Christian is called to endure suffering for his sake, for the sake of the Gospel. As Philippians 1:29 says, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him," that's what's granted to you, that you should believe in him, "but also to that you should suffer for his sake." It's so contrary to so much of what is taught today in many churches.

Listen, suffering is part and parcel of the Christian life. It's not odd to suffer as a Christian. It's actually normal. "As it is written," Romans 8:36, "for your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." Makes me uncomfortable, doesn't it you? I don't want to be slaughtered. I don't want to be dragged from my house and

beaten. But you know what? That's just the natural response. If I suffer for the sake of Christ, we rejoice to be counted worthy to suffer along with him for his name's sake. That's the utmost honor. Jesus died on a cross for me.

Paul says, Romans 8:36, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. And yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." That's because affliction and suffering, it's what prepares the soil for fertility, productivity. In order to go into a field, a virgin field, and you have to break it up, don't you? You have to plow it. You have to pull out all the rocks. You've got to really grind up that soil. I'm sure if the soil had feelings, and that field had feelings, they'd say, you know what? That hurts, you running that plow through me!

But this is how things grow, and in our life. That's why Paul wrote in Romans 5:3-4, "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." It's that hope that we have as Christians in the midst of suffering, sometimes very severe, sometimes very intense affliction. And that, when

we suffer with that affliction with joy, that draws the attention of the world. What, what is that? I've never seen anything like that!

Peter prepares us for that attention, that curiosity, those questions. He writes this, 1 Peter 3:15, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." Set him apart as holy in your heart. That is, he is Lord, he governs my thoughts, my actions, my words. In every situation, he's Lord, so set him apart like that in your heart, "and always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you." How are they going to see the hope that is in you unless you are enduring through suffering? That's the plan. God puts Christians through trials and suffering, and we learn to endure it with joy in the Holy Spirit. That is supernatural, and it draws the attention of the world around us, which gives us what? Opportunity to proclaim the saving Gospel, to see more people saved, more people sanctified.

So how do we learn that? Where did that pattern come from? Well, we've imitated the Christians who came before us, right? We're standing on their shoulders. They imitated the Christians



who came before them, and so on and so forth all the way back to imitating the pattern of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. "It's fitting that he," Hebrews 2:10, "It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through," what? "suffering." If Jesus, the founder of our salvation, if he was perfected through suffering, should we expect anything less for ourselves? No. Not at all. Hebrew 12:2 says, "We look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Listen, this is the mark of the imitation of a Gospel-driven ministry: number one, when people receive the Gospel; number two, when they receive it amid much affliction, even great affliction, severe affliction; number three, when they receive that Gospel, enduring the suffering that it brings with the joy of the Holy Spirit; with deep, unshakeable joy. That's the evidence of spiritual power that Paul saw in the Thessalonian church, which he noted in verse 5, "the gospel that

came not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”

So we observe, we imitate Gospel-driven ministry, the ministry that we’ve received from others. Those are the first two points in our outline. They’re really the power that’s in the engine room of every true church. They’re what fuels us, what makes us go. As we’ve said, this is a reproductive power. It’s a power that’s generated by the Holy Spirit himself, and he produces a like faith in every genuine believer, conforming us all after the image and the pattern of one Person, the Lord Jesus Christ.