

## Study 2 – Book of First Thessalonians

### Topic: Paul's commendations to the Thessalonians

#### Study text: 1 Thessalonians 1: 2-10

Let's look at this text, verse by verse as we study Paul's commendations to the Thessalonians and what we can learn from it individually and corporately as Believers.

#### Verse 2

**Q: What was Paul's attitude toward the Thessalonians? What were they doing for them and how? What can we learn from their attitude?**

1. Paul is a very superlative kind of guy – He does not take half-measures. In these verses, we see such superlatives as **“always” and “constantly.”** You can see that Paul does not just pray for the Thessalonians now and then or when he thinks about it. He intentionally comes before the Lord on a regular and even frequent basis. He is constantly thinking about them, their growth, and their relationship to the Lord.

In fact, Paul did not know most of them very closely. It appears that he was only in that area for about three weeks. And yet, he cared deeply for them. Paul knew they were spiritual babies when he left them and would face many persecutions, temptations, and spiritual attacks. He couldn't be with them personally, so he was left doing the only thing he could do for them: continually come before God's throne and beseech the Father directly on their behalf. We are all acquainted with the idea of prayer. Praying for others is not a new concept. But here, Paul shows a clear example of just how important prayer is and how crucial it is to dedicate ourselves to be faithful and constant prayer warriors.

#### Application:

**When you promise to pray for others, do you pray for them just once?** Perhaps when it comes to mind? A minute here or a minute there? This is not the model of prayer which Paul has set for us. Prayer is our direct link with God. Only He can change people's hearts and bring about spiritual growth. While we should be men and women of the Word who place a heavy emphasis on the Word, we should not do it to the exclusion of prayer. Prayer needs to be a major part of our Christian lives, something we dedicate ourselves to, not just an afterthought.

#### Verses 4-5

**Q: What can we learn from Paul about how to treat brothers and sisters in Christ?**

**Q: What doctrines are revealed in verses 4-5?**

**Q: What does “work of faith” mean? How about “labor of love”? And “steadfastness of hope”?**

2. Paul sets a model of gratitude and optimism— You can see Paul's positive outlook toward the Thessalonians in this chapter. Of course, they were not a perfect church, but he chose to focus on their strengths instead of their weaknesses. As we know, in the case of the Corinthian church, Paul doesn't ignore sins and weaknesses, but at the same time, most of the epistles are overwhelmingly positive as he chooses to focus on the good rather than the bad.

Why does he do this? Why is this important? What lessons can we learn from this?

In fact, there is a **gift of encouragement** (sometimes referred to as exhortation) found in *Romans 12:7-8*.

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*If it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.*

Barnabas seemed to have this gift (Acts 4:36). Perhaps Paul also learned the importance of encouraging others from him. I have been around brothers and sisters who are wonderful at encouraging. They could sense when others were getting discouraged and would always try to remind them of the positive things God had done in and through them. They used their words to lift up others' spirits and help the people around them focus on God's goodness and the many gifts He has bestowed upon us.

How about you? Do you tend to criticize others easily or look at the shortcomings they have or the mistakes they have made? How can you be more of an encourager?

**3. Work of faith** – This is an interesting phrase. A lot of times, people consider faith as passive. Sometimes unbelievers look at Christians and accuse us of being passive or lazy while we wait for God to do things for us. But this phrase shows us that this idea of passivity is clearly wrong. In fact, genuine faith is quite the opposite. Faith drives us to work. It causes us to serve God wholeheartedly. What does faith in God drive you to do? It drives us to try to reach God's standards. Faith drives us to "don't waste your life," as John Piper puts it. True belief in God will push us to work for Him during our brief days on the earth before we enter eternity.

**4. Labor of love** – Here is another intriguing phrase that we often wouldn't think about. Most of the time, people think that love is natural. They believe it is an emotion, a feeling. Once people reach the point where they have to work at it, and it doesn't come easily (like it might during the honeymoon phase of a relationship), they think that they have "fallen" out of love, and it is not even worth continuing the relationship. This idea of love is completely false.

Real love is not easy, and it does NOT come naturally. Our natural inclinations are all selfish. It takes hard work to support your family properly. It takes hard work to take care of the household and deal with all the problems your kids face. It takes hard work for a couple to show proper respect and care for each other after they finish their long workdays. It takes hard work to raise and discipline one's children properly. It takes hard work for a child to care for an elderly parent rather than send him/her to a nursing home.

Love is a labor, but it is a worthy one.

**Application:** Are you putting forth the time and energy you should be to show love to the closest people around you? Who do you need to labor more to love? How can you do this in the coming week?

**5. Steadfastness of hope** – Here is yet another interesting phrase that differs greatly from what we might expect. For many, hope is a temporary thing, a flash in the pan. They may hope for something, and when they don't get it in a very short time, they give up hope and begin to despair. But Paul commends the Thessalonians for being steadfast in their hope. What is their hope? I believe their hope is the same as ours, that all of Christ's promises to believers will come true. Eschatology is an important theme in this book, and here is the first reference to the hope that all believers have. If the Thessalonians already needed to be steadfast in their hope, which they had for only a brief time (perhaps only around a year), how much more should the church, which has been waiting for Christ's return for almost 2000 years, have hope today!

**6. His choice of you** – This is a reminder that every believer is chosen by God, which is something that should be quite encouraging. Next time you are feeling down, remember that God chose you. Next time your brother or sister feels dismayed, remind them that God chose them. We indeed have great reason to rejoice.

**Q: What lessons can we learn from verse 5 which are helpful for sharing the gospel? What came with it and why?**

**7. Verse 5** – Preaching the gospel is not about saying the right words. While we should do our best to present

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it clearly, the best arguments in the world cannot convince anyone to believe. Although Paul was one of the greatest preachers of all time, he was very well aware that his words could not change people's hearts. This responsibility belonged to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes the words of the gospel and uses them to illuminate people's hearts and convict them of sin. See John 16:8.

*<sup>5</sup> because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.*

How could Paul's three weeks at Thessalonica create a strong and vibrant church? It seems almost impossible to us, and yet it happened. How did it happen? How is this possible? It happened because of the Holy Spirit and power. He caused it to happen, not Paul. What lessons can we learn from this? How can we apply this principle to our own Great Commission efforts?

### Application:

**A. We need to be humble tools of God.** Never get puffed up about your amazing gospel presentations or awesome answers to challenging questions. Working for credit or personal glory will hinder the Spirit's work. All the glory always goes to God because He changes hearts.

**B. We must soak everything we do in prayer.** Knowing that we cannot change people's hearts, no matter how good we are at sharing, should push us to our knees. Since it is the Spirit's work, why do we not spend more time beseeching God to do it?

### Q: Should we ask others to imitate us (see verse 6)?

***Vs 6-7** And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup> so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. **NKJV***

***NIV** You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. <sup>7</sup> And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*

### 8. You became imitators of us –

***1 Corinthians 11:1** Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. **NKJV***

*<sup>1</sup> Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. **NIV***

Paul's modelling of the Christian life and ministry for others is not exclusive to this passage. It is a key component of his mission strategy, and he is not shy about it. The idea of modelling tends to make us feel uncomfortable. It can stir up a lot of questions, such as:

- What if I am not good enough?
- Is it prideful to declare myself as a model to others?
- Is it seeking credit and glory if I tell others to follow my example?
- Isn't it enough to have Christ as a model?

### How can we answer these questions?

A. Firstly, if modelling is fundamentally prideful, Paul would not have done it. This was an intentional and well-thought-out aspect of his ministry, which he mentioned on numerous occasions. Therefore, we can conclude that if done properly and with the right motivations, it is a powerful discipleship method that we can also use.

B. Secondly, it is not necessary to be perfect to be a model. If it was, only Jesus could be a model.

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C. Modelling must be done with the right motivations. Certainly, people may seek to get personal credit or glory through modelling. That is a sinful “look at me” attitude. Our motivation should be to help the disciple grow closer to the Lord, not draw attention to ourselves just for the sake of attention.

D. While Christ is the perfect model; He is not someone that we can see right now in front of us. Sometimes it is helpful to see a believer facing the same problems or situations as we are so that we can learn from their examples and experiences.

E. Modelling challenges us in our own spiritual walks. Spurgeon said that before reproducing, we should consider if we want to produce other Christians like we are. Generally, people you teach or disciple will become much like you are. This applies to parenting (“like father like son”) and to spiritual discipleship. Do not give up discipleship because of your own mistakes. Instead, correct those issues so that you can be a better model.

F. We also need to model repenting when we stumble.

**Q: What were the Thessalonians commended for in verse 8?**

**Q: How did their lives change after their belief in Christ?**

9. The Thessalonians then became a model to others

***Verse 8** The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it,*

Look at what happens if modelling is done right! What does this text show us happened? Paul was a model to the Thessalonians, who were, in turn, an example to all the believers in that whole province. We see an example of modelling done right, resulting in reproduction. These saints in Thessalonica learned from Paul that they should obey the Word and pass it on to others. They saw Paul doing this, so they did it too. The outcome was that the gospel went forth into the whole province of Greece and beyond. In verse 8, Paul says that the Word of the Lord has sounded forth. This was not an accidental or incidental spreading of the gospel. It was a powerful, bold, intentional mission. When you think about all the persecutions this church faced in their own backyard from the Jewish troublemakers in their city, their dedication to boldly share the gospel is even more impressive. They had lots of potential excuses, but we don’t see them making those excuses.

Verses 9-10

**To wait for His Son from heaven** – Each chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with an eschatological reference. Jesus’ Second Coming is a central theme in this book. We will be studying it more later on in the book, but the key lesson in this chapter is that they didn’t waste the time they had passively waiting for this second coming. They were growing and rejoicing. They were following Paul’s model. The Thessalonians were modelling the life of a growing disciple to others. They were spreading the Word. Their lives had been transformed, and they were showing it. How about yours?

**Application:** What will you do in the coming week to apply what we have learned in this chapter?