

1st THESSALONIANS

1:1-10

Introduction

Someone once said, *"You can preach a better sermon with your life than with your lips"* (Oliver Goldsmith).

Take out the word "better" and I think it's more biblical to say, *"You can preach a sermon with your life and with your lips."*

There's no denying the power of **personal example** in the Christian life:

1. Jesus frequently said, **"Follow Me."** His call to discipleship was understood to mean that you would follow His **example**. On the night before He was crucified Jesus plainly told His followers, **"I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you"** (John 13:15).
2. The apostle Paul was bold enough to say on more than one occasion, "Be followers of me" (First Corinthians 4:16; 11:1).
3. Paul expanded this idea of personal example to include ordinary believers. In Philippians 3:17 he said, "Be followers together of me, **and** mark them which walk so as ye have **us** for an **[example]**" (KJV).

We read about the power of personal example in our text – only with a new twist:

1 Thessalonians 1:6 And you became **followers** of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit,

1 Thessalonians 1:7 so that you became **examples** to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.

Not only were they given an example to follow; they *became* the example for others to follow! They were the example "to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe," and way beyond that "in every place" (verse 8). Their example extends beyond geography through history all the way to you and I.

You have their example to follow... And, just like them, you **are** an example to follow.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Are To Follow The Example Of Other Believers, and #2 You Are The Example For Other Believers To Follow.

#1 You Are To Follow The Example
Of Other Believers
(v1-7)

As a veteran missionary Paul had established many other Churches prior to his arrival at Thessalonica. This was, however, the only Church he would ever call an "example" to other Churches. The word for "example" can mean a *type*, or a *model*, or a *pattern*. As we study First and Second Thessalonians we will be seeing the typical model for our Church to pattern itself after.

The letter begins sensibly with the name of the writer and his companions:

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 from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul had been a Christian for some eighteen years; he had been a missionary for some eight years. We are picking-up the story of Paul's life during what is called his second missionary journey. He was traveling with "Silvanus" (also called Silas), "Timothy," and Luke. He had last been in Philippi where he and Silas were beaten and imprisoned. Leaving Luke in Philippi the missionaries walked one hundred miles along the Egnatian Way in order to come to Thessalonica.

The account of their journey is given in Acts 17. It is interesting to note that they passed cities along the way – not stopping to share the Gospel. These men were Spirit-led in all of their endeavors.

It was Paul's custom to go into the local Jewish synagogue to preach the Gospel. There he would reason from the Old Testament that the Messiah was to suffer and die to save men from their sins. Then he

would point out how Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies regarding the suffering Savior. A few of the Thessalonian Jews responded to the message, along with a larger number of Gentiles who attended the synagogue services seeking God.

The remainder of the Jews - those who rejected the Gospel - stirred-up trouble for the missionaries. They hired thugs to find them and beat them. They were unable to find Paul but they did make it so that Paul and his companions were forced to leave town.

Paul would later send Timothy back to check on the Church. They met up in Corinth and, hearing the report, Paul wrote this letter.

Paul only spent "three Sabbaths" in Thessalonica - *less than a month*. To put it in perspective: This is our third Sunday here at the new building. At the time of the writing of this letter less than a year had passed. Still he could say that this very young Church was the typical model for all Churches to pattern themselves after!

How did they do it? They were "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." They shared the life of God through Jesus Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

A doctrinal note: Scholars point out that this sentence is written in such a way that makes God the Father and Jesus Christ equal in their deity.

"Grace to you and peace." "Grace" is the undeserved favor of God toward sinners by providing the gift of salvation through the death of Jesus Christ. Only those who have received the grace of God can experience both peace *with* God and the peace *of* God.

1 Thessalonians 1:2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers,

The giving of "thanks" is always a major emphasis in Paul's prayer life. Notice he gives thanks "always for you **all**." We will encounter some odd characters in the Church of the Thessalonians. Paul gave thanks for "all" of them. He held a high opinion of God's people.

In verse three you are given the example to follow:

1 Thessalonians 1:3 remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father,

Paul was "remembering" the *unceasing* "work ... labor... and patience" of the Thessalonians. This is your example.

"Faith" produces unceasing "work." Your faith rests in the past in what God has done for you. Knowing what God has done for you, you are motivated to good works. Good works follow your salvation. You discover good works that God has prepared for you as you walk by faith day-by-day.

"Love" produces unceasing "labor." "Labor" is a strong word that means *exertion, fatigue, and exhaustion*. Your labor relates to the present in your relationship to others. You are to "love one another" to the point of physical exhaustion!

"Hope" produces unceasing "patience." "Patience" is another strong word; it means steadfast *endurance* in the face of severe opposition. Your hope looks to the future. We will see a strong emphasis in these letters to the Thessalonians on the certainty of the coming of Jesus to Rapture the Church.

Working hard for the Lord, even to the point of exhaustion, while enduring opposition. This is a great example to follow! Before you try to follow it, though, *make sure you are a Christian*. "Work," "labor," and "patience" are *performed outwardly*... But "faith," "love," and "hope" must first be *produced inwardly* in the heart of a person who has been transformed by having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Paul was sure his readers were saved:

1 Thessalonians 1:4 knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

Uh, oh! "Election!" It's a doctrine that has divided Christians for centuries - and there's no end in sight to the controversies surrounding it.

Election in Scripture has to do with God selecting out from the human race before creation those who are saved. A few months ago, when

we studied Ephesians, I dedicated most of one of those studies to a lengthy discussion on the various views and how they relate to God's sovereignty and man's free will. I'm not going to repeat that today. Let me just say that the Bible teaches **both** God's sovereignty in selecting and man's free will in choosing. They are simultaneous truths. We might have a hard time reconciling them in our minds; but that does not give us the right to emphasize one over the other. Those who do become extremists and end up in serious error.

There is a famous illustration of these simultaneous truths. It shows a human being standing before a doorway. On the arch over the doorway is written, "*Whosoever will,*" indicating your choice and free will. As the person passes through the doorway and looks back, over the archway is written "*Chosen in Christ,*" indicating God's selection and sovereignty.

Back to Thessalonians... Paul said something remarkable about election. He said he "knew" they were elect. How could he know this? He could know it because of what he said next, in verses five and six:

1 Thessalonians 1:5 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit,

There were certain evidences that a genuine conversion had taken place among the Thessalonians. The evidences were in both the *preaching* of Gospel and in the *receiving* of the Gospel.

The preaching of the Gospel is described four ways:

1. It was done with words. When Paul said, "our gospel did not come to you in word only," he did not mean to minimize the importance of preaching. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."
2. The preaching was done "in power." The word is singular. "Powers" (plural) would refer to miracles, signs, and wonders that accompany preaching; but that is not what is meant. "Power"

(singular) refers to the power of the Holy Spirit upon the preaching to break-open the hard ground of human hearts hearing it.

3. The preaching was done "in the Holy Spirit." This indicates a dependence by the preacher on the Holy Spirit in the preparation and presentation of the message.
4. The preaching was done "in much assurance." This is the confidence of the preacher that he is speaking words that are true.

The receiving the Gospel is described in two ways:

1. "In much affliction." This was not a motivational message or a self-improvement program. The Thessalonians knew the results of receiving the Gospel. The missionaries had recently been beaten and smuggled out of Philippi. They could expect similar treatment at the hands of family and friends. As we progress in these letters we'll see they were severely persecuted for their faith in Jesus.
2. They received the Gospel "with joy of the Holy Spirit." This is supernatural joy given by the Holy Spirit. Joy and rejoicing marked their lives - despite their potential and actual suffering.

Paul was confident in their election. Did this mean he knew that each of them was definitely saved? *Probably not!* Only God knows the heart. It meant that Paul knew a genuine work of God was going on. A Church had been established and people were being saved.

He could confidently say,

1 Thessalonians 1:7 so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.

This Church was the model other Churches ought to pattern themselves after. *It still is!*

It's great to have the model; we need to keep following the example. The modern Church is constantly looking to the world for new methods. We should look to the Word, and especially to this letter.

Remember, though, that two things are emphasized in this chapter: You are to follow the example of other believers, **and**

#2 You Are The Example For Other Believers To Follow (v8-10)

This makes things a little dicey. Whether you like it or not...If you are a Christian then you **are** an example of what it means to be a Christian. Your lifestyle is a message that gets amplified. Paul put it like this (in verse eight):

1 Thessalonians 1:8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

Wherever Paul went the lifestyle of the Thessalonians had already "sounded forth" and "gone out." "Sounded forth" was used of a trumpet blast or a peal of thunder reverberating through the valleys. This does not mean that they sent out missionaries to spread the Gospel. The words are in a passive form, meaning that this was the natural result of their conversion.

Thessalonica was on a major trade route. Travelers were spreading the message that something was happening in Thessalonica among the Christians. Their lifestyle was being amplified by others and was reverberating "in every place."

There's nothing wrong with organized evangelism. We have the Great Commission to "Go into all the world" with the Gospel. But even the Great Commission recognizes the power of your example. We go into all the world to make "disciples" – followers of Jesus and of ourselves. Further, the word "go" means *as you are going*. It refers to the daily life of all believers – not just selected missionaries or ministers. As you are going about your life you are to be an example others can follow.

Your lifestyle is going to get amplified. What kind of lifestyle should it be? We can identify three things: Lifestyle *crisis*, lifestyle *changes*, and lifestyle *choices*.

Lifestyle crisis:

1 Thessalonians 1:9 For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you...

Paul, Silas, and Timothy arrived. Paul began to preach on successive Saturday's in the synagogue. It created a crisis: A decision had to be made. The Thessalonians had to *receive* or *reject* Jesus Christ. There was no middle ground.

The Gospel brings you to a lifestyle crisis. It is the crucial point in your life which determines not just the course of your life on earth but also for eternity. When you trust Jesus Christ as your Savior your crisis gets amplified and reverberates among all those you know or who know you.

Lifestyle changes:

1 Thessalonians 1:9 ...how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

Carefully note the order in which this is stated. They turned "to God" first, then "from idols." They didn't try to reform themselves then come to God. They came to God and were transformed by His indwelling power in their lives.

Bob Dylan wrote a Christian song whose lyric goes, "You gotta serve somebody; it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord... But you gotta serve somebody." You are never free to be your own master; but you are free to choose your master.

With Jesus as your Master you begin a process of discovering things in your life and lifestyle that hinder your walking with Him. These can be considered "idols." We have trouble with the word "idols." We think of superstitious idols and can't identify any in our lives. There are *superstitious* idols; but there are also *sophisticated* idols. They can be an attitude... an ambition... an attraction... an addiction. An idol can be too much of a good thing if it hinders your walk. The Lord will be faithful to reveal them to you. He wants to replace them with something better.

Lifestyle choices:

1 Thessalonians 1:10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *even* Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The imminent Rapture of the Church was an important and foundational doctrine that Paul taught these believers in the short time he spent among them. He mentioned the resurrection to establish that there is a literal, physical coming of Jesus - not just some spiritual change in the heart. The "wrath to come" is the Tribulation that is coming upon this planet following the Rapture. You will be delivered "from" out of it, Raptured, prior to its being poured-forth upon the earth.

The word we want to focus on is "wait." It means to *wait up* expectantly and with great anticipation. All of your lifestyle choices should always be made by keeping in mind that the Lord could come for you at any moment.

Your life and lifestyle – its crisis, its changes, its choices – will be amplified. You **are** an example others will follow. Be a good one.

Conclusion

The communication of the Gospel is to be *visual* as well as *verbal*. We never want to under-emphasize the verbal in the preaching of God's Word. But we must not ignore the visual communication of our lives. The two together – our lives and our lips – preach the sermon that reaches the hearts of those who are perishing.