



SILVER STREET MISSION

Regular Sermon 2006

Something of value

I Thess 1: 1 – 10

Rev. Peter R Green, Sunday morning, 08 Jan, 2006

IS OUR ministry as Christians on a level with selling soap? The famous German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, emphatically denied the idea. Ministry is about bringing Christ's life to the dead.

Of course, if our message is *not* worth marketing, there is something seriously wrong. It is far more than a mere product, but it is certainly something to promote, to publish abroad and to make known with as much effort as marketters put into Coca-Cola or Colgate toothpaste.

But we can't merely copy worldly methods.

Our world is largely opposed to Christianity. For over 150 years, the anti-Christian propaganda machine has been working overtime, and people are believing it. To make matters worse, enough Christians get publicity for everything from silliness to criminality that there is always something to point at.

Never imagine that a neat slogan will carry our message to the world. The world needs to see real Christianity put into action. It needs to see faith, hope and love in abundant measure from God's people.

That little church at Thessalonica, a church we hardly think about most times, is a great example of exemplary Christianity. It is a church which was a good advertisement for the gospel.

That's how God wants his church. He wants it to be a working church, one that achieves what it was made to do.

And that's how the church at Thessalonica was. It was not a powerful church. But it was a functional church through the power of the Holy Spirit, and it was a beautiful church because it was growing in Christ-likeness.

But let's ask ourselves, "What are the true characteristics of a good church?"

Paul gives us some clues.

First, from our passage, we can see what it is that is good about the Thessalonian church; second, we can see what spiritual qualities made it so good, and, third, we will begin to see how those qualities and characteristics were developed.

WHAT GOOD QUALITIES?

First, we can see that the church is good, because Paul is able to thank God always for all of them. More than with most of the churches he wrote to, Paul finds this church to be praiseworthy.

He writes,

1TH 1:2 We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.

The Corinthians needed to be pulled up for their divisiveness; the Philippians tolerated some women who were at each others' throats; the Galatians were struggling with legalism; the Colossians were getting into angel worship and petty religious restrictions. And the Thessalonians didn't have anything much worse than a few people who got too enthusiastic about the coming of Christ.

Work, Labour, Endurance

Then he outlines the things they do that he remembers them for: he says,

³ We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

They are notable for their work, for their labour, for their endurance.

When we talk about work, we are emphasising their constancy and their willingness. When we talk about labour, we are emphasising the energy they put into it. When we talk about endurance, we emphasise the way they keep going despite everything to the contrary.

There are many churches which don't really do very much at all. A woman was talking to me at a local Festival Day, years ago. She was a member of an Orthodox church outside Murrumbidgee, and, when she discovered I was from Silver Street Mission, she said, "Oh, yes! I know about your church! I wish my church were as active in the community as yours is." I was surprised and delighted, but I also knew that, at that time, I would have had to say that about four or five people were truly active in the community. That was enough to give us a reputation. Four or five were enough to make us a working church and not just a functioning church.

But there is always a question of how we are doing our work. Some of us started back at work this week. We had three databases come in, and we had a big server outage on Friday, and there was a fair bit of admin work for us all to do just to get ready for the year.

Yet you couldn't say we were labouring this week. There was a fair bit of joking around. Except to get those databases sorted and out, there were no absolute deadlines. We worked, but we didn't labour. Many churches are like this year round.

Then there is endurance. A while back, one of the databases I work on was massively changed, and I had to re-arrange 4000 rows of data by hand. That added about 12 hours to the job. The Account Director knew the changes had occurred, but just didn't grasp why I couldn't finish the whole job — not just the changes — in about four hours as usual. I came very close to giving an hour's notice and saying, "Do it yourself!"

It took endurance to stay, to work through my lunch break, and to keep at the task.

When we are in Christian work, there are always times when everything piles in on us, and when we feel like giving up everything. That is when endurance is needed.

Conviction, joy, suffering

Then we see that the Thessalonians were marked out by their deep conviction and their joy despite suffering.

1TH 1:4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

It's easy to have shallow conviction, and to live in misery even when things are going our way. I've met people who have been so determined to get happiness that they have never gained it, and have always lived in misery because they couldn't let themselves experience joy.

A model of life and an example of faith

Finally, Paul speaks of them as a model of Christian living and an example of faith.

...you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia — your faith in God has become known everywhere.

One weakness of many Evangelical Christians is that we tend to think about faith, but not think as much about being models of Christian living.

I thought at first that Tim's decision to be baptised this morning was an example of how one person's model influences another person. Stephen was baptised last Sunday, and now it is Tim's turn. I am very pleased to see it, when one person's example encourages another person. When I was baptised, I had been thinking about it for quite a while, but it was when a couple of other young blokes from the church were being baptised that their example encouraged me to follow.

However, I am also very pleased to know that Tim wasn't influenced by Steve, because Tim

wasn't here last Sunday night, and hadn't known that Steve was to be baptised. It was all his own decision.

And that is faith in action, He believed, and therefore he acted.

But what Tim will do today may be an example to someone else. As one of my son's friends used to say, "What goes round, comes round."

WHAT SPIRITUAL QUALITIES?

Faith, love and hope

The three most important things that Paul sees in the Thessalonian Church are its faith, its love and its hope.

You will remember that Paul told the Corinthians that the three lasting things in all of creation are faith, hope and love. Here it is again in his letter to Thessalonika.

³ We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

People who believe, act. As the apostle James wrote,
...faith without works is dead.

People who love also labour.

One of our Melbourne Data Analysts was having a bad week, because an error had been detected. She was working hard to correct it.

That error also affected my work. Louise really went out of her way to help me with it. I told her what a good friend she had been. She replied that one of her friends in the Melbourne office had originally detected the error and had done a lot to help her get onto it quickly and easily.

Louise said that friendship makes all the difference with work.

That's it. When people care about each other, they go a little bit further for each other. Mere work turns into a labour of love.

There have been many times in my life when I have prayed and prayed for someone and then given up, because that person seemed unlikely ever to change.

Here is where hope comes in: hope keeps on believing that things will come right.

Hope is a vital thing in life, and Christian hope is the best of the lot. There are many people who hope to goodness, but that doesn't give any guarantees at all. There are many people who hope by choice, because it is good for them, but they have no promises to rely on.

Christian hope is different, because it is firmly based on the promises and guarantees of God.

Paul is very firm on this eschatological hope, as theologians call it, this hope based on firm convictions about the end of the world in Jesus.

He had heard from everyone about this little, struggling church He said,

They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

THE GROUNDS OF THE QUALITIES

So how did the Thessalonian church come to have such valuable qualities?

Spirit and conviction

The first clue is how the Gospel came to them. It wasn't simply words, but there was power, there was the Holy Spirit and there was deep conviction.

People who start well generally go on well.

Over the last couple of months, we have been seeing a work of the Holy Spirit.

I have seen movements of the Spirit where people trembled, and, on occasion, fell to the floor — not over backwards, but face down in abject repentance. I am not knocking people who fall over backwards — and I am definitely not knocking anyone over in any direction! But I am reporting what I have seen.

We are having a quiet, but powerful move of the Spirit. And you can see what a difference it makes. One of the great things when the Spirit moves is that he moves in people even when they are not physically connected. One person will be in Marrickville, another in Narrandera, but the same Spirit works in the same way in both at the same time.

When we see the Spirit at work, we know from personal experience that our God is real, and that boosts our faith, and faith builds our love, and love and faith together create hope, which encourages us to persevere.

We are convinced of God and that conviction leads to conviction as the Spirit shows us ourselves and shows us our Saviour.

Welcoming the news

The best thing we see about them is that they joyfully welcomed the message of Christ. As it is written,

you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit

We all choose *to* hear the message: we can also choose *how* we hear the message. If we decide to respond joyfully and with expectation, the word will transform our hearts and our lives; if we choose to take in the facts alone, our minds will be nourished, but we will come out like a starving man from a library.

As the hymn writer said,

*Let the Amen! sound from God's people again —
Praise him with loud adoration!*

The choice is ours

Following the pattern

The second thing they did was to follow the pattern set for them by Paul, Silas and Timothy. For a long time we have had few people in positions of leadership who were seen as models to be followed.

Someone said to me the other day, “What you just said was very negative!” And I replied, “Welcome to the world of pessimists.” While we pessimists are proven to have a more realistic outlook than optimists have, people do need optimism, too. And we have models for that; we have people who model a wide range of Christian activities. The Thessalonians followed the examples they saw: we must follow the patterns we see, too. And the world will begin to notice, when they see that it can work!

Waiting in hope

Finally, they were a church convinced that Jesus was going to return, and they governed their lives in that light.

It's easy to get slack, because Jesus still hasn't come. But and expectation of the end will always give us an impulse to obey,

CONCLUSION

The Thessalonians

...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

If we are to model and demonstrate what real Christianity is like, we have to live it.

What have we turned from? What have we turned to? What are we waiting for? What is our hope?

If our God is true; if Jesus is going to return; if the way to avoid the coming wrath of God is to be found in Jesus on that day, what better can we do than to come to Jesus right now?

AMEN