

## **Celebrating a Consecrated Church, Part 2**

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

2019

Turn in your Bible to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, if you will, please. Because of the special nature of this week, we decided to share with you out of this first chapter of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. We're enjoying a very special season in the year, a time of concentrated thanksgiving. And we've tried to focus on the fact that of all the things that we could be thankful for, this year we wanted to express our thanks to God for our church, for our family. This church means so much to all of us. And so we set a time aside last week which we called "Celebration Sunday," and we really were celebrating what God has done in our midst. And I shared with you how I believe this is indeed a church to celebrate. Oh, not because in ourselves we're anything, because we're not; but because by God's amazing grace, He has chosen to pour out upon us very, very unique blessing. We're not like every other church. In fact, we're not like any other church. We're spiritually rich. We're the recipient of boundless mercies. It seems as though there is an endless stream of kindnesses that comes to us from God's hand. And it seemed fitting for us to spend some time thanking Him for our church, for what He's done, what He's doing, what He will do here.

And so, we've concentrated in our worship and our giving on celebrating what the Lord has done. And as a testimony of thanks to what He has done, we have given in order to provide a new building so that we can teach our children and our young people and our adults and our students the things of God so that we can advance His kingdom to His glory.

And as I was thinking about it this week, my mind ran to the Old Testament for some similar celebrations. And I was drawn to the great event of the 35th chapter of Exodus where the tabernacle was to be built. And Moses came before the people there in the beginning of the 35th chapter about verse 4 and he calls to them and he says, "Now all of you that are of a willing heart, I want you to bring for the building of the tabernacle." And he listed all of the things that they could bring. And he said over and over again in that 35th chapter, "Bring whatever your heart tells you to bring, whatever you're willing to do, you do it." And so they brought, and they brought and they brought. And while they were bringing there was a spirit of celebration and a spirit of praise and a spirit of worship and a spirit of adoration. And finally the workmen came in the 34th chapter...or the 36th chapter, rather, came to Moses and they said, "Would you please tell the people to stop. The stuff they have brought is more than enough. Tell them we can't use anymore. It just makes more work." And so he got up and gave the first and last speech of its kind in the history of God's people. That's enough, don't bring anymore.

And when it was built, the 40th chapter of Exodus, the Shekinah glory of God came and dwelt in that place and the cloud filled the congregation so the priest couldn't even minister. And then you go into Leviticus chapter 1 and the people begin to worship. So, worship, celebration was tied to giving and the giving was for the building of a facility to the glory of God.

Later on in the 29th chapter of 1 Chronicles, David comes before the people on the behalf of Solomon, who's still very young and it's time to build the temple. And David says the same thing, takes his cues from Moses, as it were, and says, "Now we want you to bring because we're going to build the temple and we want you to bring gold and silver." And in order to get everything started, David gave an unbelievable fortune. And then the people became struck with what David did and the leaders and the rulers and the people over thousands and the people over hundreds and all the rest of the people began to come and they brought and they brought and they brought and they brought for the building of the temple.

And while they brought, they sang and praised God and worshiped. And it was a great celebration. And it was all because they were building a place to the glory of God.

Well, the place was destroyed when Israel was taken into captivity, but when they came back under Ezra and you come to Ezra chapter 3, it's time to build again. And so, the same message comes forth, the people are called upon to give. And they're called upon to give their money and whatever it is they can to Zerubbabel, who's going to build the second great temple to the glory of God. And they came and they gave and they sang and they praised God.

And these three great celebrations tied to worship and adoration, tied to giving, tied to the building of a facility to the glory of God are reminiscent of what we've been doing. We're not building the tabernacle or the third temple, or the fourth temple, or any temple, but we're building a building no less to the glory of our God. And we've been doing so with hearts filled with celebration and thanksgiving. And we've been doing so by giving from the depth of our hearts. And so we stand in that great tradition of the people of God who gave for the glory of God to build to His honor. So these have been great days.

And in our celebration, we've been particularly focusing on the fact that God is to be glorified for what He's done in our church. It isn't that we've arrived. It isn't that we're perfect. It isn't that we're all we ought to be. But it is true that God has done marvelous things here for which we praise Him.

And in order to find a place in the Word of God that parallels our hearts at this moment, we've been drawn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. The Thessalonian church was a church to celebrate, also, like ours is. And as I told you last week, when I came here nearly 14 years ago, I preached that first month that I was here on 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and I said this is the kind of church I'd like to see here. And I can say now 14 years later that this is the kind of church God is building here. And that great prayer is being answered in my heart. Because the church of the Thessalonians was a church to celebrate and the whole first chapter is really Paul celebrating the church. He's just overjoyed with it.

He writes:

"Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ, grace be unto you and peace from God our Father. We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in all our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of God and our Father; knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For, our gospel came not unto you in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much confidence as ye know what manner of men

we were among you for your sake. And ye became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the Word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit so that ye were an example to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia but also in every place your faith toward God is spread abroad so that we need not to speak anything. For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you and how ye 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, even Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come."

Now that is a paean of praise. That is a celebration. That is a statement of thanksgiving to God for what He's done in that marvelous Thessalonian church.

Now, it's not my intention to give you a closely knit exposition of the flow of the text, but rather to look into this text and to see, as it were, the ingredients that make a church worth celebrating. Because I think they parallel our own church here. And we said basically there are two things. First, the role of the pastors must be right, and secondly, the response of the people must be right. Last week we looked at the role of the pastors. And we saw that as we sensed the heart of Paul and Silas and Timothy who write. And we see implied in what they say and in their heart attitude, three essential responsibilities that pastors must fulfill.

Number one, prayer, notice verse 2, and this marks the right role of a pastor. This is where it starts. "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing." And then he goes on to describe the elements. Unceasing prayer; the right role of the pastor is to give himself to prayer and they did that. And in that sense he functions as the priest, taking the people to God, lifting them to God in prayer, praying continually for their spiritual mastery.

The second thing that marks the pastor who fulfills his biblical role is proclamation, verse 5. "For our gospel came not unto you in word only," it wasn't just a lecture or a sermon or a speech, "but it came in power and in the Holy Spirit and therefore it had with it much assurance," or much confidence. You believed it. It produced in you a settled confidence because it came in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we saw that the pastor is not only the priest who takes the people to God, but he is the prophet who takes God to the people. And if his ministry is to have power, it is to be a ministry filled with the Spirit of God. And the only way the message of God can ever come with power is when it comes in the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of knowledge guiding into truth, who is the Spirit of wisdom applying it to life, who is the Spirit of holiness cleansing the soul and the Spirit of conviction drawing men from sin to the Lord Jesus. It must come in the energy of the Holy Spirit and that church was a church to celebrate because it had leaders who prayed and those who proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, we see here an example of pattern. And that's the third element of the role of a pastor. He says at the end of verse 5, "You know what manner of men we were among you for your sake." In other words, he says you know how we lived among you for your sake, for your sake we lived a certain life. And then in verse 6, "And you became imitators of that and consequently of the Lord whom we are imitating."

And here you see the pastor not as the priest taking his people to God, or as the prophet taking God to the people, but in a sense as the king who sets the pattern for all who are in his care. And he becomes the model, setting the example. And that, by the way, is the sine qua non of all leadership. You can pray for your people and you can preach to your people but inevitably they'll follow the

pattern you set. If the preaching is one thing and the pattern is something else, they'll follow the pattern not the preaching. And so, the pattern must come together to validate the prayer life and the proclamation. And in this assembly it did. These men set an example to them which was an example to follow. And when they followed Paul and Silas, they were following the Lord. Paul said it to the Corinthians, "Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ."

And so, the reason you had a church to celebrate was because you had those in leadership who were committed to prayer, proclamation, and setting the pattern. And I shared with you last week how I think that's really been the key at this church, that God has given us through the years those men who prayed and still do, those men who proclaim the Word of God in the power of the Spirit and still do, and those men who set a pattern to follow. That's half the ingredients for a church to celebrate.

Let's look at the second half. And this has to do with the response of the people. The role of the pastor we looked at last week, now let's look at the response of the people. And this again sort of bleeds out in this chapter. And I just want to be somewhat selective and yet not violate the intent of the writer to show you how he praises God for a people who have had such right responses to those who fulfilled their roles in their midst. And the parallels again to our own fellowship are...are very interesting and very exciting.

The key is verse 3, and as there were three elements in the role of the pastor, there are three elements in the role of the people as well. Verse 3 says and continuing his thought about his prayer that he remembered without ceasing three things: your work of faith, your labor of love, and your endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of God and our Father. They really lived consistent with a relationship with Christ. They really lived under the...under the oversight of God. In other words, they lived under the control of God and an intimacy with Christ. And as a result, these three things marked them: The work of faith, the labor of love, and the patience of hope.

Now let me transpose those into one word: Salvation, service, steadfastness. Those are the three things that mark a church worth celebrating. Number one, salvation; verse 3 says he remembered their work of faith. Now what is this saying to us? Well, basically it is what in the Greek is called an objective genitive. And it could be read this way, "your faith which produces a work. He says, I remember unceasingly your faith which produces a work.

What do you mean by that? What he means is it's true saving faith. You see, there are at least two kinds of faith. There is the faith that produces a work and there are a...is a faith that does not produce a work. And the reason Paul can celebrate the Thessalonians is because they have the kind that produces, so important. What he's saying is they were really saved. They were truly regenerated. They were truly redeemed. They had a faith that worked. They had a fruitful believing.

Now, this faith that works is exactly what James is talking about in chapter 2, so let's look at it. And he'll help us to understand what Paul is saying in those brief words. In James 2:14 we read this: "What does it profit, my brethren, though a man say he has faith and has not works?" Now listen. People have misunderstood this text and there's no need to. It's the same thing Paul is saying in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. He is saying what does it matter, what good is it, what benefit is it for a man to say he has faith when he doesn't have any works? Then it says, "Can faith save him?" Now some people sort of choke on that statement because we want to say, "Oh yes, faith can save him, oh yes, Ephesians 2, 'For by grace are you saved that not of works,' and so forth. Oh yes, faith." But the

implication is this, can that kind of faith save him? What kind? The kind that has no what? No works. In other words, there are at least two kinds of faith. There is the kind that doesn't have any works and there's the kind that has works. So James says, let's say there's a man who says he has faith that has no works, can that kind of faith save him? And the implication in the Greek language is no. In fact, you could even read the last part of the verse, "That kind of faith can't save him, can it?"

You can't be saved by a non-productive faith. In other words, it isn't enough to just believe and say, "Well, I believe in Jesus," unless there is an evidence there. It's the same thing Ephesians 2:8 and 9 is saying, "For by grace are you saved through faith, that not of yourselves, is a gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast." You say, "Oh, it's faith and not works." Yes, faith and not works saves you but it's faith that works because the next verse says, "For ye are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto (What?) good works." We're not saved by works; we're saved unto good works. So there is no saving faith that doesn't work. And when Paul says, "I praise God for your faith that produces a work," he is saying, I'm glad you're truly regenerated, you're not a sham, you're not just saying I have faith you give evidence of it being saving faith.

And then in James 2 he gives an illustration of the kind of faith that doesn't save. "If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food and one of you say unto them, 'Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled.' Notwithstanding, you give them not those things which are needful to the body, what does it profit?" I mean, what kind of a person is going to say I'm saved, I belong to God, I have faith in God and then someone comes along across their path who is literally dying of starvation and you give them a speech about be warmed and be filled while they starve to death and you're closet is full of stuff? James is saying don't tell me that kind of faith saves because it doesn't.

It's the same thing John said when he said, "You say you love God and you close your compassion to one who has need, how dwells the love of God in you?" In other words, there's no...the Bible knows no such thing as a faith that doesn't produce, no such saving faith exists. That's why we've said through the years that you don't walk an aisle and necessarily come...become saved. You don't stick your hand up. You don't say, well, I believe. There's more than that. It is a faith that produces righteousness. That's saving faith.

James says in verse 17, "Faith, if it doesn't have works as a byproduct, is dead because it is alone and faith alone is not sufficient." Now it doesn't mean that faith alone can't save you, it means that faith alone that doesn't produce works can't save you. Saving faith will produce in your life, otherwise it's dead.

And then in verse 18 he shows, "A man may say you have faith, I have works," and there's the dichotomy. One guy stands over here and says I believe you're saved by faith. And this guy says oh, I believe you're saved by works. So, you've got faith over here and you've got works over there and he says, "Show me your faith without your works and I'll show you my faith by my works." He brings two together. He says don't tell me about a faith with no works, there's no such thing. You know, when you see somebody that says, "Well, you know, I...I received the Lord one time and I know I don't live it and nothing in my life gives evidence of it," and so forth and so on. They're not saved because a faith without product is dead.

"Oh," you say, "I believe, I believe." "Well, you do well," verse 19 says, "so do the demons." And they do more than believe, at least they have a work, they shudder. But will you know, oh vain man, oh empty man, oh useless man, that faith without works is dead? And as somebody said, "Corpses do

not make public appearances." And people with dead faith don't come before God.

So, truth in terms of faith is validated by works, the product. Now go back to 1 Thessalonians. And what Paul is saying here is that I am thanking God for your true faith which produces. That's true faith.

And then he gives us four insights into that true faith, looking at it as if it were a four-faceted diamond. Facet number one describes it in verse 9. It says, "How you," middle of the verse, "How you turned to God from idols." This...this real saving faith involves repentance. It involves turning from idols, that is any false belief or false worship, to the true God, the living and true God as it says later in the verse. There is a turning. There is a repenting. There is a conversion. There is a dramatic change. True saving faith is validated by a turning from idols to God.

Secondly, it is further defined in verse 1 when he says to the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Saving faith then turns from idols to the true God and then is intimately in God and in Christ. What a marvelous truth that is. It is marked by an indivisible and eternal union with the living God. "He that is joined to the Lord," 1 Corinthians 6:17 says, "is one spirit." The New Testament says we are partakers of the divine nature. We are joint heirs with Jesus Christ. We are sons of God, children of the Father, brothers of the Lord. Our life is hid with Christ in God. We are one with the Father as the Father is one with the Son. And as 1 John so beautifully says, "We enter into a fellowship and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ the righteous."

So, he says, I thank God first of all for your faith that produces a work. And what is that work that initially is produced? It is a turning from idols to God and an entering into an intimate and eternal relationship and union with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Marvelous.

And then there's a third element. And this moves to the sovereign viewpoint. Verse 4, he says, "Because I can see your work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and in sight of God our Father, I know, brethren beloved, your election of God." He says this is another way to look at your salvation. You've been chosen by God.

You say, "Well, how do you know when someone's elect?" Only one way, you have to go back to verse 3 and see if the product is there. Do you see the work of faith? Do you see the labor of love? Do you see the endurance of hope? That's the stuff that proves they're elect. You can't know until you see that. You can't know whether someone's elect before they believe. You may not know whether they're really elect at the moment they say they believe. The only way you'll know they're elect is when you look at the product of their life. But isn't a mar...it a marvelous thing? He says, "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God." God has chosen you to be beloved. As he says in Ephesians, "You are chosen in the beloved."

And so, he's really affirming their genuineness. They are elect of God as evidenced by their fruitfulness, their work of turning from idols to serve the living true God.

And then there is a fourth element that speaks of the genuineness of their salvation. I think it's so important. Verse 5, "The gospel came in the power of the Holy Spirit and much assurance as you knew what manner of men we were among you for your sake. It came with power." But look at verse

6, "And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the Word in much affliction," or *thlipsis*, tribulation, trouble, "with joy of the Holy Spirit."

Here's another mark of a true Christian. He receives the Word even though it costs dearly. Even though it's in much tribulation and affliction and trouble, he receives it with what? Joy produced by whom? By the Holy Spirit.

And this, I think, is the fourth mark of the genuineness of their salvation is their response to the preaching of the Word of God. When the apostles gave them the Word of God, they received it. The price was very high, but they received it anyway. You know, there are many people today who say they want to be Christians, who say they want to go to heaven and they want to know Jesus Christ and they want, you know, Him in their life, but they are unwilling to conform to the Word of God. And in much of current-day Christianity, they're rewriting the Scripture to fit their own desire. And as Joe Bailey said in a recent article in *Eternity* magazine, he says, "Now we have homosexual theology and we have black theology and women's theology and liberation theology and all these other things. And when the Bible verses don't square with what they want, they just eliminate the Bible verses." That... You wonder at the very heart of that whole thing whether these people are redeemed at all, because they give no evidence of being willing to receive the Word of God no matter what the price and to obey it with joy.

In that same article, he makes a very interesting statement. He says, "The evangelical church is sick, so sick that people are crowding in to join us. We're a big flock now; big enough to permit remarriage of divorced people, beyond the exception Jesus allowed, big enough to permit practicing homosexuals to pursue their lifestyle, big enough to tolerate almost anything pagans do. We're no longer narrow, it's a wide road of popular acceptance for us," end quote.

Well, he's really reflecting the sign of our time, that instead of receiving the Word of God no matter what it asks and take the tribulation that comes or the price you have to pay and doing it with joy in the Spirit of God, you want to twist the Bible so that it's comfortable for your own lifestyle. I question whether that's a mark of genuine Christianity. These dear people paid a price to receive it. Let's find out.

Go back to Acts 17. Let's see how they were born. Acts 17 says, "And when Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica." They're in the area of Macedonia, modern Greece. "There was a synagogue of the Jews there and Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures." So, he's only there two weeks, a Sabbath on each end and one in the middle. That's all he had with these people. He went in there and he had been chased out of synagogues all over the place, but he went right back again into his synagogue knowing what he would get. He went in there, reasoned out of the Scriptures, dialogued with them, taught them. And the main theme, verse 3, "He was opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered." He showed them the Messiah had to die, talked about the death of Jesus Christ and how God raised Him from the dead. "And that this Jesus whom I preach is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, and some of the Jews believed and they associated," is what that says, "with Paul and Silas." The church was born.

And even devout Greeks, and those would be those devout Greeks who had come to be proselytes to Judaism, many of them, a great multitude believed and even the chief women, some of them believed. Some of the wealthy dowager types in the city of Thessalonica. And so the church was

born in the first four verses.

In verse 5, "The Jews who believed not were moved with envy," and isn't that what the gospel is supposed to do, prompt Israel to jealousy? Romans 9? "Took unto them certain vile fellows of the baser sort." You know what that means? Market-place creeps, marketplace thugs, the worst, the pits, trouble-makers, rabble-rousers. And they hired these guys to stir up a riot and "they set the city in an uproar, assaulted the house of Jason and sought to bring them out to the people." They wanted to capture all the Christians and bring them out. "And when they had found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren to the rulers of the city crying, 'These that have turned the world upside down are come here also, whom Jason hath received,'" tried to indict Jason for taking them in. And their indictment of these people is that they are trying to overthrow Caesar. Now, of course, they knew the Romans weren't really too interested in the fact that they were different in terms of their theology of the Messiah than the Jews. That was a Jewish issue. But once you got them into the Roman bailiwick and said he was trying to overthrow Caesar, they thought that might be an issue they'd respond to.

They didn't respond. "They troubled the people; and the rulers of the city when they heard these things, when they had taken security of Jason and the others, let them go." They just posted bond and let them go, just posted bail for them and set them loose. And the brethren knew the heat was on. Imagine, these people have only been redeemed for two weeks, some of them may have not even come to Christ till the third Sabbath and they've only been a matter of hours in the kingdom. "But the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night to Berea." So, they get them out of town. Get out of here because it's going to be hot here.

And it was so hot, verse 13 says that "When the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the Word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there and stirred up the people. And they had to send Paul on from there to Athens." So, there was heat in Thessalonica, real heat. This is a baby church. I mean, this is an infant group and the heat is on. Now go back to 1 Thessalonians, let me show you two verses.

Chapter 2 verse 13, "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing because when ye received the Word of God which you heard of us, you received it not as the word of men but as it is in truth the Word of God." What a great statement. "Which effectually worketh also in you that believe." When you get a person who really believes, the Word of God effectually works in them. That's another way of saying the same thing we've been saying. You can tell a person's true faith by their response to the Word of God. If they're not interested in responding to it, they...they're not following what Jesus said in Matthew 16:24, "He that comes after Me must deny himself, take up a cross and follow Me." And the cost is high: Self-denial and cross bearing, reproach. And he's saying the same thing. When the Word is really effectually working in someone, it indicates their true belief.

And then verse 14, "For you, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judea are in Christ Jesus." How did they...how did they become like them? "For you also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews." Oh, the identification point between this church and Thessalonica and those in Judea is that they had equal persecution. Here was a baby church persecuted.

Now what was their attitude? Back to chapter 1, "In the midst of that," verse 6 says, "they received the Word in much persecution, affliction, trouble, tribulation, with joy given to them from the Holy

Spirit." Does that tell you about the genuineness of their faith? No matter what the price, they would pay it. They took it with joy. What a great thing. No price was too high for that little church. It was a church to celebrate because it was a church that possessed true salvation.

And I have to say that in the bottom line of all the things I'm thankful for about Grace Church, it's that. I'm thankful that God has taught us the true doctrine of salvation, that we know what it is to be saved. When I talk to pastors who say I think my problem is I have unsaved men on my board, or when I talk to churches who say we don't know whether a certain staff member is saved, or when you see churches filled with unsaved people, and you see how impotent, how ineffective, how impossible it is to organize the host of the devil to do the work of the Lord, you can thank God for a redeemed congregation. And I see in you the same things Paul saw in the Thessalonians. I see that you've turned from idols to God. I've seen you turn your back on the world and all the things it offers and turn to God. I've seen the intimacy of your union with Jesus Christ and I've seen the product of your life that tells me you're elect of God. And I've seen you receive the Word of God. And even though it means you have to change your life and you have to change your lifestyle and you have to pay a price to do it, I've seen you do that. And I can affirm in my heart that you're a redeemed church. That is not to say that there are not any people who are not saved. I'm sure there are tares sown among the wheat. But there's an awful lot of wheat in this place. And I thank God for that.

And I celebrate the work of the Lord in our fellowship because He's done it. He's done it.

There's a second thing that marks the Thessalonian church as a church to celebrate. Not only keyed on the word "salvation" but the second word is "service." Look back at verse 3 again. He says, "I remember not only your faith which produces a work, but your labor of love." And again it's the same objective genitive, your love which produces wearisome toil, your love which effects wearisome toil.

In other words, you, he says to them, have such a love for God that you don't grow weary in well doing. You're out there doing it to the point of exhaustion. It is love which produces toil. You know, the greatest thing that...that's ever come out of this church in terms of its testimony spreading around the world is the fact that it is a church where the people serve, where the people minister.

I was amazed some time ago, I shouldn't have been but I was, to find out that there were over 9,000 people a week from this church involved in some other activity than a worship service, in some other ministry, or prayer group or Bible study. That you're out there, you're active, you're involved, you're doing the work of the Lord because of the love of the Lord. And I asked one of the secretaries this week to find out for me, if she could, just how many people officially serve with a title of some kind in our church, actually were set in a particular role of service in the church. And I was amazed to find that the figure is bare...is just under 2,000 different people every month are serving the Lord Jesus Christ in some capacity out of this fellowship, lay people, 190 deacons, 201 deaconesses, 136 Sunday school teachers, 200 Flocks workers, 145 people work in special ministries, and on and on and on. And I see the service of love, the service that love renders.

And verse 9 adds to this, doesn't it? The end of the verse, it says that when they were saved, they, too, moved to serve the living and true God. And the word is *douleuō*, to be a bond slave, slaves totally yielded to the will and control of their masters. And Paul could thank God for the Thessalonian church because they were committed to service. They were committed to doing the work. Their faith was real and it worked. And their love was real and it toiled. And the impact of it was marvelous. Verse 6, "You became followers of us, consequently of the Lord whom we're following, because you

received the Word."

And then verse 7, the result is, "You were an example to all that believed." In other words, you became a model church, you became the pattern. You became the model church. First you started out as a *mimētēs*. That means mimic or imitator. And then people began to imitate you. See, here's the pattern. We were imitating the Lord, you were imitating us and the others are imitating you. That's the way it's supposed to be. The leaders imitate the Lord, the people follow the leaders and then the other churches follow the lead of that church that imitates the leaders who are imitating the Lord. And it says in verse 7, you were an example to all that believed. What a testimony, an ever widening circle of influence as they became a model church, a pattern church, a church for other churches to look to in Macedonia and Achaia. Macedonia was their own area. Thessalonica, Philippi and Berea were in Macedonia. Achaia was adjacent, Corinth and Athens were there. And so they became the model in their own area and then the model for the neighboring area.

It didn't end there. Verse 8, "For from you sounded out," it's the Greek verb that means "to echo." "For from you echoed out the Word of the Lord." And that's very important, folks. When you proclaim the Word of the Lord, you want to make sure it's an echo. You want to make sure it's not your own words. You're just a sounding board for God to echo His Word. And they were. And so, God's Word echoed out not only in Macedonia, their area, and Achaia, the adjacent area, but in every place, Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, who knows where? "Your faith toward God is spread abroad so that we don't need to say anything."

Now here's a church two weeks old, Paul and Silas are there. They leave. A year later they write back and they say, hey, before we can open our mouth about you, they're telling us. Located on the Egnatian Highway, the main east-west thoroughfare, the crisscrossing of trade going through that thing, the reputation of that church was spread by land. Located at the point of port, at the Thermaic Gulf, the ships all docking, it was spread by sea. By land and by sea the testimony of the Thessalonians went everywhere so that in every single place they didn't even need to say anything about them because the whole world was finding out. Here was a church that labored out of love, whose faith was genuine and the world was finding out about it. They were the model church. They were the pattern church.

Now, I admit to you that we have never had leadership like Paul and Silas or close. We are not to assume that we are of the quality of a church as the Thessalonians were. But I think the parallels are still there. Grace Church, by God's gracious providence, has become a pattern. It has become a model church, for other churches in California and in the surrounding states and in the United States and all around the world through your lives, through the way you live and through the fact that your relatives come and visit here, or you go around the country and you talk about it. Or you write letters to people. Or our books or tapes or films or seminars or our staff goes to minister. Or the missionaries we send, or the pastors that go from this place, but all of that just keeps the message going around the world that this is a church that is marked by a faith that produces a work and a love that produces toil. And I thank God for that.

Some day, just any day at random you could pick to come into my office and just go through the letters that come in to me personally, to say nothing of the hundreds and thousands of letters that come from the radio and tape ministry, from all over the globe to tell us about how God is using the example of this church around the world. That is not to our credit. God, help us, we haven't got an idea of what to do. This is God's work. But we want to praise Him for it, don't we? Not to do so would

be a sin. We get letters, as I do, from a missionary somewhere in the middle of New Guinea jungle pleading for us to send him material so that he can continue to equip the saints down there after the patterns that have been established here. You get it from the major cities of America, from Europe, from Eastern Europe, from the Orient, South America, Africa, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia. It's a marvelous thing that God has done. Our material's translated now into all...I don't even know that I can even know all the languages. And we're not thanking ourselves. We are not boasting about that, we are praising God for what He's chosen to do. And frankly, folks, it's more responsibility than any of us care to have. And we don't need your accolades, we need your prayers.

Just to bring it down to a personal thing, I received a letter this week that sort of, I think, helps us to get a glimpse of what we're saying. A gentleman writes: "I just had to stop and write you a note of deep appreciation for your labor of love." He didn't know I was going to preach on that point, but it sure fit, your labor of love. He said, "In-depth studies of the Word have made me realize that I have been a babe in Christ practically all my life. I am now 92 years old and was taken into the family of God when I was 11 years of age. And the Bible has been my textbook all these years. But I just didn't get above a certain level. Your studies have made me realize that it has been some subtle sins that I didn't realize I had. Since these have been taken care of, my eyes have been opened and the Word is shining forth in all its glory. I have written these words on the bottom of the last page of the study notes." And here's what he wrote: "As I finish these inspiring studies, I bow in humble awe and admiration with the keenest sense of pleasure and delight in and before the high and lofty one that inhabiteth eternity whose name is holy.

"I'm grateful to God that He's using you in these days of apostasy and I'm ordering the study notes to be sent to every student in the Bethany School," wherever that is. Ninety-two years old, it's wonderful, isn't it, that the Word is sounded out from here. We praise God for that.

So, a church to celebrate is one that's marked by salvation and service. And lastly, it's marked by steadfastness. There's a lot of flash-in-the-pan type operations, a lot of comets in the sky that aren't stars, they just flash and are gone. But the Thessalonians endured. Look at verse 3, "And your endurance of hope," *hupomonē*, to get under the load and stay under it. They had the spiritual staying power. They hung in there tough. That's what that means. They didn't just spark. I mean, they were a sustained flame. I love that. They had a tenacious hope. And again, it's an objective genitive. It should say the hope that produces endurance.

What is that hope? Verse 10, "To wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come." Our hope is that we're waiting for Jesus. I don't know about you but I'm not waiting for an event, I'm waiting for a person, right? I'm not waiting for the Second Coming, I'm waiting for Jesus. It's not...and I think people who get hung up on prophecy are waiting for all of the signs rather than the Savior. But we're waiting for Him, the one who was raised from the dead, Jesus, the one who delivered us from hell and damnation and punishment, the one who is our Savior, we're waiting for Him. And because we believe that He could come at any moment, it keeps us under the load, doesn't it? Because, He says, "I come quickly and My reward is with Me to give to every man." And because He says, "Occupy till I come." And so, we eagerly and anxiously endure.

And that's the way it was with them. They didn't give up. They didn't bail out. They had steadfastness, confidently remaining under the load because Jesus was coming to set up His kingdom and glory. And that gave them spiritual staying power. Let me tell you, you take the doctrine

of the Second Coming out of a church and you'll take all of its motivation out, you'll suck it dead in terms of the drive and the desire to serve God. That's why Jesus when He ascended in Acts 1 said He would come back. And the angels appeared and said, "This same Jesus who was taken up from you shall so come in like manner as you've seen Him go." Why? Because that became the motive for what was going to happen the rest of the history of the church. I'm going, but I'm coming back, and you stay at it until I get there.

So, the work of faith, the labor of love, and the endurance of hope. And do you know, those are the three greatest things? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, "And these are the greatest things: Faith, hope and love." And then he says the greatest of these is what? Is love. But the three greatest things, the three things that only God can produce — true faith, genuine love, faithful hope — He produced in that church. That's why it was a church to celebrate, they had a steadfast hope. And isn't it 1 Corinthians 15:58 that sums up our hope with these words? And I think I'll just read the whole verse to you cause it's worthy of our attention, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord for as much as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." Why isn't it in vain? Because as Christ rose, someday we shall rise to be rewarded as well.

I thank God for the endurance that I've seen at this church. Faithful through the years, not giving up, carrying on the work, being under the load, sacrifices in the family, sacrifices at the job, sacrifices that so many of you have made financially, sacrifices you've made with your time, it's marvelous. If you only knew the people around you who were giving and giving and giving that God's work might be done. And even when it isn't easy, they were faithful.

We're like this church. Thessalonica was a cosmopolitan city, filled with evil, crime, prostitution, abortion, murder and we're in a city like that. But they had leadership in that church that prayed and proclaimed and set a pattern and they followed that pattern. They were truly saved. They were totally lost in the service of the one they loved and they endured under all the pressure because they saw Jesus coming. And I think Grace Church is much like that.

And when you put these two things together, that kind of pastoring and that kind of peopling, you get a church worth celebrating. And I may seem optimistic to some of you, but I believe all that's just prologue and I believe we're on the threshold of what God's going to do in the future. I mean, I think about what God has done to lay the foundation and I just can't believe what the future is going to be like. I'm sort of like the little girl, you know, who went to kindergarten Sunday school, every day...every Sunday when the Sunday school session ended, the teacher had them sing the "Doxology" because she wanted to have them learn that so that someday they could sing it with their parents. And one little girl after weeks and weeks of the Doxology came home and taught it to her mother. Only this is the way she sang it, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise Him all creatures, here we go."

And I think that's where I'm at today, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise Him all creatures, here we go." Let's bow in prayer.

God, You are the living and true God, the only God, the God who has saved us, the God whom we lovingly serve and in whom we enduringly hope. Thank You that You've worked a work here to Your glory. And where there is sin yet, and where there is inadequacy and where there is failure and where there is human wisdom, or stupidity, and where there is inequity and where there is

shortcoming, we pray that You would give attention by Your Spirit to those areas. We're under no illusion that we are all that we should be, but at the same time we strive to be what You would have us to be, thanking Thee that we are what we are by Your grace. We haven't arrived, but we've seen Your hand of blessing. Keep it on us, oh God, keep us faithful in leadership and people that we may know Your blessing and that while we praise You for what You've done, we sense that we're on the threshold and have yet to see greater things in the future. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2017 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).