Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Divine Blessing for a Faithful Church, Part 2
Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Code: 80-173

This morning I am going to take the liberty to change what I had anticipated to speak to you on. I'm having a hard time getting started in 2 Corinthians chapter 11. It's not that I haven't done the preparation; I've been working on it for a couple of weeks. But, I just feel prompted in my spirit to continue the direction of things that I said to you two weeks ago. You remember a couple of weeks ago I wanted to express my gratitude to you and to the Lord for the church. I'm so grateful, and I...I likened our church to the church at Philadelphia, which was the church with an open door, a church that the Lord did not condemn but only commended, and I tried to draw the parallels between the church at Philadelphia in the book of Revelation and our church.

And, I've been thinking about what a blessing this church is and what a wonderful church it is. And after spending time last week with the dear friends from Russia, and having them affirm to me how much this church means to them and how many of you came to me and thanked me for that message which was so encouraging, I decided that maybe I ought to give another one on the same subject. I haven't by any means exhausted my gratitude to God or to you. And a couple of weeks ago, I did mention that another church that is a parallel to Grace, aside from the church at Philadelphia, was the church at Thessalonica. And so, I really found myself unable to escape the fact that I probably need to follow up on that and take you to that church at Thessalonica and show you the parallels.

So, if you'll open your bible to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, I want to give you part two this morning on encouraging the church, a church to be thankful for. And you know, I really do feel mandated by the Lord to do this, because I know that the preacher spends a lot of his time confronting the congregation, a lot of time pointing out sin, a lot of time correcting and training and all of that, and perhaps not an adequate amount of time expressing gratitude to God and gratitude to you for your faithfulness. It has been a remarkable, remarkable life to be a part of this church, for me and for many, many of you. God has singularly and greatly blessed us because of Grace Community Church and what He has chosen to do here. We take no credit for it whatsoever, but are merely the recipients of God's grace and mercy, and the recipients of the kind of blessing that comes to the faithful proclamation and the faithful obedience of the word of God that has characterized this church from its beginning. And, it is right for us to thank God. In everything we are to give thanks. And sometimes, thanks is on the...sort of the last of the list. And, because in the church there are so many problems and so many needs, very often we're done praying before we get to the category of being grateful.

But, I can honestly confess to you, most of my prayers through the years for this church have been prayers of thanksgiving. And certainly, there is much to be grateful for, and we would be unfaithful to the command of Scripture to give thanks if we were not to stop and thank God for our church. This is a beloved church, not only to the Lord, but to me and to all of us, and we need to express gratitude for what God is doing here.

The best way to do that is to look at parallels in Scripture, and certainly, the church at Thessalonica is such a parallel. Let me describe this church to you by simply reading the first chapter. It's just 10 verses. Listen to how the apostle Paul describes this church. "Paul and Silvanus" or Silas "and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come."

The European theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said cynically, "The church is like Noah's Ark. If it weren't for the storm outside, we couldn't stand the stink inside." Well, such a comment indicates that he never attended the church at Thessalonica. There wasn't really any stink inside there. And I certainly would say it's obvious he never attended Grace Church, either.

This church at Thessalonica was a remarkable church. One of the most notable omissions at the outset in the salutation is that Paul does not identify himself as an apostle. He just says, "Paul." In all of his letters, he identifies himself as an apostle, a servant of God, a messenger of Jesus Christ, in order to enforce his authority, because it is intended in the letter that he will bring to bear upon that church some authoritative correction. Not here. He never even identifies himself as an apostle. This is not a letter that needs any authority. He doesn't have to bring his great apostolic bearing upon them. There are no issues to confront, really, the call for such authority. This is a letter of gratitude. It is a

letter of encouragement to a church of believers who were living holy lives, who were loving each other in a Christ-like way, and who were enduring suffering faithfully. This was a noble church. And this first chapter is the initial outburst of gratitude from the heart of the apostle, which he unpacks in more detail through the remaining chapters of the epistle. But, when you read this first chapter, you really catch the passion of this letter, and you catch the character of this church.

Verse 2 sets the tone for everything. "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers." Paul's prayers for the Thessalonian church were prayers of gratitude. He was giving thanks to God always. In other words, it was exclusively thanks, and it was extensively thanks for all of you. This congregation brought him nothing but joy, nothing but gratitude. In chapter 2, he was thankful to God for the way they received the gospel, as it was the word of God, and not the word of men. He was thankful, verse 14, that they had become imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus. He was thankful, that same verse, that they had endured suffering. Over in verse 17, it says he was longing with great desire to see their face, for they were, according to verse 19, his hope, his joy, his crown of rejoicing. Verse 20: "You are our glory and our joy."

Chapter 3 verse 5, he says he could not endure it any longer, finding out about their faith, "for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain." But, now that Timothy has come to see us, he's come from you, he's brought us good news of your faith and love, "and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you." He was so glad when Timothy came and told him everything was as it ought to be, very different from the Corinthian situation, which was a wrenching, heartbreaking experience of a church in disaffection, disobedience and mutiny against the beloved apostle. In fact, in verse 9, he says, "I am speechless. What thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account? You have brought us so much joy; I am speechless to know how to return that joy."

Chapter 4, essentially the same thing, verse 9 he says, "As to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia." Here was a church that was faithful; here was a church that practiced the love of the brethren in its fullness; here was a church that brought Paul tremendous joy. Chapter 5, verse 11, "Encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing." I mean, they were a church that was in every sense a church to be thankful for, and that's why the first chapter is sort of an outburst as he launches the epistle, it's an outburst of reasons for that thanksgiving.

And there are many parallels, I believe, here to our own church, to the goodness and grace of God toward us through all these many forty years of life as a church. This church has always been a church to be thankful for, a church to rejoice over.

And so Paul writes, along with his friend, Silas, who was a Jewish coworker, and Timothy, who was his son in the faith, and he writes to the church of the Thessalonians, and he identifies this church - and this is very important - as "in God the Father, and in the Lord Jesus Christ." In other words, this is a true church. They're in vital union with Jesus Christ. He is expressing living union with the very person of God and Christ. They were a church to whom he could say, "Grace to you in peace," because they had a right to receive God's grace and peace. They were a genuinely redeemed church. They were a beloved church. Verse 4: "Knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." They were an elect church. In other words, all of that is to say they were genuine. They were real. They were a saved group. He says, "You are in God the Father. You are in the Lord Jesus Christ," that is in vital saving union with Him. "You are the recipients of grace and peace. We thank God for all of you." That means as far as we can tell, he didn't know of any tares among the weak, of any disaffection, of any mutiny, of any false teachers, of any false prophets, of any insurrectionists, any heretics. He was thankful for all of them. They were the beloved of God. They were sovereignly loved by God. They were chosen. They were the elect of God. And all of that is to emphasize that the reality was this is a saved community of believers, genuinely redeemed people. And so Paul is so grateful for the fact that this is genuinely the church of Jesus Christ. And in verse 2 he expresses that gratitude to God for all of them, and how he continually thanked God in his prayers.

Now, as the passage unfolds, starting in verse 3 there, it unfolds with a list of the characteristics of this church, and I listed ten of them that we'll work our way through, touching on them only briefly, because there are many of them. These are the ten things that made Paul thankful for this church. And as I worked through those in thinking about this this week, I was struck by the fact that they're all characteristic of our own fellowship as well. And I'm so grateful that this is not a Corinthian church, but that this is a Thessalonian church, and we're going to see that as we see the unfolding of the characteristics of that church. And again, I remind you, this is not a testimony to our greatness, this is a testimony to the grace of God. This is not some kind of tribute to our cleverness or our ability to grit our teeth and hang on. This is a testimony to the power of the Spirit of God, faithfully serving the purposes of God in the work of this church through these years, in spite of our weakness, in spite of our failure. But, if we are to give honor to whom honor is due, certainly we are to give honor to God for what he has done in this place.

Now, let's look at the characteristics that mark a church to be grateful for, and I think mark our church by God's grace to us. Number 1, they had a faith that works. They had a faith that works. Look at

verse 3. Paul says, "We are thankful, always mentioning that gratitude toward God in our prayers, constantly bearing in mind, constantly remembering, first of all, your work of faith." The first thing that comes to mind in Paul's thinking, as he looks at this Thessalonian church, is that their salvation was real and it manifest itself in works. "Work" refers to the deed done. It refers to an act, a deed. It refers to an achievement, *ergon*. And he is saying, "Your faith, your saving faith, the genuineness of your salvation is evidenced in the work that you have done."

Now, Paul makes it very clear that you can't be saved by works. Romans chapter 3, Romans chapter 4, Romans chapter 5, etcetera, etcetera, all through the New Testament, Ephesians chapter 2, Galatians, everywhere in Galatians that is emphasized. Paul makes it very clear he is adamant on the fact that a faith without works saves. Okay? We just want to affirm that. A faith without works saves. You are saved by grace through faith alone. It is apart from works. But, though we are saved by a faith without works, Paul is also clear and adamant that the faith that saves produces works. Ephesians 2:10, "We are his masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God has before ordained that we should walk in them." And James even goes so far as to say, "Faith without those works is dead faith, non-saving faith. It is an illusion." James says, "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, because that's a condition of self-deception."

I can't see the new birth. I can't feel regeneration. I can't touch the new creation. I cannot hear God declare a person righteous. So, how do I know who's saved? You know it by their work. "By their fruit you shall" what? "know them," Matthew 7 says. What distinguishes counterfeit faith from the real thing is righteous deeds. Righteous behavior will be inevitably produced in those who have authentic saving faith. Faith is, by nature, turned and toned toward obedience. So, good works are inevitable, showing the work of God in the heart, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the evidence of real salvation. Yes, we fail, yes, we fall, but never cease from having the disposition to obey and do what pleases God.

This church produced works. These people were saved, and it was evident because they worked. They labored; made their salvation manifest in spiritual works. They were productive. I look at our church and I through the years have been really overwhelmed at the amount of spiritual work that is done in this church; the deeds of love and kindness; the deeds of mercy; the exercise of spiritual gifts; the teaching; the nurturing; training; the building up; the serving; the helping; the ministering has been manifest through all the years. Jesus emphasized this in Matthew 7, when He said, "It's not the people who say 'Lord, Lord,' it's the people who do the will of My Father who belong to Me." And certainly, through the years, this has been a serving, working church.

As you know, early on in our ministry, this church was known as the church with 900 ministers, because they came and looked at us and said, "Everybody is serving. Everybody is working. Everybody is doing things to make this church productive." And, that's the way it has always been. I never cease to be amazed at what comes by way of spiritual production out of this congregation. And even through the years recently, our pastoral staff has shrunken smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and smaller, as more and more of the ministry is taken on by you. You have a faith that works as well, and it's always been that way. This is a working church, people serving relentlessly in this church, here, on our campus, out in the community, and many of you all over the world, in many, many ways. I can't even begin to recite all the myriad of ways that you serve. This has been a serving church since the very, very start. I come here on a Sunday and I'm prepared to preach; but, everything else that goes on here is carried on by you, by faithful folk who do so many, many tasks. This is a church that demonstrates its faith in its work.

Sometimes, people can't believe how active this church is. People always ask me why the parking lot in this church is always full, every day of the week and every night of the week; how these people stay so involved. Sometimes pastors say to me, "How do you do this?" And my answer is, "I don't do this. I just come and do what I do, and they've always been moved to do what God has prompted them to do," and that's so commendable.

Secondly, Paul addresses not only their work of faith, but their labor of love. They had a faith that works, they had a love that labors. The word "labor" is a little different than "work." Work looks at the deed done. Labor looks, rather, at the effort expended. Labor is a term that has to do with arduous wearying toil to the point of exhaustion, *kopos*. And it looks at the effort expended to yield the work done. Why is it that your faith produces such works? Because you arduously labor. And what motivates you? It's your love that motivates you. It's not me up here browbeating you. It's not me putting some legalistic trip on you. It's not me manipulating you to do these kinds of things. It's not a group of people straining and working and pulling and tugging at you to try to force you to do these things under threats. It is rather you motivated internally by the love of Christ and the love of God and the love of the church, laboring out of that love, and it's always been that way. We have avoided legalism, we have avoided manipulation, we have avoided the kind of intimidation that forces people to do things apart from a God-honoring, Christ-exalting, loving motive. And yet, through all the years, people have strained with all their energy to the maximum to serve the purposes of God and do the work of faith in this church out of the love of Christ that is in their hearts, and the love of the people of God around them. Serving the Lord out of love, *agape*, that self-sacrificing willful love has always characterized this congregation.

And that is true of the Thessalonian church, and Paul is so grateful for it. As I read earlier, he says to them, in chapter 4, verse 9, "As to the love of the brethren, I don't even have to write to you. I don't even have to bring it up. It's not a subject that needs to be addressed, because you have it. You love Christ, and you love those that are Christ's, and it's manifest." All of this, the church's ministries, all of this church's ministries, from one end to the other, are dependent on people who do the work of faith because they love enough to labor to do those things.

As I said, we cut down our staff, we trimmed back our staff, and yet we have this almost endless ministry going on that comes from the love of your heart. I love that concept, the labor of love. And it should be true in my life as well. I mean, all of us should be in the labor of love. I know I get paid to preach and to pastor, and that's okay, too; because the Bible says that those who preach the gospel should live of the gospel, be paid to do that, and those who work hard in the word and doctrine are worthy of double honor or double support or pay, and you care for the pastors of this church well to do that. But, the amazing thing to me is you're all uncompensated, and this church is full of thousands of people who work, who toil to the point of weariness — from elders right on down to people who help in the simplest task — and do this without any earthly compensation at all. This is a labor of love. This is certainly...this is certainly the greatest uncompensated work force in the state of California, and I thank God for that. I want in my own life for it to be laboring where I have no earthly reward as well, and that's one of the reasons that I many, many years ago gave myself to the ministry of Grace to You and didn't want to take any money for any tapes or any broadcasts or anything at all that's produced and distributed through Grace to You. That...I wanted to have a labor of love. I wanted to join you and serve the Lord purely and only for that which is eternal.

But, you have been faithful through the years, and that was true of Thessalonica. Their hearts were filled with love toward Christ and toward those who were Christ's, to the point that they were willing to work exhaustively and make great effort to do the work for which they would never be compensated, except in the life to come, which was evidence of the real condition of their hearts; true faith, evidenced by affection for Christ and for Christ's own people.

Thirdly, Paul commends this church not only for faith that works and a love that labors, but a hope that endures, a hope that endures. He says in verse 3, "I am constantly reminded of the steadfastness of your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father." And he's talking about eternity there. You work in the light of eternity. You labor in the light of eternity. You labor for future glory. "Steadfastness" is *hupomon*. It means "to remain under." It has the idea of endurance under difficulty, endurance under literally *thlipsis*, pressure, tribulation. You don't defect. You don't go into a stall. You have spiritual staying power. You stay with it. You are, in the language

of Revelation 2 and 3, overcomers. You are the seed that is planted in the soil and when tribulation comes you don't die. You overcome the trouble. You flourish. You are not like those who defect. First John 2:19, we've been talking about them, those who went out from us because they were not of us. You persevere. You continue.

The Thessalonians were under persecution from the Jews. They were under persecution from their own countrymen. Those things are mentioned in chapter 2 verse 14. It wasn't that they were in a bed of roses. It wasn't that they weren't suffering persecution. It wasn't that there weren't attacks upon them, because in fact there were. But, trouble didn't kill them, because they had their eyes fixed on what was eternal.

You've had struggles. Life isn't the way you want it to be. It doesn't come out all the way you would like to script it. We struggle through things as a church. We've struggled through some grave difficulties through the years as a church. You in your own life have struggled through relationships within the family of God, within your own family at home, in the areas of ministries here. There may have been prices to pay for you from unconverted family members. Who knows what. Life is not going to be the way we would like it to be. But, we're not questioning God, we're not assaulting God. We don't expect a world of comfort, and we are willing to endure whatever comes in this life because we look to the life which is ahead. We are willing to suffer anything in this life because we anticipate the things that God has prepared for them that love Him, and we believe with the apostle Paul that the sufferings of this life are not to be compared with the glory which shall be ours.

And that kind of enduring hope sustains people through the long haul. It's been so wonderful to see this church through all these years from its beginning never wavering, enduring under all the varying pressures with a faith that works, a love that labors, and a hope that perseveres. And here we are all these years later, and you have still been faithful.

Having established those three things as the primary issues reminding us that the three great virtues are faith, love and hope — Paul identifies them as such in 1 Corinthians 13. — he says, "You have the three most important things: Faith that works, love that labors, and hope that endures." And he's really referring to their present condition. You have those. You exhibit those.

In verse 5, he looks back to their past conversion, and this is an important thing as well. This was true of their church and I think of ours also. He says in verse 5, "Our gospel didn't come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction, just as you know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake."

They had powerful preachers. They had powerful preachers. They had a faith that works, they had a love that labors, they had a hope that endures, and they had preachers that were powerful. This is a most interesting point to me. One of the things that made that church what it was, was the power of the preachers that came to them. They had Paul, they had Silas, they had Timothy. This is most interesting. And Paul says, "Our gospel didn't come to you in word only." It has to come in word, but not word only. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word. How shall they hear without a preacher? It has to be in language. God is revealing Himself in words that can be understood in human language. So, they had to hear the words. But, the gospel came to them not just in word. It was, according to 2:13, the word of God's message, the word of the gospel, and it has to be that. But, he says, "Our gospel came not in word only." And, by the way, I want to just mention, he says, "Our gospel." He doesn't say, "We came not in word only," because he really wants to set the messenger aside and emphasize the message. Instead of saying, "We came to you, not in word only, but in power," he says, "Our gospel came," therefore emphasizing the messenger...the message rather than the messenger. The message is the issue to him, not the speaker. The good news of salvation, which these preachers brought, came. And it wasn't just talk. He says, "It came in power, it came in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." You know what you had? You had powerful preachers, you had Holy Spirit-filled preachers, and you had preachers with strong convictions.

You know, beloved, I really believe that is an absolute essential to building a strong church. You just didn't have people who could make speeches, who could speak with polished rhetoric, who were clever communicators or, you know, trained orators. You didn't just hear some truthful discourse. You got more than that. You got men who came to you not just in word, but they came with power, and they came with the Holy Spirit, and they came with strong conviction, so critical. This divine power was woven into the fabric of Paul's life. This divine power was woven into the fabric of Silas' life. This divine power was woven into the very warp and woof of Timothy's life, and Paul is saying, "We were preachers possessing the power of God."

The message itself had power. "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation," Romans 1:16. But the preacher had power, too, because he was devoted and dedicated to Godly living and to holiness. He has here in mind the inward reality of spiritual power in the preacher, making him a mighty preacher, and making the people aware that they were hearing something more than a speech, and they came in power because they came in the Holy Spirit. The two go together. They're utterly inseparable. I mean, totally inseparable. The person behind the power is the Holy Spirit. You could perhaps translate it that he is saying, "Also in power, even in the Holy Spirit."

Those people in Thessalonica, those idolatrous pagans in that city, just going along with their damning life, had some preachers come to town who were not just ordinary men. When they stood up to preach, they were Holy Spirit empowered men, and the preached — I love this — with full conviction. Strongly confident of the truth of the gospel, strongly confident of the reality of Jesus Christ, strongly confident of the saving message, strongly confident of God's divine revelation in Scripture, they came and they preached powerfully under the energy of the Holy Spirit with great conviction. They were confident that the word would not return void but that Isaiah 55:11 would be fulfilled. And you, you have to ask yourself the question, really: What would you be like? Some of you can answer this, because maybe this has been your experience in other places. But, what would you be like if you were exposed to polished rhetoric, fine speech making, even truthful discussions, but, all you ever heard was a weak impotent, fleshly preacher speaking his own clever words without strong conviction and the power of the Holy Spirit? What would you be like? Would it make a difference in your life? You bet.

But, the very experience of the Thessalonians was that they were exposed to men who were powerful, Holy Spirit driven, with full conviction of the truth of their message.

Let me tell you something. I speak as a preacher to you now. When you preach the truth of God, and you experience the amazing power that comes in that preaching...and that's the only way I know to express it. As one of my sons said to me one time, when I preach, I'm something unique, but, the rest of the time, I'm nothing special. He was acknowledging the fact that something happens to the preacher when he preaches; something that is...I don't want toa say it's miraculous. It isn't miraculous, but it is a power that God grants. I find myself saying things that surprise me, and if I sometimes smile when I make a good point, it's because it's the first time I've ever heard it, too. I never cease to be amazed at how the Lord can make my mind work to be saying things that have some biblical profundity, when I don't have time to think about what I'm going to say. It is an amazing thing to have experienced the power of God. You say, "Well, don't you prepare what you're going to say?" I prepare what I'm going to say, but I certainly don't say just what I've prepared. Once you've experienced that, and once you've experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, which results in the conversion of people, and the conviction of people, and the transformation of lives, and once you've preached with real conviction because you believe what you preach and you see what God does in the lives of people, you can't trade that in for a book review, or anything else. I say that to young men. If you'll just spend the opening part of your ministry in faithful exposition of the word of God, you will see the power of God through His word, you will sense the tremendous energy of the Spirit of God as He works through you to convert souls and transform lives, and if you do that with full conviction and you begin to experience what happens when you do that, you will never be able to settle for anything less. But, if you go out and start with some cheap substitute for that, you may get stuck there the rest

of your life. So, the apostle Paul says, "You know the kind of men we were when we came."

What really marks a church to be thankful for is that that church has been exposed to power in the pulpit. And, from the very beginning, Dr. Householder and Dr. Elvey and through all of the preaching that's been done on the pulpit of this church through the years, not certainly just mine, many, many others, this church has experienced powerful, Holy Spirit preaching with full conviction. That has an immense impact.

Number 5 in my little list as we wrap this up, a church to be thankful for also has life that is new. Life that is new. Look at verse 6, "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord." That's really amazing, because the apostle Paul only ministered in Thessalonica for a few weeks, just a few weeks, and it hasn't been very long after that that he's writing this letter back to them, and he says, "You have already become imitators of us and of the Lord." What does that mean? That means they were regenerated. That means they were born again. That means they had newness of life. There was a dramatic change on the inside among these sordid, idolatrous pagans, and these legalistic, self-righteous Jews. They had been revolutionized. They had become Christians and already were manifesting, imitating characteristics of Paul and of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. They had new life. They were imitators of Jesus Christ. They were new creations. It didn't take long. In a few weeks, they were giving powerful demonstration that they had been born again. They were indeed God's elect and beloved, and they had been transformed. “Imitators,” beautiful word from *mimts*, mimics; it means "little copies" of Paul and Silas and Timothy, and of the Lord Himself, evidence of regeneration. They had new life in that church. They were imitating Jesus Christ.

And you know that new life really basically shows up in three areas: Holiness, love, and suffering. And Paul addresses those areas throughout the New Testament as the other writers do. Imitating Christ means imitating His holiness, God's holiness, 1 Peter 1, "Be holy as I am holy." It means imitating His love, "Love one another as I have loved you." It means imitating His suffering; suffer together the way I've suffered. "I've given you an example," Peter says, "of how you ought to suffer." So, when you say they became like Christ, what you mean is they were pursuing holiness, love, and willing to suffer. That was the evidence of their newness. Just a baby church, but all things were new, and they had been transformed out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son. They had been delivered from idolatry, as it notes down in verse 9, turning from idols to serve the living and true God. They had a life that was new.

I love that about our church, I always have loved it about our church. Some people think our church is a teaching church, and we're all wrapped up in a theology, and that the main thing here is to...is to poke around in obscurities of the text of scripture. But, they don't know our church. Primarily, our

church is a place that could approximate a spiritual maternity ward where there's the constant cry of newborn babes in Christ. New life has always abounded in this church, and for that we thank our God.

Number 6 in my list, and looking at Thessalonica, I find another parallel. In verse 6, "You not only became imitators of us and of the Lord," therein marks the transition to new life "but having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." They had a joy that was transcendent. They had a joy that was transcendent. They received the word, that's the gospel, in the midst of severe suffering. You can read Acts 17 about that. That suffering continued, according to chapter 2, verse 14, from their own countrymen, and from Jews. Chapter 3 indicates that it continued even further. 2 Thessalonians indicates some further suffering. In several passages in 2 Thessalonians they had hostilities on all sides. They weren't without suffering. The word used there in verse 6 is tribulation. *Thlipsis* means "severe pressure." The idea is that the pressure was hostile and intense; and yet, in the midst of all of that, he says, "You have the joy of the Holy Spirit." No human joy could survive what they endured. They had to be the true Christians, they had to be the elect, the beloved of God, genuinely made new in Christ, or their joy would never have survived their troubles.

Joy was the evidence of their true salvation. They heard the word with joy, and that joy remained. "The kingdom of God," Paul says in Romans 15, "is joy in the Holy Spirit." I mean, that is so basic. That is so foundational to our Christian experience; and it was true of that church, and it's always been true of our church. I love the joy of this church. Whenever I come here on the Lord's day, people are rejoicing together. There're smiles and happy faces as people talk about what God is doing in their lives, as they share the blessing of God since last they met. There's joy in your singing. Clayton always comments to me about how great it is to lead this choir, and how equally great it is to lead this one, the congregation, and how you sing with such exuberance, because the Spirit of God has prompted you to sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord. Your joy comes through in relationships, it comes through in your kindness to others, it comes through in the way you sing, it comes through in the way you give with such generosity. It's there, it's evident, and it's always been a part of this church. It's always been a happy place. It's always been a place of celebration, always a place of jubilation, no matter how serious I might be or how serious the message might be; and you can hear that seriously, and you do that. There is always a sort of a rebounding joy because you, like Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail, have so much to rejoice about. I thank God for a church filled with joy. No matter how difficult times get, and life is not what we want it to be. My life isn't, and your life isn't, either. I would like to fix the whole world; and I'd like to fix our whole state; and I'd like to fix our city; and I'd like to fix everybody I know just the way I'd like them; and I'd like to fix me just the way I'd like me; and I can't do it. And yet, in the midst of all the suffering, in the midst of all the trials and all the hardships and all the difficulty, and all the unfulfillment, there is an abounding joy in my heart, and I see it in yours and I always have. This church, like Thessalonian...the Thessalonian church is known

by a faith that works, a love that labors, a hope that endures, preachers that are powerful, life that is new, and joy that is transcendent.

Number 7: Behavior that is exemplary. Verse 7, he says, "You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." You became a *tupos*. Type comes from... The word "type" comes from that, model, an exact replica, a reproduction. "You are imitators of us worth imitating, and you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." This is really amazing. Paul wasn't praying for them like he was the Galatians when he said, "I am in pain and agony until Christ is fully formed in you." To them, he says, "You became the example. You imitated us, and now you're worth imitating." And this is a young church. Macedonia was the northern province of Greece where Philippi and Berea were located. Achaia was the southern province of Greece where Athens and Corinth were located. And he says, "No matter where, you are the model. You are the model church to the Bereans, the Philippians, the Corinthians and the Athenians. You're the model. You're the example for others to follow. Your lives are exemplary. You are a living evidence of saving faith. You are an illustration of Christianity and how it ought to work. You show others what they're to be like in Christ." Their behavior was so distinctly Christian, so God-honoring, so Christ-exalting, they not...they were knowledgeable in the truth. They were committed to living that truth to such a degree that others could follow their pattern. And oh how I have rejoiced through the years that God has made this church an example. God has used you to be examples to others here, and across this nation, and around the world. What a blessing.

Number 8, this church was marked by a witness that is strong, a witness that is strong. Look at verses 8 and 9. And here is another reason for his commendation. "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything, for they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you." This is quite amazing, really astonishing. In addition to the exemplary lives they were living, they were bold evangelists. In addition to living examples, they were speaking the gospel. They were proclaiming the gospel. They were really fulfilling the great commission. "The word of the Lord," he says, "has sounded forth from you." Sounded forth, *exchtai*, is a strong word meaning, literally, "to broadcast," very strong term. It was used of a trumpet blast. It was also used of rolling thunder. This is a loud voice. "Out of you was broadcast the gospel. Out of you the gospel came thundering forth." And the tense of the verb indicates a continual sounding forth, the constant echoing of the truth of the gospel, increasingly the wider, and wider, and wider, and wider areas.

I think about all the people from Grace Church who've gone all over this community, and all over this nation, and all over the world; and all of our missionaries, and all of our radio ministry, and all of

everything that's everywhere, and how the word of truth has sounded forth from this place across the face of the earth. It is astonishing to me. It astonishes me that every single day, eleven hundred times a day, we are able to preach the word of God across the world. It's astonishing to me that all twenty-four hours of the day, the message of this pulpit is being proclaimed somewhere in the world, all twenty-four hours of every day. God has allowed us the blessing of sounding forth the truth, and you have been faithful. Your faith toward God has gone forth so that we have no need to say anything, he says.

And then in verse 9 he, says, "Everybody tells us the story everywhere we go. They report to us how we came to you and what happened." In other words, the reputation of this church had reached far and wide. How did that happen? Well, everybody passing through Thessalonica that was exposed to that church carried the message, and everywhere the Thessalonian believers went, the message went with them. And then, what we affectionately call the grace vine took over, and away it went.

This was a remarkable church, the church to be grateful for. No wonder, in verse 2, Paul said, "We give thanks to God always for all of you." A faith that works, a love that labors, a hope that perseveres or endures, preachers that are powerful, life that is new, joy that is transcendent, behavior that is exemplary, and a witness that is strong and reaches out into the world.

Two final identifying marks of a church to be thankful for that I also believe are parallel to our own church: Number 9, a loyalty, a loyalty that submits, a loyalty that submits. In verse 9 he says, "You turned to God from idols." And then I love this part, "to serve a living and true God." That indicates that they had submitted to God. They turned and they served. You turned to God. A verb, by the way, used in the book of Acts repeatedly for conversion, it's a synonym for repentance and faith that leads to a new allegiance. "You turned from," if I can add, to give you the parallel, "you turned from dead and false idols to serve a living and true God. You turned from the dead and the false to the living and the true. You turned from idols to God, and you are serving Him. You are serving Him. You became slaves. Your relationship to God is that of a slave." Here is the reality of transformation: You become slaves of God. Many of these Gentile Christians were former idol worshipers, perhaps most all of them. Their lives were transformed, and so was their allegiance. John Calvin said, "Only the man who has learned to put himself wholly in subjection to God is truly converted to Him." If you're truly converted, you're going to be subject to God. When God converts a man, He changes the entire person, not just the emotion, so that one regrets his former manner of life, but also the mind and the will. With respect to that, he experiences a complete changeover, and all of this becomes apparent in his outward conduct, as he willingly submits himself to the purposes of God.

Becoming a Christian involves a definite break, a new Master and subjugation to that Master, willing subjugation; loyal, loving service. And again, this church has always been obedient. I was talking to a pastor yesterday, and I said, "What is the joy of your ministry? Tell me what is bringing you joy in your ministry?" He said, "My people submit to the Word of God, and that's really all I care about, and therein is my joy." And I have to say that has been true here from the first day I came here, February 9, 1969. To this very day, this church has always submitted to the will of God, and served God, the living and true One.

Finally, this marked the Thessalonian church and certainly marks our church: This was a church looking for Christ's return, looking for Christ's return. Verse 10, "And to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come." It was a Second Coming church, and that's so wholesome. That's so important, to be waiting for His Son, to understand that this life isn't everything. That's what breaks the back of materialism, do you understand that? That's the... That's what breaks the back of getting caught up in amassing worldly well. That's what puts ecology in its right place. I always remind the ecologists, "If you think we're messing up the earth, wait till you see what Jesus does to it when He gets here."

We are waiting for Jesus Christ. We know the end of history. We are known by the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ, and we live in the light of that hope; and whoever has this hope in him purifies himself. We're looking for Jesus Christ. We're not looking for a time of tribulation. We're not looking for the antichrist. We're not living in fear. We're looking for the Savior to come and take His people. And we know He will deliver us from the wrath to come. That final phrase refers to eternal wrath in hell, I believe. We're looking for the coming of Jesus Christ to deliver us from all the judgment to come, and to take us to eternal glory.

Bottom line, we live in the light of eternity. We have eternal perspective here. We are expectant. We believe in the imminent return of Jesus Christ, that He could come at any moment, and we have to live our lives in light of that imminent return. We want to be found faithful when He comes, and He could come at any moment. And I believe living in the light of an imminent return of Jesus Christ has an immense impact on how we live our lives, knowing that Jesus could come at any moment. You've always been that way. This church has always had a strong, strong emphasis on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and that's what creates holiness. And the imminent expectation of the coming of Christ awakens and alerts us, that He could be here any moment, and we want to be found faithful when He arrives.

What was Paul thankful for? What am I thankful for? A faith that works, a love that labors, a hope that endures, a...preachers that are powerful, life that is new, joy that is transcendent, behavior that is exemplary, witness that is strong, loyalty that submits, and looking for the Second Coming, an eager expectation for Christ's return. And these are true of our family of people here, and how grateful to God should we be. How many people languish in a church not nearly so privileged as ours. How grateful we should be.

Beloved, will you just go and somewhere, this day, express your gratitude to God for this church? He has been merciful and gracious to all of us undeserving people. But, because of His goodness, and because of His honoring of His word, and His blessing of your obedience, we have known this full blessing. Now, I'm not under any illusions. While you're thanking God, pray that He'll continue to be faithful to protect us, because the enemy lies at the door wanting nothing more than to destroy what God has wrought. And we want to be watchful in our prayers, even while being grateful.

Join me in prayer. Father, this has been a refreshing time this morning to just rehearse what You've done for us. We are reminded immediately of the fact that to whom much is given, much is required. And we're also reminded that Paul did say to the Thessalonians on several occasions, "Excel still more." We don't want to rest on these things as if we have arrived at some kind of perfection. But, we are thankful for the direction. May we excel even more. May we even be more faithful. Thank you, Lord, for what you've done in this church. We give You all the glory and thanksgiving. In Christ's name, amen.

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