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

What God Wants the Church to Be
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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In thinking about what the Lord might say to us as we begin a new year, in 1976, I was drawn to a very favorite passage of mine, one that I go back to many times. In fact, it's a passage that we deal with in the packet that our first-time guests received tonight, and the very same principles that are there in that packet, and I guess it's been five years or so since I wrote out those little things, and I doubt whether anybody's even remembered what was there. But, I was thinking through those thoughts and realities, and I began to study the book of 1 Thessalonians, and some new things came into my heart and my mind as I was looking through the meaning of the various texts in 1 Thessalonians. And out of it I drew some conclusions about what God wants the church to be. And I thought tonight we might look at the 1st chapter, particularly, and then on into the 3rd and the 4th chapter and draw out some basic principles for the life of Grace Community Church, or for that matter, any church.

If you're a visitor with us tonight, you can take these things back to your own congregation, to the fellowship that you enjoy in Christ. You can apply them in your own personal life, because they're universal principles belonging to the ideal church, or the church that God especially blesses, or the church that fulfills His intended design. And I suppose that it's particularly important as we begin a new year because of the fact that it's sort of in our minds as a fresh beginning. There's something new about it. There's something about the old that sort of fades after January 1st, and we can kind of look ahead with a view toward maybe a new approach, and a new insight, and a new commitment. And maybe this is a good time to look at what our church is, and to look at what God wants it to be, and not just theologically, but to try to make it personal and then to try to make it very practical in terms of what God wants us to do.

We could have studied the Book of Ephesians, because in the Book of Ephesians you have the doctrine of the church. We could've studied Acts, because in Acts you have the history of the church. But in 1 Thessalonians, you have the example of a church that was everything, basically, that God ever intended a church to be. All of the basic ingredients that our Lord wanted in a church were in the Thessalonican congregation, and it is a welcome refreshment to me to spend at least half a week studying Thessalonica after the rest of the week studying Corinth. Because everything that could probably go wrong or possibly go wrong in a church went wrong in the Corinthian assembly, and it wasn't so in the Thessalonian assembly. And 1 Thessalonians just lays out for us the pattern of the church that Christ really built.

Now, to begin with, let me hasten to say there is no reference to numbers in this particular epistle. Doesn't tell us how big the church was or any of their numerical objectives or goals. None of that is described. It tells us absolutely nothing about their programming. It doesn't tell us anything about the kind of sermons that were preached, the kind of music that was done. It doesn't tell us how big their parking lot was. Doesn't tell us about their Sunday school, their worship services. Doesn't tell us about their high school camp. It doesn't tell us about any of those things. But it does tell us about internal things. You know, whenever the Lord takes the temperature of the church, He always wants to know the internal temperature, you know? Somewhere along the line, the Lord puts the thermometer inside, and Thessalonica came out 98.6, normal. And because of that it sets a tremendous pattern for us.

Paul, of course, had preached the gospel to the Thessalonians, and he had sent Timothy back to kind of find out what was going on. You know, he had a great desire to know what was going on in the congregation that he had left, and Timothy came back, and Timothy had a fantastic report. Chapter 3 verse 6, "But now when Timothy came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and love, and that you have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you. Therefore brethren, we were comforted." Paul says, when I got the word about you from Timothy, boy, was I comforted. Did I ever get good news? And what Timothy told him prompted him to write this first letter to the Thessalonians.

To make it even more interesting by way of contrast: this was written from the city of Corinth, which must undoubtedly have been cause for extra joy, to know that whatever Corinth may not have been, Thessalonica was. And I trust as we look at some of these very simple and very basic principles, the Lord will help us to see what it is that He desires from us, and how it is that we can experience those things. How can Grace Community Church or any church or any believer be what God wants him to be?

All right, let's look at some things. First of all, and we're going to stick in chapter 1, at least through the first ten verses, which includes all of that chapter, and we're going to see several patterns for the ideal church. Number one, Thessalonica was a saved church, a saved church. You say, "Well, that doesn't seem to be too abnormal." Well, it is in our age. There are many churches today that don't know the beginning of the meaning of salvation. We've been studying in the last month or more the epistle of Jude. In fact, we've just finished our series on Jude and we're between series. People are asking me what the next one is, and I just tell them I'm praying about it, and the Lord hasn't given me any real clear insight yet. But we'll just hang in there till He does. But we studied Jude, and as we looked at Jude, we found that there is going to be, in the last days, a tremendous amount of apostasy, and the church will abandon the true faith. And we see this all around us. Uniquely, in Thessalonica, we have a saved church, a church truly born again.

Now, that is illustrated to us in the first four verses by the very terms that Paul uses. Let's look at verse 1, and we can't cover everything, but just highlighting the feature that we're kind of after. "Paul and Silvanus," which is another name for Silas, who was his good friend accompanying him on the second journey, "Paul and Silas and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and" - the implication - "in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers." Now, the reason he can thank God for all of them is because all of them are in Christ. This was a totally regenerated congregation. "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father, knowing, brethren beloved" - because of all of these evidences - "your election of God." Now, in those four verses, Paul says, "It is obvious that you're a regenerated group. It is obviously that the tares have not yet infiltrated the wheat. It is apparent by the kind of life you live that you really do know the Lord Jesus Christ." And therein lies the beginning of an effective church.

The reason so many churches are ineffective is because there's a mixture of wheat and tares, very often even at leadership levels. Unregenerate people in places of responsibility only confuse the issue, because that puts God alongside Satan, and that makes it difficult for God and confusing for the people.

Let's go back to Acts 17 and see how all of this began in Thessalonica, and that'll help us. It says in verse 1, "And when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews." And, you know, as we've studied the Book of Acts that we learned that Paul always went to the synagogue first, because there he would find the widest open door, because he himself was Jewish. And so, he could speak to those people. And he also realized that if he went to the Gentiles first, the Jews would never accept him after that. So, he had to go there first. Hopefully, he could win some Jews to Christ, and he could attack the city, not alone, but with some help. So, he went to the synagogue and, "as his manner was, went in and three sabbath days he dialogued with them out of the scriptures." Now, he was only there for three sabbaths, probably two weeks with a sabbath on each end. So, he spent three sabbaths teaching them the Scripture, opening and alleging that Christ must needs to have suffered. Of course, the difficulty that Jews had was accepting Jesus as the Messiah because He died. They had not really understood the meaning of Isaiah 53 or Psalm 22, and that is of the suffering Messiah. They couldn't understand how their Messiah would have to die. And, consequently, they had a hard time accepting Jesus as their Messiah. And so, Paul spent time showing them that the "Messiah must have suffered in order to fulfill His place in God's plan and risen from the dead and then that this Jesus, whom I preach, is indeed the Messiah. And some of them believed, and consorted" - or worked together – "with Paul and Silas, and of the devout Greeks, a great multitude," and even some very important women.

From the very beginning, there was a tremendous response. Only three times did he reason out of the Scripture. Now, that's a short beginning, isn't it? Three sabbaths and he was gone. You say, "Boy, I don't know about that church. I don't know if they'll make it off the ground. I mean what do they know about organization? I mean have they been to any seminars? They're really handicapped. I mean they've only had teaching for three weeks. They're in bad shape." Well, they would be apart from the Holy Spirit, right? So, Paul writes back, and he probably, if he was human like I am, would say to himself, "Now, Timothy, you find out. I'm a little concerned." And Timothy comes back and says, "That place is really knocking everybody dead. That is fantastic what's going in Thessalonica." And he writes back this letter and says, "Praise the Lord. This is exciting."

And it all begins, you see, because it is a regenerated church. You'll notice that in verse 1 it says they were "in God the Father," and the implication they were in Jesus Christ. And verse 3 says "in our Lord Jesus Christ." And verse 5 says "in the Holy Spirit." We do not just follow the precepts of Jesus. We do not just follow the teachings of Christ. We are in Christ. A tremendous concept.

In 1 Corinthians 6:17, Paul said, "He that is joined to the Lord is" - What? - "one spirit." In Romans chapter 6, the apostle Paul lays out that marvelous passage regarding the identity of a believer in his union with Christ. Look with me for a moment at Romans 6, and I just want to point out a couple of things to you there. Romans 6 verse 3, "Don't you know that as many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ." That is, as many of us as were placed in Christ, as were put into union with Christ. And the baptism there is not water, but it's being placed into Christ. "As many of us as were being placed into Christ were placed into his death. We were buried with him by that baptism into death. As Christ is raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection." Verse 8, "If we be dead with Christ, we believe we shall also live with him."

Now, what is Paul saying? He's saying nothing about water. Water symbolizes this, and water pictures this, but the act of baptism is not that saving act. But what Paul is saying is that when you became a Christian, by a divine miracle, you were placed into Jesus Christ. And by a divine miracle that supersedes time, you died with Christ, you were buried, the old life died, and you rose to walk in newness of life in His resurrection. You are inextricably linked in union with Jesus Christ. Paul even went so far as to say this, "Nevertheless, I live" - What? - "yet not I, but Christ lives" - Where? - "in me." And the Christian experience is not simply following the moral precepts of a man. It is not simply believing in a historical figure. It is experiencing union with the living God through Jesus Christ. True believers are in Christ.

What are the results of being in Christ? Listen to this. "If any man be" - What? - "in Christ, he is a new creation." That's the thing that happens. When you come into that union with Christ, you know why you become a new creation? Because the old one dies, and you're made new. And Paul says in Romans 6, you walk in what kind of life? "Newness of life." Why? You're a new creation. An exciting

reality. And so, what is Paul saying here as he writes the Thessalonians? “You know why I thank God always for all of you? Because all of you are in Christ. All of you are in God. All of you are in the Holy Spirit.” And by those terms he means they are all in union with common life in the Trinity. Now, get ahold of it, people, because to be a Christian is a pretty exciting reality, isn’t it? You know, all you have to do is really think about that, and you find yourself shouting, “Hallelujah.” Realize that the very life of God is yours. Peter said it this way. He said, “You have become partakers of” - What? - “the divine nature.” Incredible.

He says, “Hey, I thank God for you Thessalonians, because you have become partakers of the divine nature. Grace be unto you,” he says in verse 1, “and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And you know why he can wish that to them? Because they can receive that. But, you know, you can’t receive the grace of God, you can’t receive the peace of God unless you’re the child of God. So, all the way through that opening, you see, Paul is acknowledging the true salvation of these people.

Look at verse 3, and this is a beautiful reality. He says, “You know how I know you’re all for real?” Because “I remember without ceasing your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope.” You know, you see there the triad of Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. All of those belong only to the redeemed, beloved. And he says, “By virtue of what I see in your life, I know you’re redeemed. How exciting it is to thank God without ceasing, remembering to God your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope. You give evidence of regeneration. And because of all of this, I know, brethren,” verse 4, “you’re elect. I know God has truly redeemed you. I know you’re the chosen of God.” There aren’t any phonies in Thessalonica. That’s a pure congregation.

And, beloved, this is really where everything begins in terms of really serving God. The church has to be a pure church. The church has to be a saved church. If that is true, if it is true that God blesses the church that is regenerate, then what do we know Satan would want to do? Make sure that unbelievers get in the church, right? That unregenerate people begin to infiltrate the church, and that they move to as high a level as they possibly can, because that just corrupts the purity of the church. So, how do you keep it out? How do you keep unbelievers out of the church? Well, I don’t know that you really always can, because we don’t know the wheat from the tares. And in Matthew 13, Jesus said, “Don’t you try to do the separating, or you’re going to create havoc. You wait till the Lord does it in the end time.” But I know one good way illustrated in the Bible to keep out the unbelievers. You know how? That’s to discipline sin in the church. You remember what happened with Ananias and Sapphira? Ananias and Sapphira were looking around in the church, and everybody was getting a lot of praise for giving to people who had needs. And Barnabas came along, you know, and he made a great gift. And Ananias and Sapphira went home, and they said to each other, “You know, we ought to do that. You know, if we do that, everybody’s going to think we’re really spiritual.” So, they say, “You know that piece of property we got? We’re going to give that to the Lord.”

So, they said, “We will give our piece of property when we sell it, all the money to the Lord.” Everybody went, “Terrific. Wonderful people, Ananias and Sapphira.” You see. So, they went and sold it. You know what happened? “Well, let’s keep a little. They’ll never know.” So, they kept a little, but under the pretense they were giving all. You know what the Lord did? The Lord made them drop dead in front of the congregation. They fell over dead. Now, that had a profound effect. You can imagine how everybody in the congregation immediately adjusted anything that wasn’t right.

But you know what Acts chapter 5 says? It really is a tremendous truth. Acts chapter 5 says, “And none dared join himself to them.” You know what the word was in the city? Don’t join that organization. One false move and you’re dead. You see, the recognition that you’re dealing with sin, and that you’re dealing honestly with the purity of the church is a deterrent to too many tares getting in on the action. To begin with, the church has to be a regenerated church. This church was.

Look at chapter 2, verse 13. By the time he gets in chapter 2, he’s still thank God for them. Verse 13, “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing.” He’s just going on and on thanking God. When, “We thank Him because when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you received it not as the word of men” - you didn’t receive it like it like it was some kind of philosophy, like it was some new theology – “but as it is the truth, the word of God, which effectually works in you that believe.”

“Boy, what I’m glad for,” he says, “is that when you heard the Word, it wasn’t something to tickle your intellect. It wasn’t just something that would be a new religious experience. You didn’t just have a religious revolution. What you had was a regeneration, and it got inside of you, because you believed it, and you received it.” And, again, he’s acknowledging that this is a regenerated church. Any church that’s going to be effective has to be redeemed.

Now, I believe, because I know enough about the strategy of Satan, that Grace Church probably has in its membership some unregenerated people. And one of the objectives that I have this year is to find out who those people are and bring them to Christ. Now, some of them, they may be here tonight, and you may be saying, “Maybe he knows it’s me.” Well, maybe I do, but probably not. But we’re going to try to find out. Why? Because we want you to know Christ. We don’t want you to be under pretense. I want this year, for Grace Community Church, a pure fellowship. You want that? I want all the people in this church to be wheat, to belong to Jesus Christ. And, you know, I’ll be honest with you, I don’t get to meet everybody and sometimes somebody’ll come up to me and say, “Hello.” And I’ll say, “Hi, do I know you?” “Oh yes, we’ve been at your church for four years.” You know? I don’t know that. But we want to know the people who know Christ, and we want to know that all the people who are here do know Christ.

I think of Revelation chapter 2 where John speaks so strongly against intermarriage with the world, against a mixed congregation. He's writing to Pergamos, and he says, "I have a few things against you, because you tolerate people there with false doctrine." And what doctrine? The doctrine of Balaam. The doctrine of Balaam is to marry the world, to compromise, to seduce the daughters of Israel to intermarry with the pagans. And he says, "If you keep doing that, I'll come against you and fight against you with the sword of my mouth." Jesus says, "I'll fight My own church if My own church compromises with the world and begins to allow intermarriage with the system." God wants a pure church.

And the key to the success of the Thessalonians was, to begin with, they were pure. If you read Acts, you find that in the early church, it starts out on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:41, three thousand believed and were baptized. And the next verse says, "And they continued steadfastly." How many continued? Three thousand. That's a regenerated church. You know what they did? They turned the city of Jerusalem inside out, didn't they? They were tearing their hair out, the leaders, and soon, in the Book of Acts they were saying, "But you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine." I hope to tell you, when you have a totally regenerated assembly of people moving through town with the miracle of the Holy Spirit going along with them, it's bound to turn that town inside out, isn't it? And it did.

Paul says, in verse 5, notice, "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance as you know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. You remember how we came, and you knew we were men from God, and you received what we said, and you believed in it. It came in the energy of the Holy Spirit. And you received it with confidence and assurance. It changed your life." They heard, they believed, and they became in Christ. And that was the beginning of the effect of that church. God wants a saved church.

Second thing, and this is just a word that starts with "S" so you can remember it. God wants a surrendered church, and Thessalonica was. I love this statement, and I don't want to get stuck on it, but I could. Verse 6, just a rich statement, "And you became followers of us, and of the Lord." Stop there. The genuine character of the salvation of the Thessalonicans becomes apparent in this statement. They "became followers of us, and of the Lord." The word "followers," a beautiful word in the Greek. It's the word *mimtai* from which we get the English word mimic. You mimicked us. I like that. The Thessalonian Christians weren't just talkers; they were imitators. They didn't just talk about their Christian experience. They actually set their lives to follow somebody else. This is a theme with Paul, and he repeats this concept in many scriptures. But in 1 Corinthians 4:16 he says, "I beseech you" - to the Corinthians - "be followers of me." "Please." He didn't have to say that to the Thessalonians. They did it. But to the Corinthians, he says, "Please be followers of me." You say, that's pretty audacious to say pattern your life after mine. Well, it isn't because of what he says in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be followers of me, even as I am of Christ." In Ephesians chapter 5, verse 1, Paul said, "Be ye therefore followers of God." What a rich concept. "Be ye followers of me," said Paul. "Be ye followers of Christ," said Paul. "Be ye followers of God."

Now, if I, as a pastor, and your elders and your leaders, follow Christ, then you can follow us. Is that right? And be following God. Now, that is precisely what was happening in the Thessalonian assembly. This church was surrendered to one thing. Christ-likeness. They were abandoned to being like Jesus. What a tremendous thing. Now, collectively, it's true that we are the body of Christ. I like to call it body two. We are collectively, as His body, all over the world to represent Him. But, individually, beloved, we're to be like Him. You remember the passage we studied when we went through 1 John a few months ago? Listen to it again. "He that says he abides in him," and he's talking about abiding in Christ, "he that says he abides in him ought also to walk even as" - What? - "he walked." If I say I am in Christ, then I should be like Christ. What is the pursuit of a Christian? To be like Christ.

And, you see, that's the key to the life of the church. You know that if all of us are like Christ, we'll have no problem getting along with each other. You know why we have problems getting along with each other? Because we're all kind of out of tune. Tozer said, "If you have a hundred pianos and you want to tune a hundred pianos, and you just start tuning one to the other, whew, what a mess. But if you have a tuning fork, tune all the pianos to that one tuning fork, and they'll automatically be tuned to each other." Right? You know how simple it is in the church? It isn't running around adjusting to everybody else; it's everybody becoming like Jesus Christ. Then, we don't have any problem with everybody else. Christ-likeness.

The Thessalonian church was surrendered to Christ-likeness. I trust it'll be a commitment in your heart this year that your desire would be to be like Christ, to walk as He walked. And, of course, in 1 John 2, he's talking about obedience. He walked obediently. And that's the way you ought to walk, obedient to God. He came into the world and said, "My need is to do" - What? - "the will of him who sent me." He was obedient. Philippians 2 said He was obedient even unto what? Unto death. And then, Philippians 2 adds another dimension of Christ-likeness. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who thought it not something to hold onto to be equal with God, but humbled himself." Two things that really stand out about Christ. He was obedient, and He was humble.

The Thessalonian church was like Paul and Silas and Timothy, and they were like Jesus. Now, I hope you realize that in even understanding that, how that lays a heavy burden on my heart. You have every right, beloved; you have every right, biblically, before God, to pattern your life after mine and after the leaders of this church. You have every right to do that. And we have the obligation and the responsibility to make sure that, if you do that, you'll be following Christ, because we're following Him. I pray God this year that myself, and the other elders of the church, and all those who lead as a part of Grace Church will so live Christ-like lives that you, as a congregation, will be able to follow along. And even patterning your life from the human standpoint after us, you'll be patterning it after Jesus Christ. Because then, you'll be the kind of church and we'll be the kind of church that God wants us to be. This church was saved and surrendered to being like Christ.

There’s a third thing that I see here in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, and that is that this was a suffering church. Now, we’ve talked about this on many occasions, and I’m not going to belabor the point. I’m just going to mention it to you, because you’re aware of its realities. But notice verse 6, “And you became followers” - or mimics – “of us unto the Lord, having received the word in much affliction.” And what was their attitude even though there was affliction? With what? Joy in their circumstances. Is that what it said? Joy of what? The Holy Spirit. Now, you see, the Thessalonian church hadn’t had it easy, and I don’t really believe that any church that really is saved and surrendered to Christ and to being like Christ is going to have it very easy.

Just to remind you of what happened in the Thessalonican assembly, as soon as they got saved, they hadn’t even begun. They’d just got off the pad and immediately, in Acts 17:5, we find out what happened. No sooner had they had the people believed, “The Jews who believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain vile fellows of the baser sort,” - I like that, cruddy characters in the vernacular, common criminals - “and gathered a company and set the city in an uproar and assaulted the house of Jason.” Here was Jason, a new believer, “And they tried to bring out Paul and Silas and Timothy. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren to the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside are come here also.” What a reputation. These people are turning the world upside down, and now they’re here. Persecution began immediately. They troubled the city, they said, and the people, et cetera, and so forth. And persecution broke out.

If you look at the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians and verse 14, you’ll find something of that. “For you, brethren, became followers of the churches of God, which in Judea are in Christ Jesus. You also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets and have persecuted us. And they please not God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved, to fill up their sins always. For the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.” Now, let me pull some thoughts out of there. He says, “You’ve suffered everything we suffered in Judea.” Some of them had been martyred, persecuted, forbidden to speak. You see, the church that is saved and surrendered to being like Jesus Christ is going to antagonize the world. There’s going to come some suffering.

Jesus put it this way, “If the world hates Me, you can expect them to do” - What? - “hate you, especially if you’re like Me.” I love what Paul says. Colossians 1:24, he says something that’s been misunderstood, and I suppose misinterpreted because it is difficult. But it says, “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you.” You say, “But, Paul, how could you do that?” “Well, I may suffer a little bit, I may get beat up, but you get saved, and I’ll take it that way. I rejoice in my suffering for you, and I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh.” “What are you saying, Paul? What do you mean you fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in your flesh?” What he means is this: the world can’t hit Jesus anymore, so they hit those who are like Him, right? “The world isn’t done persecuting Christ. But since they can’t get at Him, they get at me, and I’m kind of glad about that. I’m

willing to suffer for the One who suffered for me. If He could take the blows on the cross that should've been mine, I think I can take a few blows that are meant for Him."

And wouldn't it be nice to be persecuted for being Christ-like? I mean at least you'd have that recognition. I don't know if I've ever been mistaken for Jesus Christ. If I have, nobody ever told me. Wouldn't it be nice to have somebody persecute you because you've turned the world upside down? Be kind of exciting. I'd like everybody to get irritated about Grace Church, not because we're offensive, but because we preach the gospel, and that exposes sin. The church that's going to confront the world is going to suffer. Eleven out of the 12 apostles, as far as we know, were martyred. The church must be the conscience of the world. I'm not saying we want our church to be obnoxious. I'm not saying we want to have a bad reputation. I'm not saying we want to be unkind to people who don't know Christ. I'm not saying that at all. The opposite of that is true. But I am saying this: that where the world is sinful, we want to expose that sin. And where the world needs a clear picture of Christ, we want them to see that picture. And if Satan and his system reacts, then we'll be ready for that, too.

But let's be something in the world that is not the world, all right? Let's stick out, and let's this year and every year, let's be different. Let's be the conscience of the system. Let's make people face the reality of God, and Christ, and sin, and death, and immortality.

The Thessalonian church was saved, surrendered and suffering, and there's something else. This is something that's really on my heart. They were a soul-winning church. The Thessalonian church was a soul-winning church. And, you know, they had a marvelous twofold testimony. I want you to look at verse 7. Here's the first way we give testimony, "So, that you were an example to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia." They lived exemplary lives. Man, you know, the rest of the people around could look over at that Thessalonian church and say, "That's the way our church ought to be." You know how long it took them to become that? About two weeks. They were yielded, surrendered to Christ-likeness. Once they had done that, everything happened. It isn't the programs that we have. It isn't the creativity that we have. It's the Christ-likeness. And the Thessalonians were like Jesus Christ. And, consequently, they set a pattern for everybody else.

You know what I'd like Grace Church to be? I'd like Grace Church to be an example of what life can be with Jesus Christ for all the world to see. Wouldn't you like that? I'd like us even to be an example to other believers. I'd like us to be an encouragement to Christians around us and other churches in our community, other churches in our country. They set an example, even for the believers. But look at verse 9, skipping verse 8 for a minute. "For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." The term "they themselves show us" refers to people in every place, in verse 8.

You know, Paul didn't have to go around and tell about the conversion of the Thessalonians. You know why? They told it. How? By their life. You know what the word was everywhere? Have you heard what happened to Thessalonica? Do you know what happened up there? They "turned to God from" - What? - "from idols." Do you know that Thessalonica was 50 miles from Mount Olympus? And Mount Olympus was the headquarters of all the gods. That those people had been raised from their earliest years of childhood to believe in all kinds of gods. That they were polytheistic; that they had a complex, idolatrous system of deities. And do you realize that, after an entire lifetime of that, on three successive sabbaths, the entire community of believers dropped the whole system of idolatry and turned "to serve the living God?" And you know what happened? That made news. "Have you heard what happened to them?"

"People are talking about you," he says, "everywhere I go. I don't have to tell anything because they themselves are telling me." The word is out. "They have turned from idols to the living God." You know, you first of all witness to the world by the change in your life. Isn't that true? The platform on which we speak is the platform of a changed life. I mean, you know, if you're a drunk, it doesn't do you any good to go help a drunkard and tell him "you've got to reform and shape up." Doesn't do you any good. If you're a crook in your business, it doesn't do you any good to get up in the sight of God and say, "Let me tell you how to be an honest man." Funny joke. And if you're living an obviously unchanged life, you haven't got anything to offer anybody.

Heine, the German philosopher, said, "You show me your redeemed life, and I might believe in your Redeemer." That's fair, don't you think? Let's pray for this year for Grace Church, that our lives would be so transformed, that the Word would spread all over the world, and people would say, "Have you heard what happened in Panorama City? It's amazing. People have turned from idols to serve the living God." Wouldn't it be nice if the world was telling the Christians about it? How about that for a switch? If the world was telling us? The living witness, people, is the basis of everything.

Now, look at verse 8, and here's the witness of the Word that's based upon that life. "For from you sounded out the word of the Lord." Now, the word "sounded out," *exchtai*, is the word from which we get *echo*. "From you echoed the word of the Lord." You know, one good thing about Christian testimony, it should never be independent of the Word of God. It should only be an echo, right? When you proclaim something, it ought not to be your ideas. It ought to be simply an echo of God's truth. And an echo always says the same thing, right? You stand on a hill. You say, "Hello." What do you get back? "Hello." Not goodbye, hello. You stand on a hill, and whatever you say is going to come back. That's an echo, and an echo is always the same, because it's the same voice bouncing. God has put His voice in you. It's the Holy Spirit. He doesn't want you creating your own words. He wants you to echo the truth.

And you know what happened to this Thessalonian congregation? They not only had such exemplary lives, and there was not only such a dramatic transformation in their character that the world couldn't

believe it, and they were shocked by it. But on top of that, that created a platform. And from that platform they echoed the Word of the Lord. And they echoed it so that, “not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place, their faith toward God was spread abroad, so we didn’t even need to speak.” Paul says, “We don’t need to tell anybody about it. Everybody knows.”

The Word of the Lord. You say, “Well, how did it get around so fast?” You know that 1 Thessalonians was written in a matter of weeks or months after the church was started? You say, “How could it possibly grow that fast? I mean how could it be every place?” Well, for several reasons. The city of Thessalonica was located on the Egnatian Highway, which was the main highway from the west to the east. And all the trade routes went through there. And what was going on in there would soon get told everywhere. And it was also located on the Thermaic Gulf, and there was all kinds of commerce surrounding the gulf, and the Word was just taking off from that port place, that heart of the hub of commerce. And pretty soon everybody was talking about that little assembly in Thessalonica. They lived it, and they preached it. God help us, people, to live those lives this year, that aren’t just going to say it, but are going to say it off the platform of a genuine transformation.

I have a real desire this year in my heart, and this is just a kind of a practical implementation of this. I’m just going to believe the Lord, for we’re going to talk about it more, but I’d like to see us just kind of reach everybody in this valley with the truth of Christ. Wouldn’t you like to see that? Say, even if it’s only one time, just, you know, give them the gospel. We’re really praying about how God’s going to have us do that. And I’ve got some kind of exciting ideas about sending the Word out, even if we have to, even if we have to mail something to everybody in the whole valley and then have them maybe call a phone number. And if they’re interested, then we’ll send that card out to somebody who lives near them from our church, and we can do a little evangelism among our own community. And follow up the people who show an interest. But I really feel that that’s only going to work, that’s only going to be meaningful, if there’s credibility in the transformation in our life.

Saved, surrendered, suffering, soul-winning. One more in chapter one. There’s one more verse. You know what else about this church I like? It was a second coming church. A second coming church. They were busy. I want you to remember verse 3. They were working, verse 3, they were laboring, and they were also hoping. But you don’t hope without working, right? Look at verse 10, “And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come.” When Jesus died, He delivered us from judgment, and He said, “I’m coming back.” And you know what? The ideal church is waiting for His return.

You know, there are many churches that aren’t waiting for His return? There are scoffers coming in the last days saying, “Where is the promise of his coming?”, 2 Peter said. There are people that, today, who claim to be Christians - they don’t ever talk about the return of Christ. I heard a preacher recently who said, “I never talk about the return of Christ. There’s too much confusion on the issue.” Well, it’s fortunate for the people in his church he doesn’t, I suppose. There’s no sense in adding

more confusion to what confusion already exists. But that doesn't excuse him from speaking the truth. And I think every church that is truly motivated and truly committed to being what God wants it to be has to be aware that Jesus is coming. And we're waiting for His coming. You say, "Well, what does that do for you?" I don't know what it does for you, but it motivates me when I know Jesus is coming. He says, "Behold, I come quickly and" - What? - "my reward is with me to do" - What? - "to give to every man according to his work shall be."

Someday, I'm going to see Jesus, and He's going to say, "MacArthur, got something for you." And I don't know what, you know, how much or whatever, you know, but, you say, "Well, what do you want to do? Just pile up crowns and reward?" No, I just want Him to know I really love Him. And the only way I can really prove that I love Him is to serve Him with my whole heart. And I want Him to acknowledge that He knew that I loved Him. He's coming to reward His saints. I don't know about you, but I'd rather have gold, silver, precious stones in that day than wood, hay, and stubble, right? If I read the Bible right, in Revelation 4, it says, "I'll take the crowns He gives me and cast them at His feet." I want to do that. And the more I have, the more I can give. And when I know He's coming, that kind of hurries me up about it. You know, Jesus said, in Acts 1, He said, "Now, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you shall be witnesses unto me." And then, a little later, He ascended into heaven. The angels came and said, "Now, remember, the same Jesus who was taken up from you shall" - What? - "come again." Don't you forget; I'll be back. Won't be long.

You know, every one of the New Testament Christians really have lived in the light of the return of Christ. What a motivator. It's a motivator to evangelism. A church that doesn't believe, you see, in the return of Jesus Christ has no sense of rewards. It has no sense of urgency. It has no sense of judgment on the ungodly. The Lord wants us to remember His return, and the ideal church is a second coming church. We believe Jesus is coming. You believe that? I look around. I can't help but think He's coming soon. And if He is, I want to give everything I have until He comes.

Let me go outside of chapter 1 and just give you a couple more that are kind of exciting. Chapter 3 verse 8, another thing about this church was it was a standing-fast church. Verse 8 says, "For now we live," and you could put in there "we really live." I mean "this is living," is what he's saying, "when you stand fast in the Lord." Boy, when we got the message about you, that you were standing fast in the Lord, man, we were really living. You contributed to our excitement. You made our week. Our month. Our whatever. What do you mean "standing fast?" In the Lord, unwavering.

What does it mean to stand fast in the Lord? I think it means two things, and I can't, I don't have time to go into all the explanation of this. But let me just give you two. Number one, I think it means you don't waver doctrinally, and you don't give up anything. Standing fast in the Lord means that, you know, you just stay there, solid, doctrinally.

But I think it means more than that, too. Because, you know, you can stand fast doctrinally and just dry up. There's one other thing you need to do, and that's to stand fast in terms of love. And that was Ephesus, right? When our Lord spoke to Ephesus in Revelation 2, He says, "I have something against you. You have left your" - What? - "your first love."

Doctrinally, right on. What do we always say? That two things build a great church. What are they? Love and what? Sound doctrine. And when you stand firm on the Word of God without wavering, and when you stand firm in love, committed to one another, you got to stand. You got a strong stand.

And that church, that Thessalonican church, hung in there on the Word. They were firm on the Word. You say, "How do you know that?" Wow, look at verse 5 of chapter 1, "When our gospel came unto you, it wasn't just in word, but in power and in the Spirit. And you believed in it. You followed it. You accepted it as the Word of God." Chapter 2, verse 13, "Not the word of men, but the truth, the word of God. And you're still standing on it." And he says in verse 7 of chapter 3, "Even in affliction and distress that we go through, we are encouraged beyond our own affliction when we hear about you standing." How exciting it is when a church doesn't waver from its doctrine and doesn't waver from its commitment to love each other. This is important - standing fast.

I pray God so often for this church, that God would help us to stand true to His Word. You believe that Satan wants to sow grievous wolves, teaching false doctrine? You believe that? Devouring the saints? Sure. Acts 20. Do you believe God wants us to realize that false teachers can arise from among us? Yes. So, there must be a commitment. This was a standing-fast church. And Paul says, "We're really living, and we're living 'cause you're standing fast." I've talked to pastors many times who once pastored a church. They've left that church, and that church has fallen into false doctrine. That's a heartbreaker. You know why? Because those pastors who look back remember that some of those are their own sheep, at least initially they were introduced to Christ by them.

If God ever called me away from this church and I ever looked back to this church, there would only be really one, well, there'd only be two things that could break my heart, and that would be if Grace Community Church lost its firm stand doctrinally or lost its stand on loving one another. Those are the keys. The Thessalonian church was a standing-fast church. Let's commit ourselves this year, people, to stand fast in the Word. And one way you can do it is to follow through the Bible with us, and to get involved in learning the Word.

And let's commit ourselves to loving one another. They stood fast in love. You say, "How do you know that?" Look at chapter 4, verse 9. "But as touching brotherly love, you need not that I write unto you, for you yourselves are taught of God to love one another." I don't even need to say much about it. You're standing on the Word. You received, not as the word of man but the Word of God, and you're loving one another. Saved, surrendered, suffering, soul-winning, second coming, standing fast.

Now, that lays a pretty solid foundation, but I got one more thing, and this is really kind of neat. I was studying, and this kind of snuck up on me. I was just reading through, seeing if I could pull out these principles, and, yeah, I noticed something very interesting. I find no other book in the New Testament where Paul makes as many unqualified, undefended, and unexplained commands as he does here. For example, when Paul writes the Corinthians, he'll say something and then spend two chapters defending it. Right? They're not the same mentality as the Thessalonians. Paul wrote the Romans in chapter 12, and he laid out some basic commands. It took him 11 chapters to get to them. You know that in Romans, there's 11 chapters of doctrine before there's one instruction? This book [1 Thessalonians] has more unqualified, undefended, unexplained commands than any other letter that Paul ever wrote. Every time he wrote the Corinthians, he had to say, "Now, do this. Now, here's why." And give a whole long list of reasons. You know why? The Corinthians were hearing all kinds of voices. They didn't know who they were going to believe.

But you know what he says to the Thessalonians? This just knocks me out. It's exciting. He just flat out says it. Like in chapter 4, verse 3, he says, "Abstain from fornication." That's all. Stay away from sexual sin, period, paragraph. And in verse 11, he says, "Study to be quiet. Do your own business. Work with your own hands as we commanded you." Chapter 5, for example, there are many others, but chapter 5, look at this. Verse 12, "We beseech you, brethren, to know them who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you. Look up to your leaders. "Esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves. Now, we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, encourage the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient toward all men." Now, there's a lot of stuff in there. You could preach on that for a week. "See that none render evil for evil unto any man. Follow that which is good, among yourselves and all men. Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil."

You say, "Well, what? He just says this stuff. Why?" You don't need to say why to the Thessalonians. You know why? They were a submissive church. Beautiful reality. You didn't have to defend anything. Can you imagine getting up on Sunday morning and saying, "Now, for my text is 1 Thessalonians 5:16, 'Rejoice evermore.' Let us pray. Next week we'll be taking verse 17." Place would be packed, those kind of sermons. Short. In the Corinthian assembly, if he said pray without ceasing, it would take him three chapters to prove why. You know why he doesn't have to say this to the Thessalonians? They have a spirit of submission to the Word of God. That's what made them unusual. Boy, those are seven pretty important characteristics of this little church. These people were submitting to the Word of God from the very start. In chapter 1, verse 6 it says, "You became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word." And how did they receive it? "In much affliction with" - What? - "with joy." Chapter 2, verse 13, "You received it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." Chapter 4, verse 1, "Furthermore, we beseech you, brethren, exhort

you by the Lord Jesus, that as you have received of us, how you ought to walk and to please God," he says, "you've already received it. You just opened your heart and took it in. Now, you just keep on doing that."

What made this church unique was they had an unconditional commitment to submit to the Word of God. You know what I believe? I believe that the primary role of a pastor in a church is to bring about a total submission on the part of his people to the Word of God. If I teach you the Word of God, and share with you the Word of God, and you learn the Word of God, and you see the Word of God at work in your life, producing and reproducing, and I saturate you until, like Spurgeon said, "Your blood gets Bibline," and you get soaked and, and engulfed in the Word of God. You know what happens? It creates its own environment, and everything goes through the grid of the Word of God. If I could ever accomplish anything in the ministry, it would be this: to make you submissive to the Word of God. Then, at any point we introduce the Word of God, and you say, "Is that what it says? Wonderful."

You know what happens in a church where the Word of God is not the total picture, and where there is not that submission? Very often, for example, a pastor will preach on topics, and he'll preach on his own ideas and on whatever happens to come along in the wind. And then, every once in a while a problem will arise in the church, and he'll get real upset about the problem. Then, he'll search the Bible, and he'll get a whole Bible sermon, and he'll attack the problem, and everybody is just saying, "Why?" Because they've never been made to see that they have to submit to the Word; the Word comes out just like another one of his opinions, because they don't have a mind of submission. They're like the Corinthians.

But where there is that spirit of willing obedience, that heart of submission, then all you have to do is open the Word, and they receive it. I'm going to teach you the Word in 1976. You knew that. What else? And I'm going to pray God like never before that He give us a spirit of - What? - submission. Now, what does that mean? That means that if you say, "Well, I don't know what to do." Well, what does the Bible say? Well, it says to do that. "Oh, boy, it does? I don't know if I want to do that." Well, you're out of line. I want the Spirit of God to give us a spirit of submissiveness to His Word, so that we bring everything in our life to the test of the page of the Holy Book, right? And because when we do that, then God blesses. Isn't that true? I'd like Grace Church to be everything Jesus wanted it to be. Wouldn't you? I really would. This is my prayer. But I know this, and I just draw it down to you. You in that one little seat where you're sitting. I'm talking to you.

Do you know something? You are Grace Church. Let me ask you a question. Are you saved? Are you? Do you really know Jesus Christ as Savior? Let me ask you: Are you surrendered? Is the greatest desire and the highest goal of your life to be like Jesus Christ? Are you suffering a little bit for that Christ-likeness? Are you soul-winning? Are you out leading people to Jesus Christ? Are you looking for the second coming? Are you serving Him with a whole heart, and can you say with John, "Even so, come Lord Jesus"? How about this? Are you standing fast in doctrinal purity and love? Are

you submissive to the Word? Because, if you aren't, you know something? Grace Church can't be. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we know You prayed for Your church, and You still intercede for us. We know You said You'd build Your church, but we sure do give You a lot of trouble in doing it. Help us to get in on the building with You. Help us to make Your church what You've always wanted it to be. And, Lord, help us to know this: that the organization can never be anything the people aren't. That the total body of Christ can't be anything different than what the individual people are. That all of Christianity can't be Christ in the world unless I am like Him. Help me to know, Lord, and help every one of my brothers and sisters tonight to know that the church in the world will be what they are in the world. Father, You can hear every prayer coming out of every heart, and I just pray that they're the prayers that You really wanted to hear. I pray that You'll help us to be honest and open, and really make some commitments as we begin a new year tonight. You've done so much for us, Lord. We just want to give You glory, and we know You're glorified when Your church is what it ought to be, and it's what it ought to be when we're what we ought to be. So, we give ourselves to You. In Jesus' name.

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