

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

If the Lord Jesus was to walk into our church and spend the next 12 months with us, what do you think He might say at the end of His time with us? If he attended our services, visited our GG's, popped into our ministries, and came to the odd snack events, what do you think do you think he would be happy with how we are going in our approach to church?

- Imagine how encouraging it would be to hear Jesus say of us, “well done, you guys are on the right track living in line with in the way I want you to. Keep going because you are doing well.”
- But imagine how deflating it would be to hear our saviour say to us, “guys, you need to change because you are not on the right track and you’re doing life together in the way I want you to.”

There’s a world of difference between those two evaluations of Jesus aren’t there.

Now some of you might think, “wow, Jesus, coming into our community.... That would be some serious stuff... I don’t know how we’re currently doing, but we’d really have to make sure we got church right at that point... Glad it’s only a hypothetical suggestion.”

Well, the truth is, that it’s actually not just hypothetical. Our risen Lord Jesus, though reigning in Heaven *is* said to be present among all His local churches. He dwells with us by His Spirit. In Revelation chapter 2-3 we get the vision of Jesus’ walking among the local churches in the province of Asia (Rev. 2:1). Some of those local churches He commends, some He rebukes. The point there is that Jesus knows all, sees all and cares deeply for the faithfulness of the community of people He has purchased by His own precious blood.

And as we begin another year together as the 5pm congregation, we need to let that sink in. Our Lord Jesus *does* dwell among *us*, He sees how we are living. He cares about us, and calls us to live His way as His church.

But how do we know if we're on the right track as it were? How should we be living, what should we be doing in order to please Jesus? Where can we go as a church for guidance and advice?

Well, thankfully God's word gives us an example of a church that's going well to learn from. In 1 Thessalonians 1 we hear Jesus, through His apostle Paul describing the church of the Thessalonians "a model for other churches to follow" (v.7).

As we heard in Acts 17, Paul on his second missionary journey had brought the message of Jesus to this city. A large number of Thessaolonians believed. But Paul and his team were forced to abruptly flee the city when persecution broke out against them because of their message.

The Thessalonian church was established amidst severe opposition and the sudden departure of their main teacher and pastor, Paul. And yet, by God's grace, this church flourishes. And Paul, when he gets word of this, gives thanks.

Now, as we'll see in this sermon series, the Thessalonians were not perfect. Like us, they were still comprised of saved sinners. But they *were* a church who by and large, lived in the way Jesus wanted them to.

So, tonight we are going to spend some time looking at three things this church got right.

Chapter 1 tells us they were a church:

- (1) Driven by a Gospel Agenda
- (2) Joyfully undeterred.
- (3) Genuinely repentant.

1. Driven by a Gospel Agenda

First, the Thessalonians were a church driven by a gospel agenda. Everything they do as a church flows from their passion for the gospel. That the first thing Paul is giving thanks for.

But perhaps you are joining us tonight and you're not actually familiar with the word "gospel." Gospel literally means "good news" – but that probably doesn't do it justice (particularly as it was used in ancient times). As we explain in our Christianity explored course, it's more like the *announcement* that war is finally over, it's the kind of news that makes people dance in the street and hug complete strangers – it's that good!

The gospel of Jesus is the great news that says Jesus Christ died for sinners, that God raised Him from the dead, and that forgiveness and eternal life is now found in trusting Jesus. No more condemnation for sin. No more fear of death. The glorious promise that the true and living God has accepted and saved you in His Son.

You can almost imagine the Thessalonians dancing for joy in the homes as they came to believe that news. Verse 6 tells us they filled with the joy of the Hs. But look also at how Paul describes the effect of the gospel on them in verse 5:

⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters^[b] loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our **gospel** came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

God had made sure they heard and believed the great news they were being told about Jesus. It hadn't come to them as an interesting lecture by which they could merely expand their knowledge of world religions. The gospel came to them with power – they were convicted by it's truth and goodness.

And it became the driving force behind all their church activity. Look with me from verse 1:

1 Paul, Silas^[a] and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. [Listen to the gospel agenda]. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by **faith**, your labor prompted by **love**, and your endurance inspired by **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And notice that Paul's not just happy because he sees a church doing many good things (running a vibrant youth ministry, operating soup kitchens, organising evangelistic outreach)

– it is not just the church activity that he’s thankful for but the love of the gospel message that gives rise to it.

Paul doesn’t just say “I thank God for your work and labour and endurance.” No, it’s:

- “Your work ***produced by faith.***” That rich faith in the Jesus as the One who died for their sins and rose again to bring them forgiveness and new life. That’s what gives rise to all their ministries and service and evangelistic outreach.
- It’s “Your labour ***promoted by love.***” The love of Jesus who suffered for them was now being reflected in their loving sacrifice and service to one another.
- It’s “Your endurance ***inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***” They were resilient as a church in the face of local persecution because they knew the sure hope that Jesus would one day return and bring them safely to their eternal home. It would all be worth it!

The Thessalonians remind us that to be a church that pleases Jesus – we must keep the gospel at the centre of our lives – both individually and collectively as a church. If we depart from a gospel agenda we depart from the kind of church culture Jesus desires.

Don Carson (A well known Christian writer) writes about the worrying tendency in many churches to focus on peripheral matters at the expense of the core gospel message. He writes about one of his colleagues who came from a Christian denomination in the States called the Mennonites. His colleague summarised the downward pattern of his denomination in the following way:

One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments.

The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments. [that is the gospel was there in the background, but not the main thing].

The following generation denied the gospel: the “entailments” became everything.

Jesus does not want to walk away from the first? He wants us to be a church in which the gospel stays central generation after generation. That’s why we sing and pray and preach about Jesus every Sunday. That’s why we encourage people not to just serve, but to serve in His name and out of Christ like love for one another. That’s why we run evangelistic courses which invite people to know Him. Jesus is why we do what we do here. But for the gospel to remain truly central in our community we have to all be individuals who believe the gospel should be central.

Carson asks a good question: “What is it in the Christian faith that excites you? . . .

Today there are endless subgroups of confessing Christians who invest enormous quantities of time and energy in one issue or another: abortion, pornography, home schooling, women’s ordination (for or against), economic justice, a certain style of worship, the defence of a particular Bible version, and countries have a full agenda of urgent, peripheral demands [political activism].”

Not for a moment am I suggesting we should not think about such matters or throw our weight behind some of them. But when such matters devour most of our time and passion, each of us must ask: In what fashion am I confessing the centrality of the gospel?

I'm sure the Thessalonians were inundated with a number of issues they could have given much of their time to, but they got it right in that they kept the gospel message of Christ crucified for sinners central. Let's be like them.

Driven by a gospel agenda.

2. Joyfully undeterred (vv5b-8).

Second, the Thessalonian church was joyfully undeterred when opposition broke out against them.

I don't know about you, but I think it's easy to get deterred and discouraged as a Christian when opposition comes. When I feel like the world or the media turns against Christians I find myself more angry about the situation than I am joyful about the gospel. It can make me feel discouraged and being open about my faith just seem that bit more awkward and uncomfortable.

I've been reminded of this recently with the Margaret Court controversy. Court was awarded a companion of the Order of Australia (our nation's highest honour) for her success as a tennis player and mentor to athletes. Many however, were appalled at this decision and criticized Court in the process. Why? Because she held to Jesus' teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman – and in doing so opposed same sex marriage. Daniel Andrew's even tweeted about her – referring to her views as disgraceful and bigoted – accusing her of “spewing hate.” Now I suspect that for many Christians who hold to a biblical ethic on human sexuality and marriage these comments were felt at a personal level.

How does Jesus want us to respond as a church in such moments of opposition? Should we become people who:

- Fight insult with insult? You call us bigots, well here's what I think of you Dan!"
- Who keep quiet about some things Jesus says – Perhaps we should choose sermon series that we might think are more “safe.”
- Maybe we should just turn inwards, and focus on looking after our own – “if the outside world is that opposed, what's the point of engaging with them?”

How did the Thessalonian church respond when they felt they force of opposition? And remember, their opposition was severe (v.6). They had seen one of their brothers in Christ – Jason – dragged out of his home and abused by an angry mob! They had witnessed injustice, felt the hate of their countrymen, experienced the marginalisation.

And yet they remained joyfully undeterred. They got on with the joy of being thankful Christians. Verse 6:

*⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for **you welcomed** the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a **model** to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*

Their response is an example of how we should respond. Not with insult, not with distraction or discouragement. But with a joyfully willingness to keep hold of that which we know possessess life – the gospel.

And what I find so remarkable about the Thessalonian church is that when they felt opposition they didn't turn inward, but kept looking outward. They kept making Jesus known to the world around them. Verse 8:

⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.

When Christians are unfairly treated, there *is* a place for pointing out any lies, injustice and hypocrisy coming from those who oppose us. But the Thessalonian church reminds us that in such times we are to be known as a people who hold on to our *joy* in the gospel and remain undeterred in our mission to let the Lord's message (the gospel) go out from us.

Ruth and I were chatting last night after dinner about what it might look like to suffer well for being a Christian in days to come. It's not our usual clearing-away-the-dishes convo. It came off the back of another conversation about the change or suppression practices bill that is before parliament – [a bill that would potentially make some aspects of the Christian discipleship I do criminal]. We talked about the fear of being charged with a criminal offense. We talked about the public shame that would probably come before that. We wondered what our neighbours who we are friends with might think of us in those days. Maybe some of these thoughts have gone around your mind too? What will we do?

We both agreed we need to be like the Thessalonians. We keep rejoicing over the gospel that saves us and our children. We keep remembering that we are loved by God (v.4) and that He cares for us.. And we remain undeterred in our mission to live out and keep speaking of Jesus to those around us. The Thessalonians themselves show us that the gospel is powerful (v.5) and that people will come to believe it even as they see others suffering for it.

Joyfully undeterred in our faith.

By God's grace that's what we will be.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have the reputation as being joyful people who can't keep quiet about Jesus and His goodness, even when our Premier implies that people who hold to a biblical view of sexuality and marriage are bigoted, hate-filled and divisive.

3. Genuinely Repentant

The third thing the Thessalonian church teaches us is what it looks like to be genuinely repentant.

A helpful way to think about repentance is the idea of making a 180 degree change in direction - or making a U-turn in life.

Vv.9-10 give us the before and after picture of the Thessalonian church. It shows how they made a U-Turn when it came to God.

Before the gospel – they lived a normal ancient pagan life. They followed man-made idols and worshiped them.

After the gospel – They lived a radically different life – throwing away their idols to follow and worship the true and living God alone.

It is this great change that amazed the world around them and made them such a talking point throughout the world. Look at what Paul says in verse 9:

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

It's a beautiful description of genuine repentance.

I like to imagine the conversations within the Thessalonian households who believed in the gospel message: I think of Dad speaking to his family, "Well, it's time to make some changes, kids, we're not going to Zeus' temple any more. We're not going to have those worthless statues sitting in our lounge room. All the prayers, sacrifices, rituals you see the neighbours doing – we are no longer doing!" We follow Jesus now. We worship Him. We live His way. But why Dad? We've always done those things! What will our neighbours say!?

It doesn't matter what they say, Jesus is worth it. You think those idols can make us right with God – they're lifeless! Jesus lives! As Paul said, He can make us right with God through his death for us. He's the only one who will save us from the wrath of God we deserve because of sin. Kids, we're going to need to be patient and trust Jesus now as we wait for his return.

The Thessalonians made the life-saving decision to let go of their idols and take hold of the true God. Genuine Repentance.

In 2019 Kanye West declared he was all in for Jesus and had become a fully-fledged follower of Christ. He even released a new album called “Jesus is King.” And we all long to see Kanye keep going in His new trust in Jesus. There was a wonderful little moment when he was being interviewed on Jimmy Kimmel and was asked by Kimmel: Would you consider yourself to be a Christian music artist now. And Kanye Replied, “I’m just a Christian everything.”

That’s what genuine repentance is – becoming a Christian everything. Every aspect of your life comes under the authority and influence of Christ.

Now perhaps you’re here tonight and you’re not yet a Christian. Perhaps you’re still figuring out whether you want to be a Christian everything – which is the only type of Christian. Perhaps you’re thinking, “Is it worth making such a radical change in my life?”

But you see, as the Thessalonians came to see, it’s a radical change worth making. For it is Jesus and Jesus alone who rescues you from the coming wrath. God has set a day when He will judge the world for our sin and rebellion against Him. We will all stand before Him on that day. And on that day there is only one decision that you will be overjoyed that you had made during your time on earth:

- It won’t be the decision to invest more time in your career.
- It won’t be the decision to get married to the person of your dreams.
- It won’t be the decision to keep worshipping the idols of your family religion to keep the peace.

- It won't be the decision to live it up and have for during your short time on this planet.

It will be the decision to let *go* those idols and hold fast to Jesus as the one who has paid for your sins at the cross and given you the hope of life through His resurrection.

It will be your decision to turn to Jesus in genuine repentance.

That decision will mean on that great day of judgment, you meet Jesus not as God's judge who will condemn you, but as God's saviour who will welcome you into eternal life.

If Kayne West has put trust in Jesus, all his fame and money pale in comparison to what He has now. Relationship with God and the hope of a future resurrection.

Jesus compares trusting in Him to a merchant who found a pearl of unspeakable worth – when he finds it, he rightly goes away and sells everything he has and buys it. Jesus is worth giving up everything for. (Matt 13:45-46).

And if you're already a Christian, that's what you need to keep remembering. Seductive idols (money, being liked, sexual pleasure, romantic love) they will always beg for your allegiance, and some have wandered away from Christ to pursue them. But Christ calls us, as His church to keep letting go from them and holding fast to Jesus our rescuer.

Genuinely repentant.

God's help to us.

In Paul's opening thanksgiving we get a picture of the kind of church that pleases Jesus – where we are driven by a gospel agenda, joyfully undeterred, and genuinely repentant.

And the wonderful thing about my 18 years at Bundy is that these things have largely been my experience. I've loved how the gospel has always remained central in the preaching and teaching. I've loved the wise and careful guidance our pastors have given to us during moments of societal opposition. I've seen people year after year, turning to Jesus for the first time and so many who are striving to live lives marked by genuine repentance.

These things are what led me join Bundy when I was in first year uni. They are what led me to do a ministry traineeship here 10 years ago. They are the things that I love about being a pastor here. Like the Thessalonians, we're not perfect, but I am encouraged to see commitment to the priorities Jesus wants us to have.

But as Don Carson points out – a healthy church is only one generation away from being a unhealthy church. We don't want to lose our gospel focus, or become fearful in the face of opposition, or think we can live with one foot in Jesus camp, and the other foot in the camp of the world.

But if we want to be a church that continues to please Jesus, we need to ask for God's help.

You see, did you notice that through this chapter, Paul isn't praising the Thessalonians for what he sees among them, but God! It's not "Thank you Thessalonians." It's "thank you God! (v.2). It was the work of the HS that meant they received the gospel not simply with words but with power (v.5). It was the work of the HS that meant amidst suffer suffering

they still retained their joy in Jesus (v.6). Paul had been praying for this church, and God had answered his prayers.

And actually this gets to the heart of how any church remains on the right track – We pray. You and I are still sinners. We are naturally inclined to get caught up and distracted by matters peripheral to the gospel. We are naturally inclined to cower in the face of opposition. We are naturally inclined to return to the seductive idols we once left behind. I have that inclination, you have that inclination. But praise be to God we have His Spirit among us. There is hope for us. So let's take a note from Paul's book here and commit to being a people who continually bring each other to God in prayer.

1. Make it a pattern in your personal life (over breakfast, on the way to work) to pray for one or two others here in the 5pm. The daily devotion email gives a list of around four different names each day.
2. Come to the monthly prayer meeting – don't disappear once a month when it happens.
3. Make it a priority in your GG prayer time this year to pray big prayers for our church that align with the three things we have looked at tonight. Keep your individual requests coming. But don't neglect to pray for the health of our church generally.

And you see by God's grace, as we ask for God's help, we will keep following the Thessalonian model – a church driven by a gospel agenda, joyfully undeterred, genuinely repentant. Let's pray