



“Thankful for the Church”

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

Idea: The church is the tool in God’s hand that produces a disciple.

Intro: Today is the first Sunday of November. Can you believe the holiday season is already upon us? I love this time of the year for many reasons, but perhaps the greatest reason is that this season reminds me of all that I have to be thankful for. There is much to be thankful for, including the big and small things of life. Here are a few things you might be thankful this holiday season:

- Automatic dishwashers—they make it possible to get out of the kitchen before the family comes in for their after-dinner snacks.
- Husbands who attack small repair jobs around the house. They usually make them big enough to call in professionals.
- Children who put away their things and clean up after themselves. They’re such a joy you hate to see them go home to their own parents.
- Gardening—it’s a relief to deal with dirt outside the house for a change.
- Smoke alarms—they let you know when the turkey’s done.

Aren’t you grateful for those? You know, thankfulness is a beautiful thing. Cicero said, “A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all other virtues.” This reminds me of the little boy was asked to pray for dinner. Before he bowed his head to pray, he looked at the dish. Then, closing his eyes he prayed, “Lord, I don’t like the looks of it, but I’ll thank you and eat it anyway.”

Gratitude has a way of flavoring one’s life. This month, as we prepare for the Thanksgiving holiday, we are going to take three Sundays to look at *Thankfulness*, but we are going to do it a little different than normal. We are going to examine the grateful words of Paul in First Thessalonians chapter one and discover three gifts the Lord has given us: the church, the gospel, and the mission. Today, we begin by being “Thankful for the Church.”

Inquiry: No doubt you have heard some preacher say, “If you ever find the perfect church, please don’t join it. If you do, it won’t be perfect anymore!”

Since local churches are made up of human beings, saved by God's grace, no church is perfect. But some churches are closer to the New Testament ideal than others. The church at Thessalonica was in that category. At least three times in this letter, Paul gave thanks for the church and the way it responded to his ministry (1:2; 2:13; 3:9). Not every pastor can be that thankful.

The apostle knew the Thessalonian believers. It was Paul, Timothy, and Silas who had introduced them to the gospel and established the church there (Acts 17:1-9). He had seen the mighty transformation that had taken place in their lives through the redemptive work of Christ. In this letter, Paul, most likely writing from Corinth, sought to encourage and equip these believers in their faith. As he began the letter, he couldn't help but express his gratitude for the work of God that was so evident in their lives. From this first chapter, we learn how we too can and should be thankful. We learn what to be thankful for. And we learn that we should be thankful for the church.

Today, I want us to look at the characteristics of this great church that made it so ideal and such a joy to Paul's heart.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3.

Paul addressed his letter to the *church* of the Thessalonians. The Greek word Paul used, which is used throughout the New Testament for the church, is the word ἐκκλησία. It is a term comprised of two words: the preposition εκ, (out) and the verb καλέω (to call). It literally means "the called out ones." It can also mean "the elect ones." Paul was certain that the Thessalonians were among God's elect because he had seen the evidence of their transformation.

Did you know that when a person is a genuine follower of Jesus Christ, there is evidence of his or her conversion? Jesus said that we would be able to recognize them by the fruit of their lives (Matt 7:20). There was no doubt in Paul's mind about the Thessalonian church for which he was thankful. There was evidence of conversion in their lives.

Paul was grateful for the Thessalonians:

1. Working faith.

The believers in Thessalonica were vibrant workers. The Lord Jesus had done a great and deep work in their lives, which resulted in a great and deep work in the lives of others. A true saving belief in Jesus Christ will always result in the mighty work of God that produces change in one's nature and disposition. Therefore, a *work of faith* is action representative of the transforming power of regeneration (2 Cor 5:17). We might say it this way, "The child of God engages in holy, righteous deeds to the honor of God."

Paul was confident of the Thessalonians relationship with Christ because their faith was producing righteous deeds in their lives. His words here, however, do not in any way contradict his clear teaching elsewhere that salvation is by faith alone, apart from any human works (Rom 3:20-21; Eph 2:8-9). While Paul understood that no person could work and earn his or her salvation, he also understood that genuine salvation would always result in righteous deeds done on behalf of Christ.

The Christian faith is a working faith (James 2:18-26). The Thessalonian believers had turned to Christ from idols. They had turned from self to the Son. As a result of the grace they had

experienced, they gave themselves in service to Christ. Like the demoniac who gave himself in service to the Lord after being freed from the demons, they couldn't fathom setting on the sidelines once they had a taste of grace (Mark 5:20). They preached, disciplined, and met the needs of others. Paul was thankful for their faith that worked.

2. Laboring love.

True Christians minister motivated by their love for Jesus and others. These are the two great commandments (Matt 22:37-39). Love is part of the fruit of the Spirit produced in those who are led by the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

The term translated *labor* is the word κόπος. It denotes an arduous, wearying kind of toil, done to the point of exhaustion. It is different than ἔργον (work), which focuses on the deed itself. Κόπος looks at the effort expended in accomplishing a particular deed. It is an effort that strains all of one's energies to the maximum level. Selfless love motivates this kind of spiritual effort.

Christian love is a laboring love that properly sees Jesus and places the welfare and benefit of others above of self. Paul was thankful for the Thessalonians love that labored for others.

3. Enduring hope.

All Christians have a steadfastness of hope in Jesus Christ. They have a persevering anticipation of seeing His future glory and receiving their eternal inheritance.

The term Paul used to describe this characteristic is ὑπομονή. It conveys the idea of endurance or perseverance; literally, it denotes the condition of staying under pressure. The Reformers referred to this as "the perseverance of the saints." In other words there is nothing that should cause a true Christian to lose his or her trust in God's promises. For them, true hope is a strong longing and groaning to "be at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:2-8).

This enduring hope was what enabled every martyr mentioned in Hebrews 11 to keep his or her faith. It is what pushed Paul forward in the face of impending imprisonment and death (Acts 20:22-25). It is what enables us today to hold fast to our faith in the face of the death of a loved one, the test results that reveal you have cancer, the loss of a job, and a culture that belittles you for your biblical convictions.

In this passage we find the trio of faith, hope, and love that are so often expressed and applauded in Paul's letters (1 Thess 5:8; 1 Cor 13:13; Col 1:5). The trio, however, is not the focal point in verse three. Grammatically, faith, hope, and love are presented as subjective genitives in this sentence identifying that which motivates and produces Christian actions.

Why was Paul so thankful for the Thessalonian church? Paul was thankful because he saw that faith produced good works. He saw that love motivated them to serve others. And he saw that their hope in Jesus enabled them to stand firm regardless of their circumstances.

Paul was also thankful for how these characteristics blessed the church. What did these characteristics do for the church?

- They are an example that motivates.

There is nothing quite like seeing an example of what something is supposed to look like. Paul thanked the Lord for the work being done in the Thessalonian church because he knew that due to the life transformation that had taken place, new and younger believers would continue to be encouraged in their faith. Their example would spur others toward greater surrender and sanctification.

We need to see examples of what our lives ought to be as Christ-followers. In many ways this is what discipleship looks like. It is not just instruction in what the Word says and how one should live. It is a visual model of how biblical truth ought to be fleshed out in the believer's life.

It is seeing a brother or sister respond to adversity like being laid-off at work with hope and confidence in Jesus. It is seeing their faith remain rock solid while they share the gospel with others and point to a firm foundation even while their financial footing is unsure.

- They are a rebuke that corrects.

It is never enough to simply be religious. It is not enough to just go to church. It is not enough to get a slice of Jesus. Unfortunately, there were people in the days of the New Testament just like there are people today who are satisfied with a form of godliness (2 Tim 3:5). Therefore, we must never forget a great truth: No change...no Christ. According to Paul, when an individual comes into relationship with Jesus, he or she is immediately changed. The old passes away and the new comes (2 Cor 5:17). Death is brought to life.

A church walking with Christ in sanctification is a rebuke to the ones walking in sin. A person pursuing sin has no desire to be around a person pursuing Christ. Perhaps, you have experienced this in your own life. There was a time when you weren't walking faithfully with the Lord. You were pursuing your sin, and at some point came in contact with a Christian who was in love with Jesus. The Bible says that light has no fellowship with darkness (2 Cor 6:14). Therefore, it made you uncomfortable to be around the person because you felt exposed. You realized that no matter how well you tried to fake spirituality, you felt exposed. The reality is you probably good fake it before others, but you couldn't fake it to yourself. The fruit of the Spirit being lived out by this other Christian rebuked your sin and revealed that something needed to be corrected.

Conclusion: The Thessalonians possessed a working faith, laboring love, and enduring hope. Paul had witnessed the transformation, which had taken place in their lives. He had heard from others that the testimony of the church was one of transformation. Therefore, he rejoiced and thanked God because he knew it would result in motivation for future Christians as well as a correction for those in error. How is your Christian walk? Do you have a working faith, a laboring love, and an enduring hope? Is your life an example that motivates others and a rebuke, bringing correction? Or is it better said that you are walking at a guilty distance?