

Example

Twenty years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians (50-51 AD) to a



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people Paul describes “your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father” (v.3). In Paul’s commendation we note the three essentials of the Christian life: faith, love, perseverance.

In Acts 17 Luke narrates the dangerous beginnings of the church at Thessalonica. Paul was only in that city for three Sabbaths (weeks), preaching that “Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead” and many Jews, Greeks and prominent women believed (vv. 3-4). Witnessing Paul’s success, some angry Jews partnered with troublemakers in the marketplace to incite a riot, accusing Paul of teaching Jesus was a king greater than Caesar. Paul and Silas were arrested, but they posted bail and escaped the city that night (vv. 7-10).

Later, Paul sent Timothy to check on the Christians and wrote this encouraging letter after his emissary brought a good report of their witness (1 Thessalonian 3:2). Paul’s gracious words to that faithful church was even more significant because they were bold and faithful in a society that rejected their beliefs, values and actions.

Our complaints about government opposition to our faith expressions and the influences of a sinful society do not even approach what the Thessalonian Christians were up against. What greater accolade could be written than “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” (1 Thessalonians 1:8)?

Paul’s choice of words emphasizes the strength of their witness: they

became “imitators” of Paul and the Lord and they “turned” to God (“accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit.”) in verse 6.

Thessalonica was the major city and government seat for the Roman province of Macedonia. It was the leading seaport on the gulf of Saloniki, as well as situated on the Via Egnatia, one of the most important highways of the empire. The Jewish business community would have been significant and many Roman military veterans retired to this city. Each of these elements increased potential threats to this “radical” new religious group. Yet they thrived, and in their witness we are encouraged and strengthened today to be the presence of Christ against the odds of culture, prejudice and sometimes ugly rejection. How do we measure up to the example of the Thessalonian church?

Paul celebrates their work that comes from faith. What is the major motivation for your life choices? Our society teaches us to be financially successful, to be a winner and to belong to the right organizations. What are your values and goals for life? Is your work just a job or does it give you an opportunity, help those who are impoverished or suffering and actively support changes that build a more positive society? We should be more than passive citizens. As God’s people we should benefit our society.

Paul celebrates their efforts or works that come from love. God’s love must shape our thinking, relationships and actions. People who make a difference are people who are passionate. My life has been significantly impacted by people along the years:

- The volunteer chaplain at Boy Scout camp in South Dakota who spent the last few months of his life helping boys find God’s love
- The elderly children’s Sunday School teacher who spent so much time and energy, not just on Sundays, to make sure every child understood God loves them

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- The deacon’s wife in New Mexico who devoted several years urging the state legislature to reform adoption laws
- The retired school teacher who has built a “Safe to Sleep” nightly refuge for women who have no home or resources

The stories are endless about those who make a difference because of God’s compelling love.

Paul celebrates the perseverance of hope made real in Christ. We should find our ultimate hope in living because Christ has given himself for us and he will one day return to take us home. Daily we are inundated with horror stories of violence and brutality, hateful political rhetoric and the affliction of poverty. We can choose to withdraw and try to isolate ourselves from the ugliness and tragedy. But Jesus modeled a different approach, to love as he loves and to make a difference wherever possible. The call is not to change the world by yourself but to change your world, to live as a follower of Jesus in your Thessalonica.

We can see ourselves as powerless and give up. But just down the block there is a school where someone is hungry or lonely, just across the street is a struggling single parent who needs help and at the community center there is a program desperately in need of volunteers.

We know “Jesus is the one God raised from the dead and is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath” (v. 10). But in the meantime, what will you do to help someone discover God’s love and begin a new life in Christ? Like those Thessalonian Christians, we must be an example.

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