

THE ASTONISHING EFFECTS OF GOSPEL MINISTRY

Ben Janssen | 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 | September 20, 2020

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.

This first chapter of 1 Thessalonians is essentially a thank-you note, which is not unusual when we read Paul's letters. Almost all of them begin with an expression of thanksgiving. But thank-you notes are not usually that interesting. You don't usually study them.

As we raised our kids, we tried to require them to write thank-you notes for gifts they were given. Sometimes you'd think we were asking them to jump over the moon! Why is it so difficult to write thank-you notes? A previous generation would probably say that we have lost the art of writing letters at all. Others would say the reason thank-you notes are difficult to write is simply because we are not thankful. But I would suggest that an even deeper explanation is that we are not easily astonished by anything. If we were the kinds of people who were more easily astonished at the grace shown to us, then our words of gratitude would flow out from us so much easier. Our thank-you notes would be far more interesting, too.

Paul's thank-you note in these verses is like that. There is a lot of content and depth to his thanksgiving as he expresses his astonishment at the effects of gospel ministry in the city of Thessalonica. Specifically, Paul gives thanks, first, for the Christian virtue that has emerged; second, the credible community that has been planted; and third, for the mission of God that has been advanced.

CHRISTIAN VIRTUE EMERGES

First, Paul gives thanks for the Christian virtue that emerged out of Thessalonica.

Standard Christian Character

In verse 3, Paul recalls the Thessalonians' "work of faith, and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice the three Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope. This is familiar triad occurring often in the New Testament. Together they constitute "genuine and recognizable Christian character."¹ The gospel, wherever it is believed, produces this kind of

character, especially in the corporate life of the church. If a church community is indeed a gospel community, you should expect to find there the character of faith, love, and hope.

That's not to say that you will not also find evidence of faithlessness. You will not be surprised when love runs cold, or when hope is lost to anxiety and despair. But the absence of faith, love, and hope is a serious concern, for these are the standard Christian virtues the gospel produces. They emerge wherever the gospel is believed.

The Fruit of Christian Character

Now notice that Paul does not mention only this standard Christian character; he speaks of them in more objective ways. He recalls the Thessalonians' work, labor, and steadfastness—the fruit that comes from faith, love, and hope.

Paul would have had more concrete memories in mind when he spoke like this. But the larger point is simply that Christian character produced by the gospel becomes evident in specific ways.

So Paul can speak of the believers' *work* of faith and not merely their faith. Faith produced by the gospel is not in opposition to works. Rather, it is the nature of genuine Christian faith to become evident in our lives. Christian faith *works*. We know this is right, for "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead," James 2:17 states. Faith in the gospel of Jesus will work in countless ways that will make the people of God distinct from the society around them.² We might always be prayerfully asking ourselves, both individually as well as together as a church, "How does our faith in Jesus make us live differently from the rest of society?" There are so many ways we are just like everyone else. Can we see how we are different? What is the evidence of faith in the gospel? How does it actually work in our lives?

Similarly, Paul recalls the "labor of love" of the Thessalonians. That is, the gospel produced Christ-like love for God, for each other, and for neighbor. And this love became evident in their labors, in their activities. It is the nature of love, like faith, to become evident. You can't just say you love God but not display that love in objective ways. According to 1 John 4:20, if a person says, "I love God," but does not love his brother, "he is a liar." That's pretty straightforward, isn't it? The gospel, when it is believed, produces a love that labors. It is active love, not passive love.

And what about hope? Paul mentions the Thessalonians "steadfastness" that was produced by their genuine gospel "hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." We know, of course, from the background to the Thessalonian church, that to be a Christian there was a big deal and caused serious conflict with the culture in which they lived. The very fact that these people still believed the gospel in such a climate, were still willing to confess Christ in spite of the disfavor this would subject them to, was evidence that their hope in Jesus enabled them to remain steadfast, to persevere in the midst of such trials. Their hope that enabled such endurance "was not some vague expectation about a better future but rather solid confidence rooted in the expectation of Christ's coming."³ How could they renounce their faith when they believed, as you and I do, that Christ would come again to judge the living and the dead?

CREDIBLE COMMUNITY IS PLANTED

So when the gospel is preached and believed, Christian virtue begins to appear. At the same time, credible community is planted in that place.

Thanks Be to God

There is something interesting about Paul's thank-you note. He is writing to the Thessalonians, and he is expressing his gratitude for what he had seen in them and has heard about them. But he expresses this thankfulness to them only indirectly. He expresses it directly to God. He is thankful *for* the Thessalonians, but he is thankful *to* God for them. God gets the credit for the astonishing effects of gospel ministry in Thessalonica.

We should join with Paul in giving thanks to God that any church, that any credible gospel community, ever gets planted. But we don't do this, likely because we give the credit to a good marketing strategy or a charismatic personality or a cool kid's ministry. But none of those things could explain how a church got planted in Thessalonica.

In Thessalonica there could be only one explanation, after the Apostles had just three weeks there and then were run out of town. Paul knows what had happened. He says this in verses 4-5.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

He knows it is God who began this good work in the Thessalonians, so he can confidently offer a benediction at the end of this letter, stating that "the God of peace himself" will bring about the complete sanctification of these believers. "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." (1 Thess 5:23-24) So while Paul is thankful for the Christian character and conduct he has seen in the Thessalonians, he does not thank *them* for it. He thanks *God* for it! That's because he knows the source of their holy living was supernatural, not some self-help approach to being a better you.

Glory to God Alone

The grace of God that brings salvation full and free to sinners is the same grace of God that works out this salvation in sinners. As Titus 2:11-12 says, the grace of God that brings us salvation, also trains us "to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age."

We know that when the gospel is received, the glory is entirely God's. But the glory also belongs to God alone whenever Christians "live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age," because it is the same gospel power that produces such counter-cultural ways of living. It is not legalism to live a holy life, according to the commands of God. But it is legalism for us to take even the faintest amount of credit for such living for ourselves.

The Power of the Spirit Through the Word

The rest of verse 5 tells us how Paul was confident that these were genuine believers in Thessalonica. It is because the gospel they preached, the good story of Jesus, came to them “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” That is to say, Paul was convinced that God was bringing about a genuine conversion here because when he preached the gospel, the words he proclaimed were accompanied by divine power. He does not say what precisely this power is but only hastens to attribute it to the work of the Holy Spirit.

There can be no genuine conversion where there is no radical evidence of the Holy Spirit’s power in the lives of the Christian community. When God’s electing love is evident, the gospel will not come merely as a message, as a truth, as a doctrine. No way! It will be accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel when it is truly accepted is accepted “not as the word of men,” Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:13. It is accepted “as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). The word of God, the gospel of God, can never be merely accepted without it taking root and becoming active in those who are truly God’s elect.

And that’s how credible gospel community gets created anywhere at all. It’s only by the grace of God. By the power of his electing love for his people.

THE MISSION OF GOD ADVANCES

Finally, Paul finishes off his note of thanksgiving and leads us to be astonished at how the mission of God advances in these credible gospel communities where Christian virtue begins to emerge.

People Full of Conviction

First, the mission of God advances through people full of conviction. Paul speaks of the gospel coming to Thessalonica “with full conviction,” a reference to how Paul and his team had preached the gospel in that city.⁴ They were not tricksters. The Thessalonians knew the “kind of men” they “proved to be among” them. They whole-heartedly believed and practiced everything they preached. Christianity was not something they were interested in, like some hobby they had recently taken up. These were men who preached a gospel that informed every single aspect of their lives.

People Who Model Devotion

And since that same gospel had taken root in the Thessalonians, it is not surprising that they “became imitators” of the missionary team. Imitators indeed “of the Lord” himself. The Thessalonians also became people full of conviction, and this in turn made them models of devotion to Jesus and his gospel. And this is how the mission of God advances. The gospel doesn’t just come to a people. It then begins to work in a people and then out through them.

It works itself out as believers in Jesus become models of devotion to Jesus. They don’t set out to be models, setting themselves up as examples. Rather, in receiving the word, in spite of “much

affliction,” they receive it “with the joy of the Holy Spirit,” and like the Thessalonians they become “an example to all the believers” even outside their local region.

The Thessalonians devotion to Jesus had already begin to go “forth everywhere” so that the Apostles found the Christian message had already come to places they hadn’t even been to yet (v. 8).

People with Patient Expectation

You know how the message had gotten out? We find in several passages in the New Testament that a number of believers from Thessalonica had already gone out proclaiming the gospel in other places. Verse 8 “speaks of a tremendous effort by the Thessalonian believers to carry the word of the Lord to all parts.”⁵

But as they went proclaiming the good news, their lives complemented the message they preached. These were people who were not only full of conviction, people who were not only models of devotion, but they were also people who demonstrated patient expectation. They had turned away from the idols of society, to the living and true God (v. 9) and lived with the expectation that Jesus would return soon enough.

These are some of the astonishing effects of gospel ministry that had come out of the small young church in Thessalonica. And we are right to pray for and expect similar things out of our own church.

We are right to expect similar things out of each one of you, brothers and sisters. What is holding you back?

Sometimes we think we are magnifying the grace of God by highlighting our own imperfections and limitations. But rather than making God’s grace look glorious, is it possible we are diminishing its tremendous power by keeping the spotlight on imperfect selves rather than on God? That is not good news.

Ought we not instead to press in further into this glorious gospel of grace and ask God to bring forth the fruit of his Spirit in our lives, creating even more credible gospel community at Crosstown so that the mission of God will sound forth from us everywhere as we wait for our Lord’s return?

¹ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), [89](#).

² Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), [75](#).

³ Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, [91](#).

⁴ Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, [79](#).

⁵ Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, [102](#).