

Essentials of Disciple-Making
Session Three: Leaving a Legacy
Commentary

1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

1:4. The credit and gratitude for belonging eternally to God should be given to our Lord. His mercy and love come to us not because of who we are but because of the kind of person he is. Love and election always go together. He rescues those who will respond to his initiations of love and revelation (Eph. 1:4–5; 2 Thess. 2:13).

1:5. The gospel is “the power of God for ... salvation” (Rom. 1:16). It comes from embracing Jesus, the centerpiece of the gospel. One evidence that salvation is entirely God’s work is the way in which it enters our lives. It comes not simply with words, but also with power.

The word power means the ability to do something. The gospel always comes with inherent power (Heb. 4:12; 1 Cor. 1:18), but its effect depends upon the hearer. There are those for whom the gospel is “simply words”—interesting, perhaps even disturbing—but that is all. The power of the gospel explodes, however, when the hearer allows its truth to penetrate the heart. The Holy Spirit empowers the message so that it comes alive; it stirs the spirit within; it brings conviction and change. God wants us to be his children.

The church is challenged to announce and model the good news for everyone. The rest of the paragraph shows that the Thessalonians were doing this.

1. Imitation Model

1:6. Jesus showed Paul how to live, and even personally instructed him (Gal. 1:12). Paul lived, led, and taught by the example he had received from Christ. In the same manner, the people Paul taught along the way—those in the churches he planted—got their signals from him. He became the model to others, just as Christ was the model to him.

In their letter to the Thessalonians Paul, Silas, and Timothy appealed to the Thessalonians memory, drawing them back to the lifestyle of the three men when they lived in Thessalonica: You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. This pattern forms a great circle of discipleship and leadership which still applies today.

Leaders and teachers in the church are to follow Christ; those in the leader’s care follow after his example; they, in turn, become models of Christlikeness to people outside the church. It was the manner of Christ in Paul, Silas, and Timothy which helped inspire the Thessalonians to follow Christ.

It is a reminder to all of us that it is the image of Jesus in us—the way we model him—that attracts people to become like Christ.

Furthermore, the Thessalonians followed Paul and Christ with determination, in spite of severe suffering. Paul and Silas's stay in Thessalonica was shorter than planned due to a riot which the Jews staged (Acts 17:5–10). Friends were arrested, the community shouted accusations, government officials became uneasy, and Paul and Silas escaped to the neighboring town of Berea under cover of darkness. With this background, the church in Thessalonica undoubtedly suffered under suspicion and community unrest. But the Holy Spirit gave them the joy and ability to receive the full message of Christ and to follow him.

Suffering and joy are almost always linked. It is the confirmation of John 15:18–21, that those who follow Christ will suffer as Christ did. As Paul later wrote in his letter to the Philippians, there is fellowship in suffering for Christ, a fellowship with Christ himself (Phil. 3:10). This brings a joy sustained by the Holy Spirit.

1:7. In the first century, the word model referred to the mark left by a hammer or die as in the making of a coin, leaving an impression like the original. Thus, the Thessalonian church became a “model” of believers banded together, a prototype of what a church should be.

After commending the local gathering and the way it was living and responding in a hostile culture, Paul, Silas, and Timothy opened the eyes of the Thessalonians to the influence they were having beyond their city. They were connected to a great network of God's kingdom. Their adherence to the faith had become an encouragement and example to other churches. The authors knew that understanding their place in the broader context of God's church would encourage the Thessalonians to continue in faithfulness.

Many believers care about the ways of Christ, and even seek to grow and serve—but primarily as individuals. As good and necessary as our personal efforts are, in the process we can easily forget that there is a distinct model for the local church's actions and reputation. To model Christ is not only a call to each church member, but to the church as a whole. Many involved in church skirmishes need to read and apply this truth.

2. Reputation Model

1:8. Paul next described the “reputation model” for the church—your faith in God has become known everywhere. The northern and southern provinces (Macedonia and Achaia) heard about the changes brought about by God in the hearts and actions of the believers in Thessalonica. Reports about their faith were being heard, often carried by unbelievers. As a result the Lord's message rang out, was trumpeted throughout the region. It is a reminder that we have reputations that influence how others respond to our Lord. The vibrancy of our faith can spread the gospel and influence the reception which it receives beyond our area and region.

1:9–10. By simple observation of the Thessalonian believers, the authors brought out some of the main components of the gospel message as given and activated by our Lord. We see at least these themes:

- Conversion. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.
- Future. We wait for his Son from heaven.
- Basis. The Son whom he raised from the dead, and his work for us.
- Judgment. There is a coming wrath to be avoided.

Those who want to avoid the wrath to come should consider that nothing in Paul's succinct rehearsal of the Thessalonians' conversion makes much sense without the reality of judgment. Why turn from idols to the Lord? Why the need for heaven if there is no hell? Why did Christ die and need to be raised? Why? Because God wanted to save us from the wrath ahead—a wrath exercised in holy justice against a rebellion which lies at the center of our sins.

The only way to avoid the coming wrath is by believing that only God is true and rules with authority. Through Jesus Christ the judgment for our sins has been satisfied, and our future belongs with Christ.¹

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

2:7. Instead, Paul and Silas chose to be gentle. There is no tenderness quite like a mother's, and Paul dared to identify with maternal love and care. Greek writers used the term gentleness to describe those who dealt patiently and with a mild manner toward those who were difficult—obstinate children, unmanageable students, those who had not reached maturity and were experiencing the inconsistencies and struggles of development. Whatever difficulties the Thessalonians may have presented, Paul and Silas recognized that these new Christians were not yet “grown up.” So rather than dealing with these people in an authoritarian manner, they chose to be patient—like a mother.

It is a great lesson for the church today, because we have not always been patient with new or young believers. Sometimes we have cut a mold and demanded that they fit it—now. Instead of this approach, we need to see each individual's need for help and encouragement as he or she struggles to conform to the image of Christ.

2:8. Here is a classic understanding of biblical love. To Paul, love is always a verb, it is doing. Feelings may accompany love, but they do not define it. Instead, the commitment of acting in the best interest of another opens the way for feelings: We loved you so much that we were delighted to share ... our lives.

It is easier to teach theology than to love, easier to share lists than time. Paul gave not only the message of the gospel, but the example of it as well. He spent time. He shared joys and headaches. Parents and teachers, coaches and mentors, pastors and leaders know what it means to give part of their heart away to others. Love is not just a job. It is a way of life.

But note that Paul did share the gospel of God. He was balanced. He gave his life and love. He gave content as well. It is not enough to visit people in the hospital or prison, or to show

¹ Knute Larson, *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

compassion to the poor or those new in the faith. Somewhere, carefully and candidly, they must also hear the truth of the cross and what it means to trust and follow Christ. Arguing whether the church should meet people's physical needs or whether it should limit itself to preaching the gospel is like debating which wing of an airplane is more important. Both are essential!

2:9. As an apostle, Paul could have expected, perhaps insisted, that he and Silas be paid or cared for while in Thessalonica. At that time, when philosophers traveled from place to place teaching, they were usually paid by their followers. Paul could have taken advantage of that cultural practice.

The interesting point is that the choice of "non-payment," or to go without a salary, was not the vote of the congregation but the decision of the leaders. Paul's intention was to provide an example of what this particular church needed, not to establish a precedent for how churches in general should limit their provisions for their pastors. To this church, which had a problem with laziness (1 Thess. 3:7–13), these men were examples of hard work—toil and hardship. They worked night and day—these were long and tedious hours. They modeled sacrificial love and giving for the sake of this new church.

2:10. Paul also speaks candidly and positively of his own heart. He knew people watched him; they had that right. Those who lead will be examined to see if their words match their lives. So Paul called these Thessalonian believers as witnesses to what he was about to say. If anyone could dispute his assertions, it would be these people. Paul had lived with them shoulder to shoulder. You cannot hide much when you live day in and day out with the same people. But Paul then went further and called God as his witness. He knew that, above all, he was answerable to God, who is always able to see deep within the heart.

Backed by these expert witnesses, Paul went on to make some strong claims, characterizing himself as holy, righteous and blameless. Holy has to do with being devout, separate from selfishness and sin. Righteousness is moral correctness, doing what God defines as just and good. Blameless does not mean perfection but a life characterized by godly habits; it is being up-to-date on confession before God and apologies with others.

2:11–12. Paul declared, We dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children. Not only did Paul express the nurturing tenderness of a mother; he also demonstrated the strength of a father's love by encouraging, comforting, and urging these people toward godly living. Encouraging is a heart-felt term, not a one-time shot in the arm just to make a person feel better. It is the strong support and trust that imparts courage to others. Paul wrote it in the present tense, implying that it was continual in his leadership style. People need to be infused with courage again and again, as a matter of practice, to be emboldened in what they know is right.

Comforting is the gentle empathy which comes and stays alongside someone as they experience failures and distresses in life. Urging comes from a solemn and earnest view of a

situation, asking someone to do or be something for the highest good. Urging has a clear view of what is right, leading a person through the maze of emotions and conflicts which can confuse an issue.

Why did Paul live among them as a father, inspiring them to be courageous, standing with them in difficulty, addressing serious issues? So that they might live worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. What does it mean to live worthy of God? To gain a fuller understanding of this, we must view God and ourselves accurately.

God determined to create for himself a people who bear his character and nature. It was his intention even before he created Adam. Despite the dark rebellion of Satan and his subversion which penetrated all the created order, God has constantly pursued mankind, revealing his personhood, justice, love, and mercy. He involved himself with his world in order to demonstrate his glory and, after man's rebellion, to bring back to himself what was rightfully his.

Jesus Christ is the extreme effort God went to—God himself planting his feet upon the dirt in the face of injustice, misunderstanding, weariness, and hatred.

As followers of Christ, are we living lives worthy of him? God has put this call upon our lives—to make us like Christ. We are the presence of Christ in this age—here and now, in this time, at this place. Are we living in a way that matches the worthiness of that call?

God has promised us his kingdom and glory. Those who have chosen to follow Christ will be welcomed by him into heaven. But in the mean-time, before that glory is realized, we are to be like him, to bear his character and nature. He gives us his Spirit, enabling us to live as he did. But the choice is always ours. Are we living lives worthy of his plan, his promise, his provision.²

1 Thessalonians 3:8-10

3:8. It is as though Paul could not find enough words to describe the up lifting and positive effect of their steadfast faith: Now we really live, since you are standing firm. Timothy's conversations about the Thessalonians' genuine faith had been like a shot of life, a new injection of purpose. Our faith can have such an effect on those around us.

3:9. Paul's words, How can we thank God enough ...? showed his great job at seeing progress and strength in the lives of those he loved.

The apostle James once wrote that we should count it a joy when we "face trials of many kinds" (Jas. 1:2–4), because they produce long-lasting, persistent faith and maturity. While we should not go searching or praying for pain, neither should we feel that pain is outside our Lord's sovereign plan for us any more than it was outside the Father's will for the Son. He was complete or "made perfect" (Heb. 5:9) through suffering.

² Knute Larson, *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

3:10. Although Paul was thrilled with the strength of the Thessalonians' faith, he prayed throughout the day and night, on various occasions and day after day. He literally "begged" God to allow him to see these Christians again in order to supply what is lacking in [their] faith. Paul recognized that, despite the wonderful news of their tenacious faith, these Christians were not fully developed in knowledge and understanding. They lacked many things for which teaching, warning, and instruction were still needed. Spiritual progress is always to be commended, but it is never to be considered complete.³

³ Knute Larson, *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).