



The Essentials of Disciple-Making

Session Three: Leaving a Legacy

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

First Thessalonians was likely the first letter Paul wrote during his second missionary journey, which took place between AD 48 and 52. It's addressed to a church Paul and Silas planted several years before. Although they spent only three weeks to at most three months with this young congregation of Jews and Greeks, they developed a deep and abiding love for this church.

You can read about the inception of the first church in Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-9. Note that Paul and Silas were swiftly run out of town by a mob who said they defied Caesar by claiming, "Jesus is King." Imagine the challenge in planting a church only to have to leave it so soon.

Paul's letter was a response to a report from Timothy that not only was the church surviving, but it was thriving, even amid persecution. Paul and Silas's legacy lived on in this young congregation, who were sharing the good news of Jesus throughout the region.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

1 Thessalonians 3:8-10; 2:7-12; 1:4-10

THE MAIN IDEA

What does it mean to leave a legacy? How might Christians view leaving a legacy differently from others?

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What am I doing with my time, treasure, and talent to leave behind something of lasting impact?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

1 Thessalonians 3:8-10 Paul was thrilled to receive the positive report from Timothy. This young church was growing and taking the gospel throughout the region. It brought Paul joy to know that the church in Thessalonica was standing firm in their faith in Christ.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12 Paul recounted that when he and Silas were with the Thessalonian believers, they nurtured and cared for them like a loving mother and encouraged and challenged them like a father with his own children. Discipling others is not merely an instructional relationship, like between professors and students. Real discipleship happens in the family of God as we love, serve, and minister to one another.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-10 Paul rejoiced in the news that the Thessalonians stood firm in the face of persecution and shared the gospel in the entire region. His ministry and impact multiplied because the church continued the work in his absence. We leave a legacy of faith when we do the work of evangelism and discipleship and when we empower the next generation to live out their faith.



START HERE

Paul and Silas spent only a short time in Thessalonica, but their love for this church is apparent in the two letters Paul wrote to this congregation. When Paul sent Timothy to visit them and bring back a report, Paul was overjoyed to hear of their continued faith in Christ and their service to Him even while experiencing persecution. The church's faithfulness was an enduring legacy for Paul and Silas. When we make a commitment to disciple others, individually or in a small group, we impact the world for Christ and leave a legacy of faith for the next generation.

DISCUSS

What does it mean to leave a legacy? How have you seen celebrities or others get this wrong? Why should the church have a different perspective?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. The fruit of discipleship is our legacy.

1 Thessalonians 3:7-10: Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and affliction, we were encouraged about you through your faith. For now we live, if you stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you, as we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith?

Unpacking 1 Thessalonians 3:7-10

If you've ever been to Disney World or Disneyland, there's a good chance you've ridden a ride called the Haunted Mansion. Built in 1969 (Disneyland) and 1971 (Disney World), it's one of a few attractions that appear in four major parks, including Tokyo Disneyland and Disneyland Paris.¹ In the scenery along the way in line for the ride, there are famous tombstone epitaphs. These witty memorials include: "Here floats Captain Culpepper Clyne / Allergic to dirt so he's pickled in brine / He braved the sea and all her wrath / But drowned on land while taking a bath," or "Here lies poetess Prudence Pock / She died, 'tis said, from writer's block." While the sayings are meant to be funny, the tombstones are said to represent real Disney Imagineers, many of whom worked on the Haunted Mansion directly. Surely it was surreal to see their names prematurely listed on a grave marker.²

Our culture places a lot of emphasis on legacy. People push themselves to acquire degrees, amass fortunes, or write books, all to have something to live on after they die. As believers, we are also called to leave a legacy that rises above earthly bounds. In 1 Thessalonians 3:8, the apostle Paul wrote of this kind of legacy that has eternal worth: "For now we live, if you stand firm in the Lord." For those in Christ, living a life in step with Christ and devoted to reaching and discipling others is the kind of memorial that outlives us all.



Paul spent the first three chapters of this letter praying for and encouraging the believers, and the last two giving instructions for holy living and the assurance of Christ's return. Consider reading this short letter in its entirety this week. Working backward through the first three chapters of this book, we will examine what Paul saw as his enduring legacy (chap. 3), how he viewed discipleship as creating a spiritual family (chap. 2), and how he envisioned discipleship as a multiplying force (chap. 1).

In verse 7, Paul recounted the persecution he and Silas experienced and said receiving word of the Thessalonian church's faith encouraged them. Attending a church is easy. But joining as a member requires more: a commitment to support, give, and serve in the ministries of the church. When church members invest in the discipleship process of others, whether teaching faith foundations to elementary-aged kids, leading a small group of students, teaching an adult class, or mentoring another believer one-on-one, faith and personal discipleship grow. When we invest in the faith journey of others and see them begin to flourish in Christ, it not only buoys our faith, but it also leaves an eternal legacy for the next generation.

Notably, that Paul rarely traveled alone. He almost always traveled with another disciple-maker, often accompanied by younger men such as Mark and Timothy, whom he personally mentored. Paul knew faith is caught more than taught, and he made it a point to invest deeply in the growth of other ministers, just as he invested in the growth of whole congregations like the one in Thessalonica. This commitment to discipleship was first modeled by Christ, who discipled the apostles and then sent them out to share with others. The work of the church is too big to be carried by one pastor or a select few charismatic leaders.

In verse 8, Paul said that the enduring faith of the church in Thessalonica gave him and Silas life. The firm faith of these believers was the living testimony and abiding legacy of these disciple-makers. At the end of his life, Paul could look back at the churches he had planted and the ministers he had taught as a tangible reminder of God's purpose and provision. A present reality and a future memorial, making the difficult times they endured worth it.

Not only that, but Paul also said the Thessalonians' faith was a source of joy in prayer, as they thanked God for the gift of ministering to them (v. 9). His affection for the Thessalonians prompted him to pray "night and day" that they might be reunited and Paul could continue to disciple them. The words of verse 10, "complete what is lacking," were not a reference to a particular sin or deficit in the church. Rather, Paul understood the discipleship process was ongoing. He knew he could teach them other things as they continued to grow in Christ, and he prayed he could return to them in person, where he felt he could better instruct them. This side of heaven, the work of discipleship never ends. Just as Paul instructed in Philippians 2:12-13, we are to continue to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is working in [us] both to will and to work according to his good purpose." Working *out* our salvation is not the same thing as the false belief of working *for* our salvation. Rather, it is a recognition that the work of being formed into the image of Christ is an ongoing process in the life of every believer (2 Corinthians 3:18); one that is best supported in consistent fellowship and discipleship.



Disciple-making is hard work, but it is not without reward. As David Mathis wrote in an article for *Desiring God*, “Disciple making is indeed costly — and designed by God, when healthy, to be a great joy-producing enterprise. It is not easy, but hard work. Yet it is deeply rewarding, with joys we will not otherwise taste apart from God’s work in and through us in sharing ‘our own selves’ (1 Thessalonians 2:8) with others.”³

In 1 Thessalonians 3, Paul makes it clear that his relationship with the Thessalonians, the fruit of their faith, and their ongoing commitment to Christ was a living epitaph that gives testimony to Christ. We can dedicate our lives to many things, but investing our lives in helping others come to know Christ and grow in Him is an enduring legacy that will impact generations to come.

DISCUSS

- *What do you want your epitaph to say? What about that short sentence would encapsulate your life?*
- *How can discipling others be a source of eternal joy?*
- *How might your relationships grow to be more spiritually intentional?*

2. The family of disciples is our ministry.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12: *Although we could have been a burden as Christ’s apostles, instead we were gentle among you, as a nurse nurtures her own children. We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers and sisters. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God’s gospel to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly we conducted ourselves with you believers. As you know, like a father with his own children, we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to walk worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*

Unpacking 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

They say children are like a sponge, soaking up everything around them and learning every day. For parents, this truth presents both opportunities and challenges. The next time you’re in an area with many families, notice the parenting styles of those around you. You’ll see strict parents trying to keep everyone on schedule and to move through lines as efficiently as possible. You’ll see indulgent parents stopping in every shop and kiosk for sweet treats and souvenirs. You’ll also see frustrated parents trying to get a cranky toddler to smile for one more picture to preserve memories. The reality is, kids watch how we react in various situations.

In Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica, he understood that discipleship is also caught more than taught. When he reflected on the time he spent with the church in Thessalonica, he felt like a spiritual parent, modeling the behavior, attitude, and actions of a follower of Jesus.



While parents may have a tough time keeping their cool depending on the moment, Paul and Silas's actions toward the church demonstrated their love, patience, and self-control.

In verses 7-8, Paul compared his relationship to the church as tenderly as a nursing mother caring for her own children. A nursing mother cares for her child by feeding the baby from her own body. For all parents, there is a sense of setting aside parts of "our own lives" to care for and nurture our children. In the same way, authentic discipleship is costly. It will require the sacrifice of our time, efforts, and energy in the service of others. Not only that, but Paul also said he cared for them with gentleness. Though he could have asserted his authority over them (v. 7), he chose instead to serve them in love.

Just like parents can't cajole their child into perfect behavior, those who disciple others cannot strong-arm them into spiritual growth. Each person must grow as they walk with Jesus. However, we still influence one another. In verses 9-10, Paul recounted the way he and Silas modeled, rather than demanded, Christlike living.

Notice how Paul described their time in Thessalonica: laboring, working, and not burdening. Paul and Silas prioritized their own needs so that they would not receive criticism from outsiders and could model Christlike behavior. This idea is reenforced in 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12 when Paul instructed, "But we encourage you, brothers and sisters, to do this even more, to seek to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, so that you may behave properly in the presence of outsiders and not be dependent on anyone."

One marker of a disciple-mentor is self-leadership. As Paul instructed Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16, those in leadership should "pay close attention to your life and your teaching; persevere in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers." Since discipleship is often caught rather than taught, it is important that those in leadership, and those who aspire to lead, live in such a way as to set a godly example for others. Self-leadership is also mentioned in James 3:1: "Not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment." This idea of accountability and judgment should not make us afraid to serve God's people but should encourage us to "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness" (1 Timothy 6:11).

Paul concluded this section with another comparison, saying that he and Silas ministered to the church "like a father with his own children, [when they] encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to walk worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12). The church in Thessalonica would have understood the role of a father through a Greco-Roman lens, where the father held absolute power, known as *paterfamilias*. The historian Donald L. Wasson, in an article about ancient Roman family life for World History Encyclopedia, comments, "To a Roman male, his family was more than just his wife and children. It determined both his social standing and personal worth. His home or *domus* established his reputation, or his dignity (*dignitas*). Under Roman law, the father



possessed absolute paternal power (*patria potestas*), not only over his wife and children but also his children's children and even his slaves, in fact, anyone who lived under his roof.”⁴

Paul's language, however, describes a different kind of father-child relationship. The apostle describes a parent who encourages, comforts, and implores them to walk in righteousness. This is not the model of a Roman *paterfamilias*, who held the power of life or death over his family, but rather a servant-leader like Jesus, who modeled personal sacrifice, accountability, stability, and love. Whether we are in a stage of life where we are learning and exercising self-leadership, leading an individual as a mentor, or leading an entire class or congregation, Paul's example is fitting for the church today. As we lead others, we should care for and nourish them like a mother with her child, and like a good father, encourage, comfort, and challenge them. We should also model for them Christlike behavior through our own self-discipline.

DISCUSS

- Can you think of a moment when your parenting (or your parents' parenting) didn't go as you planned? Explain.
- Why do you think Paul used the illustration of a family to teach the Thessalonians about discipleship in the church?
- What is the place of self-leadership? How is that the same as or different from being led by the Holy Spirit?

3. The future of discipleship is our influence.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-10: *For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full assurance. You know how we lived among you for your benefit, and you yourselves became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with joy from the Holy Spirit. As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out. Therefore, we don't need to say anything, for they themselves report what kind of reception we had from you: how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

Unpacking 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

In 1966, Walt Disney coined the acronym EPCOT, for a future-focused theme park and living community. The name stood for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, and his vision was to create an experimental living community that would help solve urban problems and set an example for city planning. He died before his vision could come to fruition. Still, the



Disney family and imagineers after him realized that while a living community was not realistic, a theme park dedicated to the future and showcasing cultures around the world could be. In 1982, the \$1 billion park opened, featuring both Future World and the World Showcase, and has attracted crowds to peer into the future for decades. While Walt Disney's idea of an actual living community did not come to pass, the park built around his vision is an enduring commitment to carry out his legacy.⁵

While most of us will never have the kind of financial and cultural influence of Walt Disney, we do have the opportunity to leave a legacy that will outlast even a theme park dedicated to the future. When we disciple others, we are investing in a legacy of faith that will outlive us all. Our influence in one generation will carry forward into the future as they reach people for Jesus, disciple them, and share the good news. In today's text, Paul stated the main idea of his letter to the Thessalonians in the first paragraph: The church's faith continued to mature in Paul's absence, and he celebrated how they carried the work of evangelism and discipleship into their community and beyond.

Regardless of our material resources, education, or worldly success, sharing the message of Jesus and walking alongside people as they grow in faith is an enduring influence. Paul and Silas spent only a few weeks with this congregation, yet this church multiplied, and the good news spread throughout the region. When we invest in the discipleship of others, we may not learn the impact of our service until eternity. For the church in Thessalonica, Paul rejoiced that the message of Jesus spread from them throughout the region (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Discipling others is not only an enduring legacy but also a multiplying legacy, as future believers take the gospel further than the generation before ever could.

Paul opened his letter to the Thessalonians, rejoicing in "your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). He recounted the evidence of the fruit of faith, love, and hope in their lives. First, Paul said spiritual fruit is proof of the work of the Holy Spirit: "For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full assurance" (1 Thessalonians 1:4). When we tell others about Jesus, we don't know who will hear and receive the gospel or which believers will develop into multiplying ministers. Our responsibility is not to grow fruit but to scatter seeds; God is responsible for the result (Mark 4:1-20).

Second, Paul recalled the time he and Silas spent with them, saying, "You know how we lived among you for your benefit, and you yourselves became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with joy from the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:5-6). Despite the persecution they experienced in Thessalonica and other areas, Paul and Silas continued to share the gospel with joy and conviction. The Thessalonians imitated the bold faith of Paul and Silas, even in the face of their own persecution. Discipling others is not about having complete knowledge. Many people in the church today fail to serve God by investing in others under the false idea that they don't know enough. If the Thessalonians could spend three weeks with Paul and Silas, come to faith in Christ, and then



continue the work of evangelism without their mentors and without a copy of the Bible to read, we can minister to others out of the knowledge we have and our willingness to serve. Just as Paul wrote corrective letters to practicing churches and individuals, refining and deepening their theology, we can—through study, training opportunities, and independent reading—increase our knowledge as we serve God. If we wait until we feel fully ready, there is a good chance we'll never begin!

Paul ended this paragraph by praising the church for its work to share the gospel and rejoicing in how they turned from idols to serve God wholeheartedly. These young believers took the gospel throughout the region as they enthusiastically shared the good news (1 Thessalonians 1:8). One indicator of authentic belief is the desire that others come to know Christ. While the church may have lacked maturity in their theology, they demonstrated growth in their desire to tell others about Jesus. A sense of urgency fueled their commitment. Paul and Silas communicated a need to turn from idols and “to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). The work of evangelism could come to an end in our lifetime if Christ returns, or it could continue to generations to come as an enduring influence and legacy of faith. Either way, sharing Jesus and discipling others is a work of urgency. Whether Jesus returns today or in a thousand years, our generation needs people to share boldly, speak truthfully, and help people know and follow Jesus.

DISCUSS

- *How does the world determine a valuable legacy? How should the church determine this?*
- *Has a feeling of insufficient knowledge kept you from sharing Jesus with others? How can today's text challenge that idea?*
- *What does the certainty of Christ's return mean when you think about leaving a legacy of faith?*

GOSPEL FOCUS

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, Paul praised the church for turning from idols to serve the living God, as they waited for Jesus, “who rescues us from the coming wrath.” When we share Jesus with others, we are not sharing a life-improvement strategy or a personal growth plan. We share life and invite people to choose life in Christ. If you have never accepted Christ, what is stopping you? Just as the Holy Spirit brought about radical change in the lives of the Thessalonians, Christ offers radical change and a renewed purpose when we come to Him by faith.

DISCUSS

- *How are we tempted to spend our lives on things that do not matter?*
- *How can we rightly assess the areas we are spending our time?*



- *What is your takeaway from today's study of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

How does today's passage challenge or encourage what you previously thought about discipling others and helping them grow in faith?

APPLY

How could you share in discipling others in your particular stage of life? What fears or circumstances hold you back?

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