

The Power of Gospel-Driven Ministry

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

June 26, 2016

Turn in your bibles to 1 Thessalonians and in the beginning of the month, I preached from 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and I'd like to return to that text, finish the chapter. I'm gonna begin by reading the passage and then we'll have just a short period of review to kinda go over what we covered in that last sermon. So if you're in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, let's read that chapter together. Let me just get there myself. 1 Thessalonians 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. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know,

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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.

“You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word,” with, “in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but,” your faith has gone, “your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 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, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

When we covered the first five verses of that chapter, we spent time identifying the foundation of a true church. Every true church is characterized by born-again believers who

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manifest those three vital Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope. That is to say that every true church is engaged in work, but it's not just a work that's a business; it's not just an activity. This is a work that is faith-generated. This is prompted, generated by belief in God, driven forward by belief in the obedience of faith. There are many works going on in churches all over the country. Not all of them, though, are faith-generated works.

Also, every true church is engaged in labor. Labor is a, a more intense word than the word, work. This is talking about sweat, toil. It's a labor that is sacrificial in nature because it's motivated there by genuine love. True Christians, they're willing to work; they're willing to work hard, and we work to the point of exhaustion sometimes. We exert ourselves. We sacrifice one another out of *agapé* love. That's the kind of love, biblically, that does what's best for another person.

So the work of faith, the labor of love. Finally, every true church continues steadfastly in hope. Hope. The church endures faithfully in its work. It endures faithfully in its

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labors because it doesn't look for a present reward. They're not looking, true Christians, a true church, is not looking for an immediate payoff. We look forward to the day that our God will receive us to himself. This is the reward of the Gospel. God is the Gospel. We win him. We look forward to a day when God is going to bring us to him that we might enjoy unbroken fellowship with him forever. That's the hope of the Gospel. That's what keeps us working, keeps us laboring.

The Gospel is not about gaining health, wealth, and prosperity now. As a matter of fact, it's becoming apparent in these days that the Gospel, it may be something that costs us significantly. There's an unbridled activism that's been tearing down any vestige of Christianity in this country for the past fifty years. And that activism has more recently become institutionalized in both state and federal governments.

As those original activists in the fifties, sixties, seventies in our country, as they have matured, they've gotten into positions of leadership and so they've institutionalized their activism. There's now a revolution afoot, as you know, to

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embrace any manner of immorality and perversion. That revolution is well underway. The government is ready to enforce it. The society at large, the culture, also eager to join with the government in embracing it, in celebrating it, in enforcing it.

So get ready for the Gospel to cost you. Employers have become increasingly reluctant to hire Christians, and they put pressure on Christians in the workplace to silence their Christianity. Everybody wants to censure us. Everybody wants, wants to push us into the private sector so that we don't talk too openly about our Christianity. They tell us to privatize our religion, and really what they're trying to do is silence the Word of God. They do not want God's voice to have any influence at all, to be heard at all in the marketplace.

But we as Christians, we cannot obey man rather than God. We must obey God. We cannot remain silent. And so it's going to cost us. If we're going to be faithful to God and faithful to his call for us to broadcast the Gospel, if we're going to be faithful to his mandate for us to make disciples of the nations, that means we've got to call people to repent. That means we've

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got to tell them what sin is. That means we have to point them to exclusive access to God, as exclusively through Jesus Christ. That's going to cost us. That is going to cost us big time.

That's okay with us, though, because if we understand that if it cost Jesus, and it cost Jesus his life, how do we think this is going to go? How do you, how do we think it's going to go for us? If our, if our Leader, if our Master, died at the hands of sinful men, how do we think it's going to go for us? As true Christians, we didn't come to Christ seeking health, wealth, and prosperity in the first place. Not at all. We're not concerned about getting our best life now. As John MacArthur has said, "The only way your best life is now is if you're going to hell." This is not our best life. Right? Our best life is yet to come.

This life, right now, is about the Gospel. It's about extending the glory of God. It's about proclaiming his glory, extending his kingdom through proclaiming the Gospel. We're pilgrims, here, just passing through on the way to our eternal home. And while we're here, we're engaged in the work of faith

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to win souls for Jesus Christ. We're here, devoted to labors of love, that is, loving God and loving others to the point of even great sacrifice. We're also gonna be steadfast in our hope, enduring suffering as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. If you persecute us, we will multiply. If you jail us, we will sing hymns. If you kill us, we'll rejoice because we're going to be in the presence of Christ.

What is it that explains that kind of an attitude? What is the reason for that mentality, which, frankly, is unheard of in the rest of the world? Look at verse 4. Paul says, "We know, brothers loved by God, that he has," what? "chosen you." God is the only explanation for this. We belong to God because he chose to set his affection on us. He chose to regenerate us by the Holy Spirit. He chose to give us new life, and that new life in Christ is engaged in works of faith, in labors of love, and steadfastness of hope. The absence of those virtues in someone's life means there is no new life. The presence of those virtues, though, that's the evidence of life. And God is the one responsible for that kind of life.

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Paul says in Ephesians 1:4-6, he says, "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." Listen folks, God is the explanation for the church. God is the explanation for this church, for its existence, for its persistence, for its preservation to the end. We are and we remain because God has willed it.

The foundation God laid is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's a Gospel that came in Word, in power, in the Holy Spirit, with full conviction, that's verse 5. That's how Paul knew that these Thessalonians were chosen by God, because of their reception of the Gospel. That was the evidence. Folks, not everybody receives the Gospel. When it's clearly explained and clearly understood, many reject it. Not everyone rejoices in the truths that we proclaim and rejoice in here in our church week after week. In fact, most people reject the truth, thereby proving that they do not belong to God. But those of us who receive the truth, those of us who continue in the truth, you know why we remain? Because

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it's all of God. This is a work of his. When he does the work, it's permanent, it's unchangeable, it's everlasting. God has chosen us, he's revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

So all glory goes to God for our salvation. All glory goes to him for our endurance in the faith, and for that very reason, Jesus once rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. It says in Luke 10:21, as he was praising his Father, he says this, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

Just like those early disciples, just like those believers in Thessalonica, we also have received the truth as well here in Greeley, Colorado. The apostolic Gospel has come to us in Greeley "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction." It's from the foundation of that Word, that power, that Spirit, that conviction, from that foundation that's how the church grows. It's from that foundation that it grows, and that's what we're going to

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consider today as we finish this chapter. How does the church grow out of this foundation? What is the secret? How does the power of the Gospel operate? How does the Holy Spirit save and sanctify people for God in and through the ministry of a local church, namely our local church? How does he do that?

Write this down. It's a very simple principle. This is the principle that weaves its way through this text and the rest of these verses, and it's the way in which, humanly speaking, the Word, the power, the Spirit, the conviction, it spreads from one life to another. It's the principle of growth that generates and regenerates and produces everything that we see in God and his church.

It's the principle of, write it down, imitation. Imitation. Not imitation as in a fake; imitation as in imitating someone, right? The principle of imitation and here's how it works; Paul said, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." Christ is the prototype for every Christian. We follow those who followed him. Jesus is the pattern. The Apostles followed him; other Christians have followed them, and so on and so forth until we

in our own day, we follow those who follow the same pattern. It's an unchangeable pattern, unchangeable marks of true faith, true regeneration. We would be recognizable to Christians in the first century for the things they see in our lives, just as they would be here in our day. There's a continuity that goes from the very first Christian all the way to Christians now.

Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:3, he said, "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." He commanded the Philippians, Philippians 3:17, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." It's imitation. It's following. It's looking to them as an example. And that's why Paul he lived very, very carefully, didn't he? He was fastidious about his walk. He was conscious of the fact that others were following his pattern of living.

I think he was conscious of the fact that he, himself, connected to Jesus Christ as the Chief Cornerstone, he was a part of that foundation of the early church. You get the foundation wrong, and the whole building is awry. So Paul knew

people are going to be following this pattern of sound words, this pattern of behavior and living. And he told the Thessalonians in the second letter, he told them, "We are giving you in ourselves an example to imitate," and that's because godly examples, following them, imitating them, it's a command. It's not an option.

We must seek out godly examples, and we must follow them. 2 Thessalonians 3:7 says, "You, yourselves, know how you," here's the word, "ought to imitate us." That's not a suggestion. That's a moral imperative. That's the language of moral obligation: Ought, should, we must.

We've become accustomed to privatized religion in our country, even in our churches, and it's partly due to cultural pressures that want to squeeze us out of the public conversation, so that we compartmentalize our faith, so we have our church life, and then we have a rest-of-the-week life. So there are cultural pressures. But it's also partly due to the fact that Americans tend to have this, to each his own, mentality about the Christian faith.

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We want people to follow Jesus Christ in principle, sure, we get really uncomfortable about people looking at our own lives, right, to learn what following Christ should look like. We want to say, oh, no, please don't, don't look at me. I mean, here's, here's Jesus, here's the Bible and everything, but don't look at my life. I'm so imperfect. Okay. That can be humility because who of us has arrived? Even Paul himself said, I haven't arrived, I haven't attained, I haven't achieved, I'm not there. And yet he said, "Imitate me, as I follow Christ."

Folks, sometimes that's not humility, to point people away from yourself, to turn people from following your example. Sometimes it's based on the fact that you don't want people looking at your life too carefully. Sometimes it's just unfaithfulness. God has called us to live exemplary lives. At some level, I, I know this as a pastor, my family knows this as a pastor's family, we live in a fishbowl. And some pastors say, man, I hate living in a fishbowl. You know what? It's hard living in a fishbowl, but I absolutely love it because you're all looking at me to see if I'm consistent with what I'm teaching. You know what that does? It stirs me on to greater and

greater pursuit of faithfulness. I need to live this way, and you know what? You're not off the hook. All of you are living in some form of fishbowl yourselves. People are out there looking at your life to see what you're like, to see how you live, to see how you talk, to see if your profession of faith is consistent with your practice of faith.

If you're not living an exemplary Christian life, I understand. Just repent. Just repent. Get on the right track. Come alongside with us. We're all doing it together. Call people to follow you as you follow Christ albeit inconsistently, albeit imperfectly. But call people to follow you as you follow Christ. You be an example to other people. That's faithful Christianity. It's the very power and principle of Christian growth. It's right here in the text. This the heart of discipleship, beloved, which is what Christ has called us to do: to go and make disciples. You don't make disciples by just pointing them somewhere else. You say, Come, follow me as I follow Christ.

So let's get started. You've got an outline there in your bulletin. Let's get started with point one, here: the

observation of Gospel-driven ministry. The observation of Gospel-driven ministry. Look at verse 5 again. Paul says, "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you, for your sake."

Paul says, "You know." You know, that's a repeated reference throughout the letter to what the Thessalonians could observe for themselves. That's because Paul and his ministry team, they were with them. They were there personally. They were in the flesh. They didn't conduct mission work by conference call. They didn't do it through Skype. They did it by being there. These were not video-screen preachers; they were there in the flesh. They weren't religious celebrities up on a platform, untouchable from the rest of us common folks, right? They're not viewed from a great distance with no personal interaction, no relationship.

Paul and his companions, they were real flesh and blood people, ministers of the Gospel. Their Christian lives could be seen in living color. People could hear them speak. They could watch them act, be proactive. They could watch them react to situations and pressures, challenges, difficulties, ungodliness.

They could see how they acted and reacted. These men, the Thessalonians could observe them up close. They could be known personally, and that's because they shared their very lives with the Thessalonian believers. They were totally open, totally transparent. They held nothing back.

Over and over in this letter, Paul called the Thessalonians to remember to call to mind what they knew to be true. Just look at a couple of verses. Look at 1 Thessalonians 2:1. Chapter 2 verse 1, he says, "For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain." Look at verse 5, "We never came with words of flattery as you know, nor with a pretext for greed. God is witness." So not only are the Thessalonians watching his life. God is witness.

Where's the pretext for greed? Where's, Greed's in the heart. It can be masked to people who see, but he calls God as witness on what's going on in his heart. Remarkable. In fact, look at 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, and just notice how these verses just drip with intimacy, with, with closeness. There's a relationship between the leadership and then this young

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Thessalonian church. Paul calls them, there, to “remember how,” verse 7, “we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”

When was the last time you heard a pastor or an elder come up to you and say, you know what? I am affectionately desirous of you, and you are very dear to me? I know that if I said that to some of you, you’d be like, Ick! Get away! That’s weird! But it shouldn’t be weird, should it? It shouldn’t. “For you remember,” verse 9, “brothers,” again calling to mind what they knew, what they could see. “You remember, brothers, our labor and toil. We worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.”

Look at it again in verse 10, “You are witnesses.” He’s calling them to remember what they saw. You’re witnesses, “and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how like a father with his

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children we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

Thessalonians, they knew the character of these leaders. They could see it up close, real life. Paul and his companions, they were on the one hand, they were like tender, nursing mothers with newborn children, sacrificial, sharing their own lives with them, to only great personal cost, laboring, toiling for their good. The conduct of Paul, Silas, and Timothy was exemplary in every way. They conducted themselves, it says there, in holiness, in righteousness, and in blamelessness. They called the Thessalonians and God himself as a witness to that fact. It's remarkable!

It may seem remarkable to us, but you know what? It's really supposed to be the normal pattern. This is really normal Christianity, right here, that we're talking about. And for it to seem remarkable to us is an indication of our drift. It's really an indictment on us. We need to return to this pattern of shepherding leadership, don't we? Like a father lovingly but

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firmly exhorts his beloved children, so Paul and his companions, they set the standard for pastors and elders to conduct themselves in like manner.

That's how we ought to be doing it, right there. You say, well, that's the apostolic standard, but that's not the way every Christian is expected to live. I mean, we're not a bunch of stained-glass saints, here. We're just regular people. We have a tendency to want to let ourselves off the hook, don't we? Make it a little easier for ourselves, drop the bar just a little bit. We can grant that higher bar for Apostles and pastors and elders, etc., if it weren't for the fact that we already read some of the verses that call us all to follow the same pattern. We're on the hook. We've got to live this way. He commanded them. He commanded the Corinthian believers, by the way. Not exactly, you don't want to call your church the *First Corinthian Church of Greeley*, right? Because it was a messed-up church, a lot of problems, and Paul called those regular Corinthian believers, you know what he said to them? "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Regular folks, many of them inconsistent, many of them practicing even ungodliness in the church. He said, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

He commanded the Philippians, as we already read, "Brothers," brethren, brothers and sisters, all of you, "join in imitating me." That is, join with other believers in imitating me. You say, whoa, that's so proud, Paul. You think yourself so high. No. He doesn't because he says in the same chapter, "I don't consider myself as having arrived." Yet he says, "Join in imitating me, keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."

The standard of behavior for the mighty Apostle is the standard of behavior for every regular Christian, me and you. Just regular folks. The standard is Christ. We're to fix our eyes on him. We're to follow along with those who are following him. There is no lower bar. There is no way to shirk responsibility, here, without being unfaithful. We're to be examples to others of how to live the Christian life.

Why is that? Why is this so important? Because this growth principle of imitation is all through the New Testament. This is discipleship. We're to disciple others. That is the mandate of

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the Great Commission: Make disciples of all the nations. This is how God disciplines and raises up Christians, through the observation of mature Christians by less mature Christians. That's the principle.

The power of a Gospel-driven ministry it's manifest in the transforming of normal people into godly, exemplary Christian people. That's the principle, those who can be followed, mature Christians who can be looked to for leadership and discipleship. Paul, Silas, and Timothy on their own are nothing special. They're men of flesh and blood; they're people just like us. Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours, right? And yet a mighty prophet of God. He was a man with a nature like ours, though, having been regenerated by the Spirit, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, these men having, having been set apart by Christ for ministry, having been equipped for this work, these men became examples to follow. The Thessalonians had first-hand knowledge about Paul's character, about the character of Silas and Timothy.

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Listen, a church is never going to rise above the level of its leadership, is it? Whether in knowledge or in character, you can't go further than the person who is leading you. And through these men, because of their example, the Thessalonian church had every expectation for vitality and fruitfulness far, far into the future. Beloved, that's why it's so vital that our leadership here at Grace Church, that we also endeavor to be exemplary in our character, in our knowledge and our character. In our character and our competency, we need to be exemplary to you. Peter commands the elders, 1 Peter 5:3, we're to be examples to the flock. That's because people are watching, as they should. Younger Christians are looking to us as patterns of how to live the Christian life. In fact, they're commanded to do so. The author of Hebrews wrote, Hebrews 13:17, he said, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith."

Your leaders, your pastors, elders, shepherds, consider the outcome of their teaching in the way that they live. Observe their homes. Look at their children. Look at their grandchildren. See how they live. See how they spend their time. See what their disciplines are, their habits of behavior. And

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consider the outcome of their daily life. Are they producing bad fruit or good fruit? Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." Look at the fruit of their life. As Jesus said Luke 7:35, "Wisdom is justified by all her children." Wisdom is justified, that is, it is demonstrated to be right by its fruit, by its outcome. The benefit of wisdom isn't as much observed in the immediate outcome as much as it is in the long-term outcome. So be patient. Wait and watch. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

This all brings us to a second point. First, the observation of Gospel-driven ministry. Second point, here: the imitation of Gospel-driven ministry. You imitate what you observe, right? We find that in verse 6, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit." The word, imitators, there, it's the word *mimetai*. Okay in the Greek, that's the Greek word, we get the word, mimic, from it. And as the word implies, to imitate or to mimic somebody, it means you observe them, you study them, you even pattern your behavior after theirs, right?

Have you ever seen people who do like comedians who do impressions of famous celebrities and things like that? What is it about them that we really like and appreciate? It's the fact that they get that person right. They've got them down, right? They don't do that just off the top of their head. They have to study that person. They study the movements, the voice inflection, the sound. They study everything, right? And they imitate that, and we find that hilarious.

You can see the same thing in the Christian life. People who imitate Christ, well they look like him. You become like what you worship, and you want to join in with other people who are worshipping the same Christ, so they can help you along the way. Just as the Thessalonians mimicked Paul, Silas, and Timothy, and those men mimicked the pattern of living set by the Lord himself, in the same way we also want to pattern our lives after godly examples; mature, godly Christians who followed godly examples set for them. Those Christians followed the examples set for them all the way back to the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the head of the church. He's the prototype for all Christian living, right?

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There's something very specific, here, though, that I want you to see. Paul isn't just referring to their imitation of the Christian life in general. He gets specific, here. Take a look at verse 6 again because it says that they "received the word," imitating, they "received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit." There are many who would profess to receive the Word, but that profession, when it's tested by affliction, by suffering, by trial, it can wither away quickly, can't it? The real proof of genuineness, it's not just a begrudging resignation to suffering. You know what? Anyone can growl and, gumb, grumble and complain in the midst of a trial. Any pagan can gut his way through the pain. I certainly did as a young pagan, gutted my way through all kinds of pain. But only Christians can suffer joyfully. Only Christians can embrace affliction and suffering and persecution and, as it says here, "the joy of the Holy Spirit."

The word, affliction, it's the word *thlipsis* in the Greek. It comes from a verb that literally means, to press, to squash, to rub down, to squeeze. Have you ever felt that kind of a trial in your life; you felt hemmed in completely, squeezed,

pressured? You know what? God is using that to squeeze out the genuineness of your faith. He's refining you.

This squeezing, this pressure, squashing, we see this picture in Acts 17 when the Thessalonian church itself was planted. These young believers, they didn't merely face some minor opposition like name-calling and such silly things like that. It wasn't just about hurt feelings. Jason's house was attacked. Imagine if a bunch of people from the city surround your house, they break in, and they grab you and drag you out into the streets, accusing with hatred and murder in their eyes.

They dragged Jason before the authorities, and, and they only let him go when they extracted money out of him. That's *thlipsis*, right there. That's affliction. These early believers in Thessalonica, they were pressed down under suffering as the enemies of the Gospel surrounded them, tried to squeeze them in the vice of affliction, tried to rub them out and destroy this young, fledgling church. And rather than recoil from the terror and the fear, rather than doing whatever they could to preserve their health and happiness, which is a natural instinct, right?

The Thessalonians, they leaned into it. Powerful! Young believers, and they endured that suffering. Not only that, but they endured it with great joy. That is not normal human behavior, is it? That's supernatural. You can't explain that reaction any other way. This is a demonstration of the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is something other-worldly that they're seeing right in front of them.

The real proof of genuine faith that comes when we receive the Word, number one; when we receive it in the midst of suffering, number two; and when we receive the Word in much affliction and additionally with the joy of the Holy Spirit. That is something absolutely remarkable. That is the evidence, the true evidence, of supernatural transformation. That's the mark of regenerative power, the power of the Holy Spirit, the outcome of Gospel-driven ministry.

Listen, every Christian is called to share in the afflictions of Christ to some level. Every Christian is called to endure suffering for his sake, for the sake of the Gospel. As

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Philippians 1:29 says, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him," that's what's granted to you, that you should believe in him, "but also to that you should suffer for his sake." It's so contrary to so much of what is taught today in many churches.

Listen, suffering is part and parcel of the Christian life. It's not odd to suffer as a Christian. It's actually normal. "As it is written," Romans 8:36, "for your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." Makes me uncomfortable, doesn't it you? I don't want to be slaughtered. I don't want to be dragged from my house and beaten. But you know what? That's just the natural response. If I suffer for the sake of Christ, we rejoice to be counted worthy to suffer along with him for his name's sake. That's the utmost honor. Jesus died on a cross for me.

Paul says, Romans 8:36, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. And yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." That's because affliction and suffering, it's

what prepares the soil for fertility, productivity. In order to go into a, a field and plant and grow anything, look, I'm no farmer. I'm begging off of all of you who can tell me how it's done. But you go into a field, a virgin field, and you have to break it up, don't you? You have to plow it. You have to pull out all the rocks. You've got to really grind up that soil. I'm sure if the soil had feelings, and that field had feelings, they'd say, you know what? That hurts, you running that plow through me!

But this is how things grow, and in our life. That's why Paul wrote in Romans 5:3-4, "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." It's that hope that we have as Christians in the midst of suffering, sometimes very severe, sometimes very intense affliction. And that, when we suffer with that affliction with joy, that draws the attention of the world. What, what is that? I've never seen anything like that!

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Peter prepares us for that attention, that curiosity, those questions. He writes this, 1 Peter 3:15, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." Set him apart as holy in your heart. That is, he is Lord, he governs my thoughts, my actions, my words. In every situation, he's Lord, so set him apart like that in your heart, "and always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you." How are they going to see the hope that is in you unless you are enduring through suffering? That's the plan. God puts Christians through trials and suffering, and we learn to endure it with joy in the Holy Spirit. That is supernatural, and it draws the attention of the world around us, which gives us what? Opportunity to proclaim the saving Gospel, to see more people saved, more people sanctified.

So how do we learn that? Where did that pattern come from? Well, we've imitated the Christians who came before us, right? We're standing on their shoulders. They imitated the Christians who came before them, and so on and so forth all the way back to imitating the pattern of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. "It's fitting that he," Hebrews 2:10, "It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to

glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through," what? "suffering." If Jesus, the founder of our salvation, if he was perfected through suffering, should we expect anything less for ourselves? No. Not at all. Hebrew 12:2 says, "We look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Listen, this is the mark of the imitation of a Gospel-driven ministry: number one, when people receive the Gospel; number two, when they receive it amid much affliction, even great affliction, severe affliction; number three, when they receive that Gospel, enduring the suffering that it brings with the joy of the Holy Spirit; with deep, unshakeable joy. That's the evidence of spiritual power that Paul saw in the Thessalonian church, which he noted in verse 5, "the gospel that came not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

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So we observe, we imitate Gospel-driven ministry, the ministry that we've received from others. Those are the first two points in our outline. They're really the power that's in the engine room of every true church. They're what fuels us, what makes us go. As we've said, this is a reproductive power. It's a power that's generated by the Holy Spirit himself, and he produces a like faith in every genuine believer, conforming us all after the image and the pattern of one Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's how every true church grows.

And we can see in our third point the propagation of a Gospel-driven ministry. The propagation, or the spread, it's just a big word for spread. It has "ation" on the end of it, so I want to keep it in the outline. The propagation, the spreadation, if you will, of a Gospel-driven ministry. This point covers verses 7-10, we're just going to break it up into two parts, here, starting with verses 7-8. "You received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit," verse 6, "so that" or with the result that, "you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia, for not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth you in Macedonia and Achaia,

but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.”

The Thessalonians observed Gospel-driven ministry in Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They then imitated the example that they saw in them, and the result of their imitation, it starts here in verses 7-8. This is what happens when believers imitate apostolic examples, when they imitate the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the fruit of that imitation. It’s the propagation, it’s the spread of more Gospel-driven ministry because it’s the spread of the Gospel itself.

So first, notice there, we see the propagation of reputation. Reputation. When you imitate godly examples, you become a godly example for other Christians to imitate. When you imitate the godly example, you become a godly example. By following godly examples, we become godly examples to other people. Notice for the Thessalonians, the spread of their reputation. It didn’t stay local. It didn’t stay bound within their own zip code, their own city. They had a regional influence that spread farther than they could have ever imagine.

"You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." It's incredible!

Thessalonica, it was situated in a prime location for influence, for spreading the reputation of this little group of believers. It was a great location. The, the city had the best harbor in the Aegean Sea, and all kinds of people were in and out of the city, soldiers and sailors, merchants, tradesmen. And when something significant happened, news spread rapidly, as you might imagine. That's because Thessalonica also, in addition to having a great harbor, it sat on the Via Egnatia, the major east-west road that connected Rome with the rest of the Empire. And then also directly to the west of the city was an important north-south road, a major artery that connected the province of Macedonia with the province of Achaia. So by land and by sea, news spread quickly from this little city.

So here's this small band of young Christians, new Christians, by the way, and they're proclaiming the Gospel. They're getting blow-back, they're getting hurt, they're enduring the persecution, they're responding to all that

affliction with great joy. And when other believers in Macedonia and Achaia, when they heard the news, this had a strengthening effect. It had such an encouraging effect on their faith. It emboldened the other Christians to stand firm as well, and they followed that Thessalonian example. The word, example, there, is the word *tupos* from which we get the word, type. Type: It refers to the impression that an object makes when it's pressed against something soft. You can think of a signet ring kind of pressing itself into some wax or clay. That's the idea. The casting of a die, the minting of a coin, all the same principle. The image that the hard form leaves on the softer substance, that's the idea, here. The example, the type.

Listen, younger Christians, they're impressionable, aren't they? That's why the early discipleship of a Christian is so important to set them on the right trajectory of growth. Younger Christians are always going to look to older Christians as examples, as models of godly behavior. They're going to look to them for, for patterns of living, habits of life. That's as it should be. It's a great privilege. It's also a great responsibility.

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As a Christian, you've gotta realize that others are watching you. Others are observing your life. So what are you modeling for those who look at your life? What does your marriage look like? Wives, how do you treat your husbands? How do you treat them in public? How do you treat them in private? Husbands, how do you treat your wives? Parents, how do you talk to your children? What do they see in you? That you're consistent with the things that people see here at home where no one's looking, or you think no one's looking? Are you modeling the Gospel for others, setting an example, no matter the circumstances, no matter the cost?

Listen, don't miss this opportunity. God has given us such a wonderful opportunity to be an example of Gospel transformation to many who are watching our lives, to many who are looking to the outcome of our faith. Like the Thessalonians of days past, we need to model true Christianity for generations of Christians coming after us by receiving the Word, by receiving it even amid much affliction, amid any suffering that comes to us because of it, by receiving it with the joy of the Holy Spirit even in the midst of that suffering. That's what true Christianity looks like. We need to model it.

So that's the first mark of the propagation of a Gospel-driven ministry. You spread a type, you spread a pattern, an example that others can follow. And the spread of that example means the Gospel spreads with that as well. People see a type of the Gospel. We see that here. We see the propagation not just of a godly reputation and example, but we see, second, the propagation of the Gospel itself. The Gospel goes forth. It's consistent with the life that's lived according to the Gospel. It becomes a vessel to carry the Gospel.

The fact is, here the Word of the Lord, the very message which the Lord has spoken, that is what sounded forth through their bold witness. That verb that's translated, sounded forth, in verse 8, it's directly related to a verb that means, to sound or to ring. It's like the blast of a trumpet. We're talking about a deafening tone. This is the ring of a bell. It could even refer sometimes in some contexts to the peal of thunder, like the booming sound of lightning as it pierces through the sky. When the Word of the Lord came to Thessalonica, it was like a nuclear bomb went off, and there were shock waves of reverberation. As people carried the news of that Gospel, its

effect went around the region to other believers as that reverberation blasted around, verse 8, “not only in Macedonia and Achaia but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth.”

Just a footnote, here. When Paul refers to, the word of the Lord sounding forth, he is talking about the spread of the Gospel message. And when he says that their “faith toward God has gone forth,” he’s not just talking about the message. He’s talking about the evidence of their behavior, their life. Okay? So we’re talking about the verbal message of the Gospel, the verbal testimony, and it’s accompanied, here, by a living testimony, by a life that corresponds to the message of the Gospel, a life that’s consistent with the Gospel. Both are important; both are here.

It’s interesting to note that Paul wrote both of the Thessalonian epistles, he wrote them from the city of Corinth in Achaia, and it was during his ministry in Corinth that he was running into people who were telling him about these believers from Thessalonica. This is no exaggeration Paul is making, here.

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This isn't just, this isn't some kind of flattery or encouragement. He really means what he writes here. "In every place your faith toward God has gone forth, and we have no need to say anything." That is, we don't need to talk about what God has done in your church and in your life because the message is out already. Other people are circulating the message.

Listen, folks, that's our opportunity as well. That's what we can see here. The message of Christianity in many parts of our country has almost disappeared. But God has placed us here in our region for such a time as this. We have a tremendous privilege of being his witnesses right here, here in our own Jerusalem, in our own Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth, in places like Haiti, right? God has situated our church in a growing area of the city, centrally located in the region. There are two colleges in close proximity to us. We're surrounded by people, neighbors, co-workers, friends, family. In fact, some of the industries in our area keep bringing people from other parts of the world into our city. As Christians, we understand the dangers that can come from immigration, through terrorists sneaking through. But you know what else immigration brings? The nations to our doorstep. That's not the enemy,

folks. That's the mission field. We need to orient ourselves to the opportunity that God is bringing to us. What are we going to do about it? God can use us too, beloved, to sound forth the verbal testimony of the Gospel. He can use us here to show forth the living testimony of the Gospel by the way we live. If we take care of the depth of our ministry, God will take care of the breadth. May he cause the Gospel to sound forth from us as well. Amen?

The propagation of a godly reputation, a transformed life; propagation of the message of the Gospel itself, which is the very cause and principle of a transformed life; and third, the propagation of the testimony of true conversion. That's verses 9-10. Look at it there, "They themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among 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 delivers us from the wrath to come."

Believers in Macedonia and Achaia were telling Paul, reporting to him about how the Thessalonians originally received

these missionaries, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, when they first came into the city. And the essence of the report was this: There's true conversion there. There's true conversion. There's a before and an after. There's a turning from and a turning to. There's something repented of and something embraced. Thessalonian believers, here, are a changed people, and it's a remarkable bit of news that had spread everywhere. This had not been seen anywhere in Thessalonica or in all Macedonia.

Just to break this down a bit. As the message spread throughout the region, Paul heard the propagation of the story of true Christianity. And first, he heard about real conversions; second, he heard about a new devotion; and third, he heard about an abiding expectation. I guess these are sub-points of a sub-point, aren't they? Hope you can stay with me. But there are just three things here that we see with this propagation of the story of true conversion. This is what happens when we ourselves observe and imitate mature Christians, follow godly examples. Word spreads, and it spreads quickly.

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First, consider the spread of the news of real conversion. It's something remarkable. Paul said, "You turned to God from idols." The word, turned, *epistrephó*, it's a classic word for conversion. It means a complete change of direction, a complete reorientation of life. They were worshiping idols; they turned away from idols to worship God. Old affections, old behaviors, they were abandoned. A new allegiance was embraced. Why was that such an incredible report? Because in the ancient world, turning away from one's idol meant turning away from one's temple. Turning away from the temple had significant social and cultural implications.

The first century was not like our world. It was not secular; it was very religious, deeply religious. Your entire business, life, and network, not to mention all your family relationships, all of it wrapped up in temple worship, temple sacrifice. So when these Thessalonians turned to God from idols, this isn't, oh, yeah, I believe in Jesus. This is true conversion because there were implications to, I believe in Jesus. It meant getting cut off. They knew they could lose their business. They knew they could be rejected, marginalized from the culture. They'd become social pariahs. No one would want to

associate with them. Even worse, they risked absolute persecution, persecution that eventually did become a reality for the Thessalonians. Being a Christian cost something during those times. There's no easy believism in that day.

It's been different for many, many years in our country, hasn't it? People have been able to profess Christianity in this country, and it hasn't really cost them anything. In fact, they feel like they can join a very powerful voting block in this country and wield influence. But that's changing, isn't it? I wonder how many people will continue to profess Christ when it costs, when there are tax penalties, when it means the loss of a job or job opportunities. I wonder how many professing Christians will stop professing openly, in public, because they, they are ashamed of the Gospel and ashamed of Christ. I wonder if professing Christians will be changing places with the homosexual, taking their place in the closet, afraid to endure scorn for the sake of Christ. Sadly, that's happening, not among true Christians, but it is happening among the professing church. Folks, we've got to stand firm. We will not bow. We've got to stand firm.

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The word that spread about the Thessalonians was this, these people turned to God from idols. They sacrificed; it cost them. They turned away; they rejected dead, lifeless idols. They embraced the true and living God to serve him. And that's the second thing we see here, how Paul heard about these Thessalonians, the report he heard from others. He heard about real conversion. He also heard about a new devotion.

A new devotion, end of verse 9, "You turned to God from idols," to what? "to serve the living and true God." Interesting word there, the word, serve. It's the verb *douleuó*, which means, to enslave oneself to someone else. The noun form is *doulos*, slave. This is the very essence of full and absolute devotion to God. We consider ourselves owned by him. Why? Because we are owned by him, right? We're redeemed with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished, spotless. This is the mark of every true Christian. We're slaves to God.

When you become a Christian, listen, it is the end of you. No longer are you the lord of your life. No longer is this life about your ambitions, your goals, your preferences, your dreams.

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It's not about your self-fulfillment, your self-actualization. When you become a Christian, this is about the death of you. This is about new life of Christ lived in and through you. And that's why Paul said, "For me to live is Christ," Philippians 1:21. Over in Galatians 2:20, same idea, "I have been crucified with Christ." Dead. Put to death on a cross. "I've been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."

Listen, folks, Christianity is about serving God. It's about slavery to God through Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary, and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, my burden is light." Don't forget, folks, there is a yoke. There is a burden.

There is a slavery, here, to a new master, but it's an easy yoke. It's a light burden. Becoming a Christian means switching

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slave masters. We go from slavery to sin, Satan, and death. We go to righteousness, Jesus Christ, and eternal life. In contrast to our former enslavement to sin, which leads us into eternal hell, Jesus' yoke is easy. His burden is light. Here's the secret, Slavery to Christ is not slavery at all; it's true freedom. Following his laws and his rules it's joy everlasting.

Paul was hearing wonderful news about these Thessalonians. He was hearing about real conversion. He was hearing about this new devotion to God. Third, he heard about an abiding expectation. "They themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God," and this in verse 10, "and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." What a powerful, powerful summation of the hope of the Gospel! The resurrected and risen Christ is now in heaven, and he will return one day to administer retribution for the ungodly, but also to rescue and reward the godly, those whom he has made his own. That is the hope of the Gospel that we all believe, amen, and there's no hope in this life. There's hope in him.

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As the shadows of sin and depravity grow longer over our land, as the cold night descends upon the world, Christians look to the future with joy, with eager expectation. We have an abiding hope, which puts all the suffering of this life into the right perspective. We're not cowering, we're not fearful. We're bold, we're courageous because we know Jesus Christ, and we know he wins in the end, and he'll protect us and preserve us all the way to the end.

Just a couple of notes, here. First, if we're to be delivered from the coming wrath, it follows that there is a coming wrath. Do you believe that? Christ has saved us by his death on the cross. He has died in our place. He has died the death that we should've died for our sins. He has rescued us from this very wrath, from this divine wrath, from eschatological wrath. We're not going to face the divine retribution that's gonna be unleashed on the rest of the unbelieving world. There is a coming wrath, which is a harrowing, terrifying reality for those who do not obey the Gospel.

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As I said, many profess Christianity, but very few truly obey the Gospel they claim to believe. That's not my observation. It is an observation, but it's not only mine. Jesus warned people, Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who," what? "does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day," not just a few, not just some bad apples, "on that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, do many mighty works in your name?' Then I'll declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Listen, let's not fool ourselves, folks. There are many of those whom Jesus is warning about right here in Greeley, Colorado. There are many religious people attending churches here in our county, here in our state. In fact, you know some of these people personally. You know them by name, and Jesus is telling you they're in danger of being cast away from Christ. They're in danger of hell. They will not be rescued from the coming wrath. Instead, they're going to experience the vengeance of Christ which, 2 Thessalonians 1:8 says, "will come, and it will come with the holy angels in flaming fire."

Do we believe all the Bible or just parts? Do we just like the happy parts? What about these scary parts? These scary parts are to provoke us to evangelism. They're to provoke us to care and have compassion on people who profess Christ, but don't live a Christian life. Are you concerned about those people? It's a terrifying reality that many professing Christians will face because they don't obey. They don't obey the Gospel that they profess. There's no true conversion in their lives. Listen, if you love them, you're going to tell them the truth. If you don't tell them, who will? Who will? We want them to join us. We want, we want them to join with all true Christians who've experienced a true conversion, who've enslaved themselves to the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ, who have this abiding expectation and hope that our Lord Jesus Christ is indeed coming back to get us.

So when Paul heard about the Thessalonians, he heard about real conversion. He heard about their new devotion. He heard about their abiding expectation. We see these virtues, faith, hope, and love, this is where we see them show up again, right? We've already talked about that back in verse 3, faith, love,

and hope. They're the mark of every true Christian. We see them showing up right here as well.

The Thessalonians' conversions, like the conversions of all true Christians, it brought to life the three principle Christian virtues, faith, love, and hope. And Paul structured verses 9 and 10 so that we could see that fleshed out. Look at those verses again. He says, "You turned to God from idols." What's that? Faith. He says, "You served the living and true God." What's that? That's love; that's devotion to God in love. And he says, "You wait for his Son from heaven." You know what that is? Hope. That's hope.

Faith, love, hope, mark of true conversion. This is the report that Paul was receiving about the Thessalonian believers from other people. Thessalonian believers first observed those virtues at work in Paul and Silas and Timothy. They imitated their faith. As they imitated them, they became an example to other Christians as well. Beloved, that's a mark for us; that's a pattern for us. No different pattern. This is how the Gospel spreads. It's our privilege and opportunity as well to propagate

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the Gospel through the power of a Gospel-driven ministry. With God's help we will do exactly that.

Let's pray. Heavenly father we are so grateful to what we see in this magnificent first chapter of a small little letter to a, a church that's not even known to us now. But we are so grateful that you have recorded the faithfulness of this church on the pages of scripture so there is immutable unchanging testimony from your own lips about the pattern of Gospel growth in Gospel driven ministry. We pray father that would cause that same principle of growth and life that imitation of godly examples, we pray that that would running through this church. That we would be an example to other believers in our region and in our state, throughout the world.

We pray that you would help us to carry out the great commission of Jesus Christ, Matthew 28, go into the world and to make disciples, baptizing and teaching we commit ourselves to that very task until we, until the day that the Lord Jesus Christ comes for us or until the day that you us home. Help us to be faithful. We love you father. We thank you so much for an

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opportunity to study your word together. Please use it to change us, even this day and it's in Jesus' name we pray.