

“Paul to the Thessalonians”

1 Thessalonians 1:1–7; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17

Paul writes to the Thessalonian house churches.

This week, we continue our look at Paul’s second missionary journey (see the map below), concentrating on Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1-10). This was an important city and had a Jewish population large enough to sustain a synagogue. Paul first visits there in AD 50 or so and then writes a letter back not long after. Paul has trouble in Thessalonica, but he left a group of devoted believers to whom he writes and for whom he expresses deep thanks.

In the opening to the letter called 1 Thessalonians, Paul notes that he, Silas, and Timothy always give thanks for this community of believers and constantly lift them up in prayer before God. There may be a bit of encouraging hyperbole at work here, but not much. In the space of a few months, the Thessalonians have already become an example to all the believers in Greece and Macedonia, despite (or because of?) their persecution. This brief passage is worth a closer look if we want to understand the nature of genuine gratitude.



“...work of faith and labor of love...”

In verse 3, we encounter a triad familiar from 1 Corinthians 13: faith, love and hope, though in a different order. As elsewhere in Paul, faith does not mean mere intellectual acceptance of the gospel claims. Faith consists of trust and

reliance. Indeed, “trust” is certainly the best synonym for what the biblical authors mean by “faith.”¹ As we’ve talked about so often, Christian love is not about feelings but actions. Often, those actions entail sacrifice of our time or money or pride. If trust is the best synonym for faith, “sacrifice” is the best synonym for “love.”

When Paul speaks of the Thessalonians’ “work of faith and labor of love,” he uses two different words for work. The first, this “work of faith,” refers to work that produces something. The Thessalonians’ work of faith is evident in the

disciplined practice of their faith – it is work that has produced the fruit of the Spirit, to borrow a phrase from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. The second word for work that Paul uses includes an element of hardship or discomfort. Thus, the Thessalonians’ “labor of love” captures their understanding that love is about sacrificial doing, serving others even when it is difficult or distasteful.

The Imitation of Christ (and of Paul!?)

When Paul gives his thanks that the Thessalonians have become “imitators of us and the Lord” it can strike us as a bit odd. After all, aren’t imitations mere copies of the original, even phony at that? And is Paul really so bold as to expect that these Christians will imitate him? Aren’t we to be Christ-like, not Paul-like?

In our world, we get pretty shy about being role models, but the language of imitation was prevalent in Paul’s day. If Paul had not been willing to hold himself up as worthy of imitation, he would have been seen as an unworthy teacher. In this way, the ancients were more realistic than we sometimes are. Paul was a role model regardless of what he said. The ancients understood that “Do as I say, not as I do” just doesn’t cut it.

Paul means that we can look to Jesus and even to himself as we seek to learn the shape of an authentically Christian life. It is not a call for us all to do and say the same things, nor to be cheap knockoffs of the real thing. I must live my life, not Jesus’ life and not Paul’s.

But from them, I can learn much about what it means to live each day in right relationship with God and with other persons. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges them to have the “same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5). It is a call for us to imitate the selflessness of Jesus so that, like the Thessalonians, we might, in turn, be an example to others (v. 7).

“...steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ...”

It is this “hope” that most challenges our imaginations. Paul is not referring to a generally up beat and hopeful attitude that everything is in God’s hands and will work out well. Rather, Paul is speaking of a patient and enduring confidence that Jesus Christ will return. Just as “trust” is the best synonym for “faith” and “sacrifice” for “love,” the best synonym for Christian “hope” is “confidence.” Just ahead in the letter (v. 10), Paul commends the Thessalonians for being ones “who wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” Repeatedly in this brief thanks-filled letter, Paul refers to Jesus’ return, his second coming (his *parousia* in the Greek), when all of God’s promises will reach their final consummation (see 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-5:11; 5:23).

Jesus’ return is the great Christian hope. We are not merely hopeful in the sense that this might happen. Instead, our hope is grounded in our sure confidence that God keeps his promises.

Thus, we can reach out to the future and grab it, certain that the God who resurrected Jesus will one day put all things right. We can give thanks today for God’s tomorrow.

A life of thanksgiving

Like the Thessalonians, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into the praise and thanksgiving of God. But let’s not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy.

Nonetheless, as Richard Foster writes, “Our God is not made of stone. Like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude.”

Living every day in a spirit of gratitude does not come naturally to us; there is much in life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude. Nonetheless, we can seek to grow in our ability to see and to experience God and all his goodness, so that, like the Thessalonians, others will see our work of faith, our labors of love, and our patient confidence in Jesus’ return. This is the service that pleases God with awe and respect.

¹ It is worth reminding ourselves again that the Greek word we translate “believe” is actually the verb form of the Greek word “faith.” When we speak of believing in Jesus, we really mean we are “faithing” in Jesus – trusting him with all that we are, all that we have, all that we do, and all that we dream.

Standing firm – a second letter

Paul's letters are all written for a reason. A second letter, which we call 2nd Thessalonians, was written to address some fears among the Thessalonian believers. We Christians have always been called to lives of courage and boldness, in word and action. The Christians in Thessalonica (and there couldn't have been many) are not so much discouraged as they are fearful. Someone has come into town proclaiming that Christ has already returned! "What could this mean? How could we have missed it?! The sky is falling!"

I'm sure that all of us give into alarmism from time to time. What are we to do when we are alarmed? For them, as for us there was always something to fear – whether it was the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem or simply missing out. The question is how we cope with our fears. Paul urged the Thessalonians in three directions. I'm pretty sure he'd give the same advice to the disciples gathered after Peter's arrest (see Acts 4).

First, Paul reminds them that they had been called to Christ by the proclaiming of the good news. They are God's chosen, his "fruit fruits" through whom God's saving work would go forward. They could trust God's choice, confident that they would "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Second, Paul urged the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter" (2:15). The word "traditions" can mislead us a bit. Paul isn't talking about clergy, robes, décor, or the order of worship. Rather, Paul is urging the believers to stand firm upon the teaching of the apostles, whether oral or written. The problem of false teaching cuts through nearly all of the New Testament. Whether it was those who came to Thessalonica teaching that Christ had already come or those who went to Galatia teaching that believers had to keep Jewish law, in all cases, the apostles demanded that the Christian communities stand firm in the apostolic Christian faith.

Third, the Thessalonians could rest in the "eternal comfort and good hope" of God's love. Indeed, verses 16 and 17 are something of "wish-prayer." Paul encourages the Christians to hold to the comfort offered by Christ. It is not so much that Paul is praying that the Thessalonians will get something they lack; Paul prays that they will embrace what is already theirs. May we do the same!

What sets apart good deeds done in the name of Christ from the other good deeds done every day? (2 Thess. 2:17)

Those who do not know Christ do many wonderful, commendable, and important acts of generosity. But what sets apart the charitable work done in Christ's name? In his commentary on Galatians in the Interpretation series (available in our library), Charles Cousar suggests that these questions are better answered by negatives:

"a) The deeds done in Christian freedom are not coerced or done to satisfy a legal demand. They are not pre-formed by a commandment or moral prescription so that the doers are obliged to keep their attention glued on what it is they are to do and away from the recipients of the deeds. Christ frees persons from such a law and for needy neighbors. To act in freedom is to be guided by the ones whose real needs are to be served.

(b) Free people are not determined in their actions by what sort of response their actions may or may not evoke. They are not miffed when a "thank you" is not immediately received for a contribution made or an important bill passed. They are not deterred when the recipients of a kindly deed do not all rush to vote democrat (or republican) or do not promptly become capitalists (or socialists)—or even reject Christianity. Christian freedom means the demonstration of freedom. Recipients may be witnessed to, but never compelled to answer in a particular way as if they are forever in debt to those who helped them.

(c) Free people are not deceived by over-valuing their moral decisions and their contributions to others as if their freedom depended on what they do. They know that freedom is a gift given, that to act freely is a sign of grace received, and consequently they do not have to be caught up in continually taking stock to see if enough money has been pledged or enough service rendered. How much is "enough"? The characteristically Christian style of life emerges not so much in what is done as in the fact that what is done expresses the freedom given by God, whose call is to selfless, serving love. Such a vocation takes seriously the remarkable paradox expressed in Eph. 2:8–10 where the writer, after affirming that salvation comes by grace and not by works, adds: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (v. 10)."
