

A FAITH THAT WORKS

By David H. Roper

Series: The Marks of a Maturing Church

First Thessalonians was the first of Paul's letters to these early churches. And though it was early in his experience, it in no way represents any immature ideas or half-baked thinking on Paul's part. By the time he penned this first letter he had been a Christian about eighteen years and had been engaged in his apostolic mission for about ten years. This represents, therefore, the thinking of a man who had not only grasped the basic principles of the Christian life, but was learning to put these principles into experience.

In this book he mentions that God had "approved" his ministry. This is a very interesting word. Archeologists have found this word, "dokimos," that is translated "approved," inscribed on the bottom of thousands of pieces of pottery as they have been excavating in Palestine. It seems that the potters had a practice of making a vessel, then putting it into a furnace to fire it. When they withdrew it, if it had stood the test of the firing, and there were no flaws or cracks in the vessel, they would take their stylus and write across the bottom, "dokimos" (approved) and as such it would be qualified for sale. But if it cracked, they would write "adokimos" on the bottom, disapproved, signifying it to be disqualified for use. It is a very interesting picture of Paul's ministry, because he is saying his ministry has been tested and he feels that God has given his stamp of approval and has written across his life "dokimos" (approved). So although this is an early writing from Paul's hand, it represents something of deep thought and personal experience.

We are going to begin our study where Paul does with this brief introduction. In chapter 1, verse 1, he writes,

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

You will recognize that this is very similar to introductions to other books that Paul has written. It is, of course, the contemporary style of first-century letter writers. There is, first of all, a brief word about the letter writer, or writers in this case, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, this team of men who, along with Luke, had been engaged with Paul in his second missionary journey and had been traveling with him in Macedonia and Achaia, preaching the gospel and establishing churches. Now they are in Corinth and they join with Paul in sending this letter to the Thessalonian church. Then comes a word about the recipients, "*the church of the Thessalonians*," and a brief greeting, "*Grace to you and peace*" - "grace" being the Greek word of greeting, and "peace," the Hebrew word, "shalom."

The thing that is striking about this introduction is that Paul, perhaps without intending to, gives us a brief description of the church. He speaks first of all about the geographical location of the church as being in Thessalonica, but, far more important, he says that this is the church "*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*." This is a church composed of individuals who know God in a personal way, who have entered into his family, and who have become sons of God on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ. Secondly, these are people who have put themselves under the authority of Jesus Christ. They know him as *Lord*. This, of course, was the burden of Paul's teaching in Thessalonica (Acts 17). The magistrates of the city had leveled a charge of treason

against Paul because he preached another king, Jesus. They did not realize that this king was no threat to their rule in Thessalonica. Paul was saying that Jesus Christ seeks to reign in a human life, and this was what the believers had come to experience. They knew God as Father and they knew Jesus Christ as God.

It is easy to see from this that Paul is not talking about an organization or some association of people in Thessalonica, but he is talking about individuals, because organizations or associations cannot have a relationship to God, and they cannot know Jesus Christ as Lord. He is talking about people who know God. And of course, this is what a church is. A church is not a building. It is not an organization, it is people. Now I am sure we all understand this, but it is important to see, as we study this book, that when Paul talks about the church, he is not talking about the organizational church, he is talking about the individual. And while we are going to be looking at the marks of an organized church, essentially we are speaking about the church as individuals, about you and me. And when we talk about the marks of a growing church, we do not mean that we are adding to business plan, or that we have pews in our auditorium now, or that our budget is increasing; we are talking about men and women who are growing in their knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Now in the following verses, Paul turns from this brief *definition* of a church, to a *description* of a vital church.

We give thanks to God always for you all, 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, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you, for 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 in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come. (I Thess. 1:6-10)

In the opening verses of this chapter Paul puts his finger on the characteristics of a maturing church. He indicates they had a *work* that proceeded from *faith*; a *labor* that was the result of their *love*; and a *steadfastness* or *patience* that was the product of their *hope*. Paul looks at these three characteristics from two standpoints. First, he looks at the attitude that inspires them, the attitudes of faith, love, and hope. Then he changes his perspective and he looks at the actions that follow: their work, their labor, and their patience. Now I think it is important that Paul so states this truth, because both perspectives are important. Our attitudes are important, and our actions are important. We must start with right attitudes because they are the key to right conduct and right activity. So much of Christian activity is trivial and worthless, because our attitudes are wrong. Our actions look good externally but the motives that precipitate these actions are wrong. For instance, Paul writes to the church in Rome and he points out to them that "*whatever is not of faith is sin*." The point is that any activity can be sin if it does not proceed from an attitude of rest and confidence in God. It can be constructive, it can be religious, but if the activity is not sourced in an attitude of faith it is worse than ineffective; it is sin. So the attitude is important. Now in another place, where Paul writes to the church in Corinth in regard to *love*, he says that we may be wise and we may be noble, we may be altruistic, we may even become a martyr and give our bodies to be burned, but if we have not love it profits nothing. It is worthless and sterile. So the heart attitude is the key to any activity. but actions are not unimportant, because actions reveal the attitude.

James writes. "*You say that you have faith? That is good, but you must show me your faith by your works because faith without works is dead.*" It is useless, powerless and inert. Faith if it is real faith, always projects itself into some kind of activity. We cannot see *love*, but we can see people acting in love toward one another. In

fact, the Scriptures always define love in this way. You search in vain for any specific definition of love. It seems to be defined in terms of functions. For instance, John writes of love: "*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his Son to be the satisfaction for us.*" We cannot see love, but if we observe God and his actions toward men, we can see something of the nature of love and how it functions. In I Corinthians 13, Paul gives us the catalog of the outworking of love. Love is patient, love is kind, love has good manners, love does not envy. These are all functional definitions of love. You cannot see *hope*, the attitude of confidence that God is absolutely faithful and that he is pursuing his program and that in his sovereignty, everything is moving toward a purpose. But you can see the action of patience and steadfastness that hope produces. And so I see both of these as vital: the attitudes, and the actions. Now this week and in subsequent weeks we are going to be looking at these three marks of maturity. The degree to which we are growing in comprehension of these principles is the degree to which we are growing in maturity.

First, we want to look at Paul's statement concerning the active, quality of their faith -- a faith that works. First, the attitude. What is faith? That is a very difficult question to answer, but I think there are some clues in this book. Paul says that this is a pattern church -- that by looking at this church we can see something of God's pattern for all believers. The first word of their faith is found in verses 8 and 9.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols,

This says that people in the provinces of Macedonia and Achala had heard the startling fact that down in Thessalonica, something had happened. These people who *formerly had been worshipping idols had turned to God*. In fact, it put the apostle Paul out of work! He did not have to say anything, because the whole world was talking about this remarkable reversal. They turned to God from idols.

The first thing I note here is that *men are obliged to have faith in something*. They must depend upon something or somebody. Man is never really independent. The option is never faith or nonfaith. The question is: what is the object of faith? We are either trusting in idols or we are trusting in God. These are the only two options.

Now of course, an idol may not necessarily be a piece of wood or metal. Augustine said, "That thing that precipitates the predominant thought in our mind, that is our idol." What is the thing that pops into your mind when we shift our minds into neutral? It's somewhat like a yo-yo: you throw it away and it comes back, and you throw it away and it comes back. The thought that comes back -- that idea is our idol. That is the aspect on which we are basing our life. Now an idol can be a lot of things. An idol can be a *person*; a husband or a wife, or a child, a boyfriend, or a girlfriend it can be a *thing*: a car, house, job, or a four-point average for a student. Or it can be *ourselves*: our confidence in ourselves, in our ability to match wits with the world, our command and grasp of every situation. But of course, the problem with an idol is that it always tends to disappoint us. If it becomes the sole source of our support it tends to break down. It cannot bear our full weight. This is why we get so frustrated and bitter and resentful at times. The things in which we trusted most have let us down. But when we do as the Thessalonians did, when we turn from idols to God (and I think this is not just a once-for-all practice, but a continuing principle of Christian living, of constantly turning from the things that we would depend upon, and resting upon God), then things begin to happen in our life. We find that Jesus Christ, as the One in whom we place our confidence, is always, in every circumstance, an adequate resource for living. He never disappoints us. He never breaks down under pressure, he is always available, 24 hours a day, to live in us the same quality of life that he lived twenty centuries ago in these believers in this little town of Thessalonica. It was true of them, and it can be true of us. I need to take a good look at myself in this regard, as we all must

constantly appraise our attitudes. What am I really trusting in? What is my source of confidence? What am I resting on? Is it an idol, or is it God? Jeremiah the prophet wrote (Chapter. 17:5-8):

Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited.

When I was in the service I was stationed for a time in Camp Irwin, close to Barstow, California, right out in the middle of the Mojave desert. I gained a real appreciation for some of the desert shrubs that have to live in that environment. I found out what a "*heath in the desert*" is. It is a bush that gets along on a bare subsistence level. When the full force of the sun is felt during the summer they drop their leaves and appear to die. For all practical purposes they are inert. They are existing, but with no real quality of life. To place our trust in the arm of flesh is to live the same barren, existence.

I see a second characteristic in Paul's life, a sort of honesty and openness and candor that is very appealing. In verses 3 and 4, he says,

For our appeal does not spring from error or uncleanness, nor is it made with guile; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

No axes to grind, Paul says, no facade. The aim of our ministry is to make an honest proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ. The city of Thessalonica was filled with religious hucksters, priests of the mystery religions; religions built upon deceit and distortions of truth and various licentious practices. But Paul says, "I'm not like them I just have one desire, I want to please God. I wasn't commissioned by any church, I'm not responsible to any man: I have only God to please, I want what he wants."

Our motives can be so complicated and conflicting. It is so hard to discern why we act as we do. We experience the truth of the prophet, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?*" We tie ourselves in knots trying to discover why we do what we are doing. We find ourselves responding to various stimuli and groups. We try to discover which way the wind is blowing and then move with the crowd in that direction, Paul says, "Not I. I have just one reference point, one desire. I want a transparent life before you; no hypocrisy, no poses, I just 'want to please God. I want to find a note of approval in his voice, to know that I please him."

The third characteristic I see is a heart of *concern* for people. That is how love manifests itself. In verses 5 through 8, Paul writes,

For we never used either words of flattery, as you know, or a cloak for greed, as God is witness; nor did we seek glory from men, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her 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.

Paul says. "We count our life as cheap for your sake. We are willing to share, not only the gospel, but our own souls, our own life. Love calls for a concern for others. It demands, as Paul illustrates in this passage, the commitment of a mother for her child. Paul says we were like a nurse with her own child. He is not referring to a hired servant in the home, but a mother who is nursing her own infant, This is the kind of concern Paul had for

them.

I think this is a very helpful illustration, for I have discovered several things about mothers in their relationship to infants. One is that it involves a *personal commitment of time*. Nursing a baby, essentially, is a *personal* commitment, as any mother here can affirm. You cannot call for a substitute, you have to be on the job 24 hours a day. You have to be available at any time to set aside your own program to meet the demands of that child. Paul says that he was willing to have that same commitment of his person to them. For a time he was barred from the city and he could not see them on a person-to-person basis. The best he could do was encourage through correspondence. But he said it was his heart's desire to be with them. Now this is what real love will do. It will cut into our own person; it will demand more than a transient show of emotion, more than hit-and-run raids on people. It will rake the utmost in time and personal energy and output.

I see another characteristic of a mother: she seeks no personal gain from her activities. She is simply doing what is expected of her. There is no thought of praise, no playing to a gallery in the middle of the night. The demands of love move in and press her to do what she has to do without any thought of personal approval or seeking of glory. This is what Paul says, "As God is witness, we never sought glory from men, although we might have made demands. We set our rights aside: we set aside any desire we might have had for personal approval from you, in order to meet the needs of your life."

I see a fourth characteristic in verses 9 and 10. Paul says,

For you remember our labor and toil, brethren: we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers.

Paul reminds them of the behavior of this team of men who had gone to the city to minister among them. He says, "Our *conduct* among you was impeccable. Not only was there a public display of good character, but *before God* our behavior was blameless. We are unaware of anything, even in our private lives, that might be a breach of good conduct. We had the right to be supported while we were with you, but we set that right aside, rather than put a barrier between you and God." Now this is not difficult to understand. Love will always produce righteous behavior. Christ said, "*Love is the fulfilling of the law.*" Love always seeks the best for its object. Therefore, love will never let us do anything that would damage or harm another person. In chapter 3, verses 11-13, Paul prays that they might increase and abound in love, so that God might "*establish your hearts unblamable in holiness.*" Love always eventuates in righteous behavior.

I am convinced today that the reason so many non-Christians are turned away from the gospel is because love has not produced righteousness in Christians. I am concerned about the fact that each one of us (and I put myself right in the middle of this exhortation) must face the fact that the thing that is going to draw people to Jesus Christ is not just our verbal witness, but the quality of our life. Unless we are different no one is going to listen to us. Unless we are different in our home, where it really counts, or at school, unless we have learned to walk before Jesus Christ in obedience, no one is going to respond to Christ. As Paul rebuked the Jews, "*the name of God is blasphemed among you because of your behavior.*" We must guard our own lives in this regard. Men must not turn away from God because of our behavior. Our walk before men must reveal that God's love has invaded our life to produce righteousness.

There is a fifth principle in chapter 2, verses 11 and 12.

For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and

charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

I see that love is *constructive*. Love looks for a way of being constructive, as a father looks for a way to build constructively into the lives of his children. He does not let them drift, but encourages and instructs and charges in love, because he wants the very best for them. He will not overlook faults, or gloss over weaknesses in his children, but he disciplines and corrects and encourages as a father should. Love always looks for a way of developing and encouraging maturity in others.

I sense that this is a missing ingredient in the church today. This is not just the responsibility of certain spiritual leaders in the church. This is the responsibility of each individual. Proverbs says, "*As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.*" Each one of us, as we come in contact with our circle of friends, will be driven by love to hone and sharpen their character. Love moves to support and correct. Often we cannot see problems in our own life and we need someone to help us objectify the problems and apply the proper correctives. Galatians 6 develops a corroborating principle,

Brethren, if man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted.

This is not a license to stamp out sin in every life. I must not be a self-appointed corrector of the brethren. But where there is a violation of a basic principle of Scripture in a friend, and through prayer the Holy Spirit indicates that I am the one to go to him, then I *must go* in a spirit of love, not in a pompous, self-righteous spirit, not lashing out at one who has offended me, but driven by a steadfast refusal to put up with anything less than the very best in the life of another believer. This drives me to put my casual relationship on the line, and build it on a deeper basis. Paul says I came to each one of you and just like a father with his child, I spent time pointing you to the Scriptures, encouraging you, correcting you. I confronted each one, and encouraged you to "*live a life worthy of God who calls us into his own kingdom and glory.*"

These are the five great principles seen in Paul's ministry that are illustrative of a labor of love. And I would join with Paul in his prayer in chapter 3, as he prays for these believers.

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you; and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love [there is the source] to one another and to all men, [that is the extent of our love] as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints [that is the result].

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