

November 10 Lesson 11 (NIV)

FAITH THAT SETS AN EXAMPLE

DEVOTIONAL READING: 2 Corinthians 5:1–10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Thessalonians 1:2–10

1 THESSALONIANS 1:2–10

² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

KEY VERSES

You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.—1 Thessalonians 1:7, 8a

RESPONDING TO GOD'S GRACE

Unit 3: Faith Leads to Holy Living

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. Loving the Work

- B. Lesson Context
 - I. Encouragement (1 THESSALONIANS 1:2, 3)
 - A. Prayer of Constant Thanks (v. 2)
 - B. Remembrance of Loving Labor (v. 3)
 - The Pareto Rule*
 - II. Election (1 THESSALONIANS 1:4–6)
 - A. God’s Choosing (vv. 4, 5)
 - B. Reputation for Joy (v. 6)
 - The Test of Spirituality*
 - III. Examples (1 THESSALONIANS 1:7–10)
 - A. Announcing the Gospel (vv. 7, 8)
 - B. Embracing Christ (vv. 9, 10)
- Conclusion
 - A. Simple Gospel, Good Example
 - B. Prayer
 - C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AchaiaUh-kay-uh.

CorinthiansKo-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

MacedoniaMass-eh-doe-nee-uh.

PhilippiFih-lip-pie or *Fil-ih-pie*.

PhilippiansFih-lip-ee-unz.

SilasSigh-luss.

synagoguesin-uh-gog.

ThessaloniansThess-uh-**lo**-nee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

ThessalonicaThess-uh-lo-**nye**-kuh (*th* as in *thin*).

Via EgnatiaVee-uh Eg-**nah**-tee-uh.

Introduction

A. Loving the Work

“Plan the work, then work the plan.” This advice helps clarify the logistics needed to get a job done. Plans are futile if the workers fail to do the needed work. Working can be futile when there is no goal in sight.

We often speak of our Christian works as labors of love. What if we said we loved the work and worked our love? What if we found better motivation and more energy to transform talk about acts of love into actions of service, deeply motivated by our love for others? When we do things motivated by our love for Christ and for others, we are not seeking to earn anything. We are working out the love in our hearts in tangible and helpful ways. We are loving the work and working our love. As Paul wrote, the things that really count are seen in “faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6).

B. Lesson Context

The historical background concerning Paul’s time in Thessalonica comes primarily from Acts 17:1–9. Paul set out on his second journey of missionary work with his new companion, Silas (see Lesson Context of lesson 13), in AD 52 (Acts 15:40). Paul wanted to return to churches he had planted on the first missionary expedition. After that, he decided to press on into new territory with the gospel.

Paul eventually came to the city of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1), about 100 miles west of Philippi. Situated on the Via Egnatia, Thessalonica served as a link between the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire. It was a center of commerce where both land and sea routes met. If Christianity could find a foothold in Thessalonica, the faith would be set to explode westward.

Paul began his ministry in Thessalonica in the synagogue (Acts 17:2), though not to the exclusion of welcoming Gentiles (17:4). This caused Jews of Thessalonica to become jealous of Paul’s success (17:5). A riotous mob formed. Christians were rounded up and jailed; only after posting bail were they allowed to return home (17:5–9). Paul and Silas left town under cover of darkness (17:10).

Paul spent less than four weeks in Thessalonica (“three Sabbath days”; see Acts 17:2). This short time for preaching and teaching combined with the agitation from Jewish opponents (17:11, 13) left the young Thessalonian congregation in a tenuous position. Would their faith hold? Would they continue to trust Paul and, more importantly, Christ?

While Paul stayed in Corinth for about 18 months (Acts 18:11), such questions undoubtedly troubled him. So he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to minister to the believers there (1 Thessalonians 3:2). Timothy returned with a report that the Thessalonians had remained faithful (3:6).

Paul’s two letters that are called 1 and 2 Thessalonians in our Bibles addressed doctrinal questions that arose in the congregation. The questions especially concerned the resurrection and the second coming of Jesus. These two letters were written within a few months of each other in AD 52.

The greeting of 1 Thessalonians 1:1 lists Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the trio who had begun the good work in this city just a few months earlier. Whenever Paul refers to “we” or “us,” he likely has at least these two other men in mind.

I. Encouragement **(1 THESSALONIANS 1:2, 3)**

A. Prayer of Constant Thanks (v. 2)

2. We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.

Paul expresses warm feelings and concern for the Thessalonian Christians immediately by assuring them of their place in his *prayers*. Paul's letters give evidence of a deep, consistent, daily prayer life. He frequently tells the recipients of his letters of his constant prayer for them, a claim he can truthfully make only with a systematic and deliberate approach to his prayer life (see Romans 1:9, 10; Ephesians 1:15, 16; Philippians 1:3, 4; Colossians 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:3).

Paul is not alone in these prayers (see Lesson Context). Though the Thessalonians may have felt abandoned by Paul's understandably hasty departure, he assures them that he and his fellow evangelists have not forgotten them.

B. Remembrance of Loving Labor (v. 3)

3a. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith,

The content of Paul's prayerful remembrance *before our God and Father* is threefold. The first of the three concerns the Thessalonians' *faith*. Theirs is an active faith, as indeed all faith is meant to be (see James 2:26). Faith in Christ propels the Thessalonians to do good things for each other and for their community.

3b. your labor prompted by love,

The Thessalonian believers have not only an active faith, they also have the right motive for it. There is a big difference in staying power and end result when motivations other than *love* undergird a Christian's work.

3c. and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Third, Paul recognizes the Thessalonians' willingness to persevere because of what they hold dear. Their work, which is "produced by faith" and "prompted by love," finds staying power in long-term *hope*. Christian hope consists not of vague wishes that everything will work out well. Instead, Christian hope is the confident expectation that God will do as he has promised and that his work will be a blessing to his people (compare Hebrews 11:1). The Thessalonians anticipate the return of Jesus, and they work in the present with an eye on that future reality (see on 1 Thessalonians 1:10, below).

Faith, hope, and love form Paul's famous triad (see Romans 5:1–5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5, 6; Ephesians 4:2–5; Colossians 1:4, 5; 1 Thessalonians 5:8). Pondering how those three are evident among the Thessalonians encourages Paul greatly.

II. Election

(1 THESSALONIANS 1:4–6)

A. God's Choosing (vv. 4, 5)

4. For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you,

Paul goes to a deeper level to explain why he anticipates that the Thessalonians will remain faithful. He knows that they are both *chosen* and *loved by God*. To have been chosen means that because the Thessalonians have accepted Christ, they are the ones God grants eternal life. God's love is the framework for that choice. This should cause the Thessalonians to look forward to Christ's return with hope and anticipation, not with dread and fear.

God chooses according to his foreknowledge (Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:1, 2). We become believers by our freewill choice, and those whom God already knows will do so he predestines to receive eternal life (see 2 Thessalonians 2:13). God's chosen ones do not believe because they are

chosen; rather, they are chosen because they believe (see Acts 10:43). God has known of our belief from eternity past (see Ephesians 1:4, 5). That's how he can decide in advance who will be in Heaven and who won't.

5a. because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

Paul now summarizes the evidence that the Thessalonian Christians are among God's chosen. They could easily have believed a false religious message. Their world is full of competing religions and philosophies, and not all of them can be true. But Paul reminds the Thessalonians that by believing the *gospel*, they have received something else: the *power* that comes only from *the Holy Spirit*.

There is no specific mention of miracles in the account of Paul's time in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9). But the account's brevity probably indicates that many things are left out. The references in the verse before us to power, the Holy Spirit, and *deep conviction* may be another way of referring to "signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God" (Romans 15:19) done among the Thessalonians by Paul and his traveling companions. Though Luke (the author of Acts) provides no list of miracles taking place in Thessalonica, Paul's work recorded in Acts 14:8–10 and 16:18 hints that such work likely has included healings and exorcisms.

The signs of the Holy Spirit in Thessalonica provide assurance for those chosen. These signs assure not just the Greek believers but also Paul (see on 1 Thessalonians 1:4, above). Where there are believers, beloved and chosen by God, the Holy Spirit is present also.

Paul's presentation differs from that of traveling pagan teachers of his day. They often seek to impress audiences with lofty rhetoric and inspiring words (followed by gifts of money to the speakers). But Paul has no interest in flattering the Thessalonians to get money from them (1 Thessalonians 2:5; compare 2 Corinthians 10:10, 11). The veracity of his gospel, his message of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, comes from divine testimony, God's confirmation through miracles in their midst (see 2 Corinthians 12:12).

5b. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

Paul indicates that the Thessalonians can judge his character and that of his companions by their actions to this point. The result will be to know *how [they] lived among* the Thessalonians. None of them has sought to dominate the Thessalonians by authoritarian tactics (1 Thessalonians 2:6). Instead, the evangelists have cared for the Thessalonians as a mother and father care for their children (2:7, 11). Rather than requiring payment, Paul and his companions do other work for wages to support themselves (2:9; see Acts 18:3; compare 1 Corinthians 9:3–12).

B. Reputation for Joy (v. 6)

6a. You became imitators of us and of the Lord,

Paul's affectionate memories continue, recalling how the believers *became imitators* of him and his companions. He is not attempting to replace Jesus as their rightful Lord but indicating they joined Paul and his fellows as disciples of Christ (compare 1 Corinthians 11:1). Their lives are examples of what it looks like to be Christ followers as well as pointers to the perfect example of Jesus himself.

Here Paul is especially stressing that the Thessalonian Christians have imitated him in accepting hardships that have come because of their faith. The core of the gospel is Jesus' willing death on the cross in submission to God. Jesus' followers will face hardships that call for similar

faithfulness (John 15:20). If we understand the cross, we realize that following Jesus will mean accepting hardship, daily carrying our own crosses (Luke 9:23, 24).

6b. for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

This is not an easy time. Paul remembers *severe suffering*, not just for himself but also for the Thessalonian believers (see Lesson Context). He makes sure to note that their suffering has been answered by the comforting *joy given by the Holy Spirit*. Circumstances may seem to dictate that a morose and downtrodden spirit is justified. But the presence of the Spirit counteracts that in a powerful way (see Acts 13:50–52; Romans 14:17).

III. Examples

(1 THESSALONIANS 1:7–10)

A. Announcing the Gospel (vv. 7, 8)

7. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

Macedonia is the region of northern Greece in which Thessalonica is located. *Achaia* is the region of Greece just to the south of Macedonia that includes both Athens and Corinth. The Thessalonian believers are models worthy of being copied by others far and wide.

8a. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.

The Thessalonians’ steadfastness under affliction gives credence to their testimony to the message of the gospel. It enhances their opportunities to evangelize others. Their name *has become known* far beyond their city of Thessalonica.

Occurring only here in the New Testament, the Greek verb translated *rang out* can also imply a crashing sound. The “noise” of the Thessalonians’ faith is not subtle but blaring out all around the Roman world.

8b. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,

Praising the Thessalonians’ faith in places where Paul travels is unnecessary because all who believe already know of it.

B. Embracing Christ (vv. 9, 10)

9. for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

Many of the Thessalonian believers are Gentiles (Acts 17:4), and therefore had been pagans who venerated false gods and worshipped *idols*. Temples for the gods and goddesses are found in even small Greek towns. A larger city like Thessalonica is thick with them (compare Paul’s experience in Athens; 17:16). If worshipping one god is good, the thinking goes, then worshipping several is even better!

Temples and their idols are normal to Gentiles but abhorrent to Jews. Through general revelation, pagans know there is only one true God, but in rebellion they choose to suppress that truth (Romans 1:18–23). But now they have another chance to embrace the true God, who mercifully grants another chance through Jesus.

To abandon idolatry involves a complete change of life—a social, cultural, and religious upheaval. The Thessalonians embrace this radical change, having *turned* away from false gods and to *the living and true God*. The Thessalonians may feel insignificant, but they are at the very center of God’s work in the world. Through the spread of the gospel, God is doing what he promised: making himself known to the nations (compare Isaiah 2:2–4; 42:6; Micah 4:1–3; Zechariah 8:20–23).

10a. and to wait for his Son from heaven,

This is the first of three phrases by which Paul sums up his gospel message. He left the Thessalonians with hope, causing them *to wait* in anticipation for God’s *Son* to return *from heaven*. Focusing on that return will allow the Thessalonians to endure any temporary affliction in the meantime. The doctrine of Christ’s return is very important to the Thessalonians, and Paul addresses some of their misunderstandings about it in both letters to them (see 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10). Paul reminds these suffering Christians that they still look forward to God’s final victory.

10b. whom he raised from the dead—Jesus,

Paul’s second phrase is also a message of hope. He will later clarify a misunderstanding concerning the relationship between the coming of Christ and the resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18), but this is a start. Death is not the end; since Jesus was raised from the dead, so can we be. The chosen will be taken home to be with Jesus forever when he comes again (4:17).

10c. who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Paul’s third phrase also conveys hope: the Thessalonian believers need not fear God’s *wrath*. Many of them were not previously part of God’s covenant people but now are through faith in Jesus’ atoning death.

God’s wrath is real, and Paul has much more to say about it elsewhere (Romans 1:18–31; 2:5, 8; etc.). Some may challenge the idea of a wrathful God whose punishment can be retribution rather than restorative. But that viewpoint misses the idea that the loving God is also the holy God.

Conclusion

A. Simple Gospel, Good Example

Is it possible to make the gospel too simple? Some preachers and churches seem to think so. They preach a highly refined version of the Christian message in which their followers must maintain correct views about many obscure doctrines, must adhere to certain social standards, and so forth. Could it really be so simple that Paul could express the essentials in a couple of verses?

Our gospel message must be centered on Jesus and his work. While there are many important aspects to the Christian life that call for study and practice, the core of the gospel need not be cluttered. Paul’s message for the Thessalonians was that Jesus Christ came and died for their sins, that he was raised from the dead, and that he will come again. This simple yet powerful message was enough for hardened pagans in ancient Thessalonica to turn from their idols and embrace faith in Christ. Their hearts were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Their transformation was so radical that their reputation spread over two Roman provinces.

Their testimony is worthy of our attention. Though this congregation experienced severe trials, the people refused to let their faith fade into the background. Instead, the Thessalonians stepped

up their loving works so much that Paul touted them as already being an example to other congregations.

We sometimes distance faith from works in our teaching, not wanting to mislead Christians into thinking they can earn their salvation. However, the two are sometimes paired in the New Testament (see 2 Thessalonians 1:11; Revelation 2:19). What can be missing is the connecting factor: love. May we believe as the Thessalonians believed and then act on our faith as they did: full of the Holy Spirit and love.

B. Prayer

Father, turn our hearts from idols so we can serve you in faith and love. May we long for the return of your Son. We pray in his` name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The essentials of the gospel
are simple and life-changing.¹
