

It was a hostile environment for a church. The city had never heard the gospel of Christ before, let alone seen a church. Not that the place was without religion, mind you. The city was full of religion of all types and stripes. But then one day, some missionaries came and preached Christ. The Spirit of God did His gracious work of conviction, and several people responded to the truth they heard. An infant church was born.

Then Satan attacked, as he always does. He used the weapon of jealousy to stir up the established religious leaders. He filled their hearts with envy and strife so that they ran the missionaries out of town.

When the dust settled, left behind were several baby Christians. They had no church buildings. They had no New Testament. They had no spiritual mentors. What they did have was the memory of the few weeks of teaching the missionaries had given them. And the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit.

But was it enough? Would they make it? Could they survive the ridicule and opposition they would receive from the antagonistic opponents of the gospel? Was it asking too much too soon?

The missionaries did not forget their spiritual children. Their hearts ached for them. They, too, wondered, "Did we teach them enough truth? Did we teach them the right truth? Could these new converts really stand against such fierce hostility?"

Finally a decision was reached. One of the missionaries would go back to the city to find out first-hand how the church was doing. And guess what he found? The persecution was indeed strong, but the church stood stronger by the power of God!

In fact, news spread about this little church. People in the next city heard reports. So did those in the next province. All over, people were saying, "Have you heard what's happened over there? Some people have turned from their old religion, and have started following Jesus. They're suffering, but they don't seem discouraged. They seemed thrilled to be serving God, and in fact, they're bold to tell others they need to trust Christ!"

The missionary leader who did not return to the city was so thrilled by these reports that he wrote a letter of commendation. I'd like to read from it, and I'd like you to actually see the letter. You have a copy of it, for it's in the Bible. The letter is 1 Thessalonians, the missionaries I've been talking about were Silvanus, Timothy, and Paul, and the church was the one founded in the city of Thessalonica.

What are the marks of a church that pleases God? We have come to part two in our current three week series entitled, "Marks of a Successful Church." Last week we investigated the Colossian church, and discovered three marks. We will discover the same three marks this morning by doing a case study of the church at Thessalonica.

Proposition: As we examine the testimony of the Thessalonian church, as found in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, we want to answer two questions which will help us know better how to please God as a church.

I. What does God look for in a church? (3)

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

- A. He commends work of faith.
 - B. He commends labor of love.
 - C. He commends patience of hope.
- II. How can we become a people of love?
- A. We must identify the options.
 1. The utilitarian approach: I will use you to help me.
 2. The cooperation approach: I will work with you to reach a goal.
 3. The love approach: I will do what is best for you.
 - B. We must identify our obligation.
 1. Love requires sacrifice.
 2. Love requires involvement (3:12).
 3. Love requires effort (4:9-10).

Personal Inventory: Are we a people of love? (2 Thes 1:3-4)

1. We never arrive.
2. There ought to be evidence that we are growing in our love.

I. What does God look for in a church? (3)

Our culture tells us to measure success in terms of bucks, buildings, and budget. We've come a long way from the New Testament where churches were deemed successful by a much different standard. Case in point--the Thessalonian church.

1 Thessalonians begins, "Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians, which is in God the Father, and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ (1)." To see the details of the church's difficult beginning, check out the record in vv 5-10 (and compare it with the historical account in Acts 17:1-10).

The Thessalonian church was a model church. It wasn't perfect, but it had a vibrant reputation. V 7 reveals, "So that ye were an example to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia."

What made it a successful church? That's an important question, isn't it? Especially in our day when we are plagued by a brand of "convenient Christianity." The American church is filled with people who have adopted Christianity for what they can get out of it. They'll serve Christ if it's convenient. They'll get involved if it doesn't conflict with their agenda. They'll identify with Christ if it's not too costly. But God's not impressed by a convenience approach.

What is it that God looks for in a church? We find out in Paul's commendation of the Thessalonian church in vv 2-3. God is pleased when He finds three marks in a church.

A. He commends work of faith.

V 2 reads, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers." These were model Christians. Realize this. A successful church is not necessarily an old, established church. By the time Paul wrote this letter, the Thessalonian church was only months in age. True, new churches often struggle with stability, but established churches often are hampered by stifling tradition.

What came to Paul's mind as he prayed? V 3 "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the

sight of God and our Father." What's a successful church? Paul thanked God when he saw a church marked by faith, love, and hope.

By the way, if we really are thankful for someone, we'll pray for them. I hope you pray for your family, and fellow church members, and people you know at work and school.

Paul told the church he thanked God for "your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope." Please don't miss that faith, love, and hope are not abstract, static concepts. When a church (or a person) has them, they produce results. What kind of results? Work, labor, and endurance.

The first phrase is "work of faith." True faith works. Paul is not saying we are saved by works but by a faith that works. The phrase could well be translated, "your work which springs from faith."

Here's the point. If I believe in Jesus Christ and He is real in my life, it will show up. You'll see the evidence of my faith in my works. You'll see it in the way I spend my money and use my time. You'll hear it in the way I talk.

Would you consider some personal questions? What work are you doing for Christ? What have you done for the Lord in the past month? How much effort are you expending for the advancement of the gospel?

I was talking with a man last week who shared that he has a burden for his unsaved neighbors. But he's doing more than sharing--he and his family are "working." Here's what they did. The man used his computer and printed up a simple brochure advertising a neighborhood party at his house, "Bring your best dessert and come to get to know your neighbors." He went house to house and personally invited around 33 neighbors to come to his house for an informal get-together. Twenty-two didn't show, but eleven families did, and some redemptive bridges were built. He told me his family had done this several times a year where he used to live, and God used their efforts to bring neighbors to Christ.

When was the last time you invited your unsaved neighbors over for dessert? God commends "work of faith." Secondly...

B. He commends labor of love.

It takes effort to be a good Christian. The Greek word "labor" denotes strenuous toil, and intense exertion (the same word is used of Paul's back-breaking work as a tentmaker). Biblical love is more than a feeling. It's exhausting to love, but it's great!

Where did the Thessalonians learn how to toil in love? From Paul and the other missionaries--they had modeled labor of love. In 2:9, Paul talks about how he started the church, "So ye remember, brethren, our labor and travail; for laboring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God." More about how to be a people of love in a moment. For now, consider a third mark.

C. He commends patience of hope.

The phrase could be translated, "your endurance inspired by hope" (Hendriksen). The word "patience" literally means "to remain under." Why hadn't the Thessalonians thrown in the towel when the persecution came? They "remained under" the pressure because they were inspired by "hope."

Hope is not "hype." Christian hope is based on the Person of God, as we see at the end of v 3, "hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Hope is the confident expectation that Jesus will do what He said He would do! He is coming again (10)!

The point is this. What does God look for in a church? The fame of the Thessalonians was that they were known as being a people of faith, love, and hope. Faith, hope, and love sum up the essence of the Christian life. Churches that please God are those that exhibit faith towards God, love towards one another, and hope in Christ's return.

With that general framework, I want to probe a very important second question.

II. How can we become a people of love?

In Colossians Paul wrote this about the Colossian believers (1:4), "We give thanks for you...since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which you have to all the saints." The Colossian Christians had become a people of love. How does that happen, and how can it happen for us? We must identify two issues.

A. We must identify the options.

When it comes to our relationships with people, there are three options. That is, there are three ways people commonly relate to each other (V. Matthews, notes, p. 7).

1. The utilitarian approach: I will use you to help me.

That's the attitude we often see characterizing relationships between professional football players and football team owners. "You want \$2 million a year? Sure...as long as you produce." But what happens when the guy blows out his knee? He'd better hope he had an injury-clause in the contract. Why? Because it's a utilitarian relationship. As far as the owner is concerned, he is using the player to help him reach his goals. If the player can't help, he's gone.

Sadly, that mentality creeps into churches at times. Some people "use" churches like they "use" gas stations. They go to one that offers them the most for their money. They're committed to it until they find another one that offers them more--better programs for their kids, better quality music--and then their commitment is broken.

The utilitarian approach says, "I will use you to help me."

2. The cooperation approach: I will work with you to reach a goal.

We see this on the job scene. Management and laborers work together to reach a goal--they cooperate. Sometimes there is animosity, but it's tolerated by the understanding, "Listen, you need what I can supply, and I need what you can supply, so we'd better cooperate so we can reach the goal we both want."

I worked for a construction company the summer after I graduated from high school. When it comes to building a building, the carpenter and the mason can agree to work together to get a job done even if they don't "like" each other. Why? They need each other. They each realize the other could make life miserable if they didn't cooperate. So they work together in order to reach a goal. Their relationship is merely a "professional" one.

I want to ask you something. Is God satisfied when we have merely professional relationships in the church? Is it enough for Christians to take the cooperation approach? Some would say, "Why not, that's the way it is," but the Bible would say, "No. We are called to live by a higher standard." What is that?

3. *The love approach: I will do what is best for you.*

Jesus said, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another (Jn 13:35)." We're not to use each other. We're not merely to cooperate with each other to reach a common goal. Our responsibility goes deeper and further. We are to operate by the principle, "I will do what is best, not for me, but for you."

Having identified the options, we need to identify a second issue.

B. We must identify our obligation.

It is not our option to love each other. It is our obligation if we are to be a successful church. God makes this clear in 1 Cor 13:13, "And now abides faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." And in 1 Cor 16:14, "Let all things be done with love." 2 John 5 exhorts, "And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another." But what does it really mean to love each other? Biblical love requires three ingredients highlighted in the text of 1 Thessalonians.

1. *Love requires sacrifice.*

In 1 Thes 1:3, Paul highlighted the church's "labor of love." You'll notice there is no object given. Love for whom? Certainly Christians are to be known for their love for Christ, but it doesn't stop there. We are to love each other.

The word Paul uses is "agape." It's the type of love God exhibits, as in Rom 5:8, "But God commended His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Agape love is selfless. It gives. It aims to do what's right for the other person.

It's easy to love beautiful people, intelligent people, rich people. Why? Because when we love them, we get something out of it--popularity, money, fun times. But that's not agape love. Agape love is the love of the completely unworthy. Agape love requires sacrifice.

Nowhere is this more clearly taught than in 1 Corinthians 13. What's true of agape love? Vv 4-8 "Love suffers long, and is kind; love envies not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, does not behave itself unseemly, seeks not its own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil, rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."

Love requires sacrifice.

2. *Love requires involvement (3:12).*

Now watch this. In chapter one, Paul commended the Thessalonians for their labor of love, didn't he? But what does he tell them in 3:12? "And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you."

Two realities strike me from that verse. First, when it comes to love, we need to keep improving. All of us can do better. And second, if we are going to be a people of love, it's going to require involvement.

Someone has well said, "The opposite of love is not hate. It is indifference. It's when a person doesn't mean anything to me."

May I speak frankly? We can't be people of love and be "one day a week" Christians. Nor can we be a people of love if we refuse to take the time to get to know people. Love requires involvement.

When was the last time you visited in the home of one of our shut-ins? You say, "I don't know who our shut-ins are." No, they won't call you and ask for a visit, but true love doesn't wait for a call. It takes the initiative to get involved.

How long has it been since you comforted someone in the hospital, other than a relative that you "had" to go see? You say, "Well, isn't that the Pastor's job?" Where in the Bible does it say that? James said, "Pure religion...is to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction (1:27)."

When was the last time you "inconvenienced" yourself to invite a hurting family to your home for a meal, simply because you wanted to cheer them up with love? Peter commanded all believers in 1 Pet 4:9, "Use hospitality one to another without grudging."

The point is this. There is no true love without sacrifice and involvement. Third...

3. Love requires effort (4:9-10).

Notice how Paul picks up on the same theme of love again in 1 Thes 4:9-10, "But as touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you; for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed you do it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we beseech you brethren, that ye increase more and more."

By the way, we don't have to feel love to practice it. Love is a decision to make a sacrifice, expend the effort, and get involved. Love requires time and effort. As time passes, we should improve in the way we love each other. That should be our commitment.

Evan and Ruby were wonderful servants in their church. They cleaned the facility faithfully for years. When there was a wedding, they threw in the extra touches without being asked. Then one day Evan came down with Parkinson's disease. He cleaned until the disease sapped the very life out of his limbs, and all he could do was stay at home.

Do you know what the people of the church did for Evan and Ruby? When Evan's health got to the point where he couldn't come to church any more, some of the men took turns going to the house on Sunday mornings. They would sit with Evan so Ruby could participate in the church worship services. Do you know what kind of impact it has on a community when people see church members loving each other like that?

Beloved, we need to take inventory, and ask ourselves a critical question.

Personal Inventory: Are we a people of love? (2 Thes 1:3-4)

Are we known in this community as a people of love? We need to see one final comment Paul wrote to the Thessalonians at this point, found in 2 Thes 1:3-4. "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren." Why? "Because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all toward each other abounds."

If we are going to be a people of love, we need to grasp two summary lessons.

1. *We never arrive.*

2. *There ought to be evidence that we are growing in our love.*

Is there in your life? How committed are you to your church? I'm not talking about being committed to this building, or even to your ministry. How committed are you to the other people in this assembly? May God help us all today to make decisions so we will be known before God and this community as a people who labor in love.

To do: In the bulletin, you will find a "Caring for One Another" card. It's intended as a practical application of what we have just learned. Allow God to use you to encourage someone this week.