

THREE MARKS OF A MATURING CHURCH A Sermon on 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5

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I. Introduction

This evening we begin a short series of messages on Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians. Now, one could rightly ask, "Why teach the Second Letter before you have taught the first one?" That's a fair question, so let me tell you what I'm thinking. In both letters, and in the Second Letter more than the first, the matter of the Second Coming of Christ or the Return of the Lord Jesus Christ plays a significant role. But the treatment of this subject is not the same in both letters.

Near the end of the First Letter to the Thessalonians is a discussion about the Lord's return. The thing being emphasized in that discussion is the manner in which Christ will return, i.e., suddenly and unexpectedly. Over the years some have wrongly interpreted 1 Thessalonians as teaching the imminent or immediate return of Christ, which it does not do. The letter really only focuses upon the manner of Christ's return.

In the Second Letter, the return of Christ is not just one of several issues, but is in fact the main issue. More precisely, the main issue is this: what we can expect to take place before Christ's return. That is the primary point being made.

And so, as I look at these two letters and think about what would be more immediately relevant for God's people, it seems to me that the Second Letter is a good place to start, if for no other reason than the fact that we are in the beginning of a new millennium. You see, before the new millennium, there were all sorts of predictions and questions about what it might all mean. And a certain number of those predictions had to do with Jesus and his return. Likewise, now that we have just entered the beginning of the new millennium, I think there is some value in getting some of these matters straight before all the prognostications begin again.

In short, what are we to believe about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ? How much can we know about it before it happens? True, we are told that it will come "like a thief in the night," but then we are also told in Scripture to "be prepared" for this return and to "look forward to it" with eagerness. Does the fact that we cannot know the precise day and time mean that we will have no warning whatsoever, that there will be absolutely nothing to signal its approach?

Those are important questions – ones which we will begin to address in these studies. But in conjunction with that, we will look at other matters as well: maturity, suffering, and practical issues like idleness in the Body of Christ. And so, 2 Thessalonians is a short letter, but one with a number of valuable lessons for us.

II. First Move

Now, while we will be concentrating on Paul's Second letter to the Thessalonians, it will be helpful, nevertheless, to take a few minutes to look at the background of both letters.

The city of Thessalonica was founded in the fourth century before Christ by a man named Cassander, who was a high-ranking officer under Alexander the Significant (a.k.a. Alexander the Great). And the city that was founded then has remained to this day, retaining the name "Thessaloniki," and is one of the largest cities in Greece.

According to Acts 17:1-9, Paul, Silas, and Timothy initially evangelized this city. When they arrived there, they were very well-received by some, but not by everyone. As a result, they had to make a hasty departure. What they left behind was a new, fledgling body of believers, consisting of a handful of converted Jews and a large number of converted Greek men and women.

From Thessalonica Paul, Silas, and Timothy went to a place called Berea where they also ministered. Not long after their arrival, however, Jewish trouble-makers from Thessalonica arrived, forcing Paul to leave that city for Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed behind.

As we read in some of Paul's other letters, Paul became so concerned about what was going on in some of the newly planted churches that while he was in Athens, he sent Silas to Philippi and Timothy to Thessalonica. Sometime after that, Paul moved on to Corinth where he met up with Silas and Timothy again and received their report on the churches. After hearing these reports, Paul dashes off a couple letters, one of them to the Thessalonians. This is the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians. In that letter he dealt with a number of issues, including the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

While Paul was still there in Corinth, the Thessalonians apparently responded to his first letter. That response was a cause for some joy, but also a cause for continued concern, and it prompted a second letter from Paul. As John Stott writes,

"On the one hand, [Paul] and his co-workers were deeply thankful to learn of the Thessalonians' growing faith and love, and of their perseverance under persecution (2 Thess. 1:3-4). On the other hand, there was cause for anxiety because the church was being disturbed in three particular ways. First, the persecution was so severe that Paul felt the need to explain why God allows his people to suffer for the kingdom and how he will put wrongs right when Jesus comes (2 Thess. 1:5-10). Secondly, the Thessalonians were in danger of being deceived by false teaching, which had reached them through a communication which [claimed] to come from Paul but was [in fact] a forgery (2 Thess. 2:1-3a). In particular, they were being told that the day of the Lord had already come, [that Christ had already returned]. So Paul needed to remind them of God's ... calendar, and especially that the [return] of Christ would be preceded by the

rebellion of [the] Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3b-12). Thirdly, the [letter addresses a] group of idlers who had given up their work [and] had not ... followed Paul's instruction to return to it. So he had some stern words in this second letter to and about this disobedient minority (2 Thess. 3:4-12)."

III. Second Move

With that as a very brief background to this letter, let me just quickly give you a proposed outline of how I think this letter is structured, and then we'll dig into the specific passage before us:

1:1-4	A word of thanks for a maturing church
1:5-12	A word of comfort to a suffering church
2:1-12	A word of instruction for a confused church
2:13-17	A word of encouragement to a faithful church
3:1-18	A word of exhortation to an obedient church.

Lord willing, as we make our way through, this brief outline will be of increasing significance to us all. Let's turn now to the passage before us: Paul's word of thanks for a maturing church.

IV. Third Move

In expressing his thankfulness for the Thessalonian church, Paul provided three explicit reasons for his thankfulness, namely:

1. their growing faith;
2. their increasing love for one another;
3. their continued perseverance in the midst of persecution and trials.

Firstly, Paul said he was thankful because their faith was "growing more and more." Now, because Paul has not been any more specific, we can only guess what he saw that caused him to conclude that the faith of the Thessalonian believers was growing. Perhaps he had received numerous reports of instances where individual believers were in situations which required the exercise of their faith and trust, and that they had come through beautifully. Perhaps someone had refused an invitation to participate in the worship of a local deity at the risk of being criticized, or worse. Perhaps another person had begun sharing her faith with her non-Christian family. Still another might have had to make a tough financial or vocational decision on account of his faith. Who knows? It could have been any number of things.

However, it is not as important to know *how* Paul came to this conclusion as it is simply to know *that* he came to this conclusion. You see, the manner in which Paul describes the faith of this particular church is very different from the way people often talk about faith today. It is not uncommon to hear people say something like, "My faith is a very personal thing," and by that they mean that it is just something between them

and God. But when you look at their lives, their goals, their values, their plans and dreams, you find that they are identical to the rest of the culture which does not claim any sort of faith, personal or otherwise. In other words, their “very personal faith” does not seem to make any difference in the way they think or live.

This was evidenced in an interview with a prominent political candidate, who was alleged to be a “devout” man. When cornered by an antagonistic reporter who asked if were too religious to serve in a public office, the politician responded by saying something to the effect of, “I have a very deep faith. But I don’t allow it to influence my judgment or decisions in any way.” Which, of course, causes one to wonder what possible value such an impotent faith might be to a person.

In contrast to that very modern – and very silly – understanding of faith is the biblical view that faith that is not evidenced externally is no faith at all. Faith that you can’t see from the outside doesn’t actually exist. Moreover, faith is not only meant to be obvious to others. It is also meant to grow, and it can be exercised in varying degrees. It is not a static, discrete quantity that you can possess in a once-for-all fashion. No; Paul thanked God for the obvious, growing faith of the Thessalonian believers.

Secondly, Paul was not only thankful for their growing faith, but also thankful that “the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.” Similarly to the previous discussion, Paul here showed that the kind of love he was talking about was not mere feeling or emotion, but was love proven by action, love that would have been obvious to anyone who cared to look for more than five minutes.

If we contrast this with the things Paul told the Corinthian church about love, it can give us an idea of he saw in the Thessalonians. To be sure, the Thessalonian church was not perfect. They had plenty of difficulties. But they were nothing like the Corinthian church which was, in comparison to the Thessalonians, an extremely immature church with problems ranging from incest to lawsuits to idolatry to plain old disorderliness. The Corinthian church was a train wreck.

So, when Paul wrote his famous “love chapter” in 1 Corinthians 13, he wrote to rebuke the congregation. When 1 Corinthians was first read to the congregation at Corinth, there was not some young couple sitting out in the fourth pew listening to chapter 13 saying to themselves, “Wouldn’t that be a lovely passage to have read in our wedding next April!” And the reason is, when you read 1 Corinthians 13 in the context of the whole letter, you realize that Paul was writing the chapter as a rebuke. In other words, the reason Paul said, “Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast...” was that this was precisely the sort of behavior that the Corinthians failed to exhibit toward one another.

In contrast to that, the reports Paul received about the Thessalonians were stories of love in action: people forgiving one another, people sacrificing for one another, people being patient with one another, people showing kindness to one another, people putting the interests of others ahead of their own, people helping others in their struggle against sin. These were the sorts of things he must have been hearing

about them, and in an increasing fashion. These were, to Paul, the marks of a maturing, vibrant church – a church where the Spirit had taken hold.

The third reason Paul gave for his thankfulness was the fact that the Thessalonians had retained their faith even in the face of persecution and suffering and hardship. They had not wavered. They had not abandoned Christ. They had not compromised the truth. In short, they had proven themselves not to be “fair weather Christians,” but to be in it for “better or worse.”

Now, unless you have lived in another country where Christianity was not favored - such as an Islamic state or something like that - then it will be difficult to relate to this idea of “persevering through persecution and trial.” Still, we can learn something from the experiences of others about what it means to hold to the truth when all around you, including large portions of the institutional church, seems willing to go along with or at least to ignore the evil intentions of the world. For example, we can look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s willingness to suffer in prison under Hitler’s Third Reich rather than silently ignore Germany’s atrocities.

Those sorts of experiences have not yet been visited upon many of us in America. But there are signs and stories beginning to surface here and there which say that different winds are blowing now and that the smooth sailing we have enjoyed – and largely squandered – may not last forever. In the midst of that crucible of hardship and suffering, we may be tested and, in the process, discover just how much we have in common with the Thessalonians – or how little.

V. Fourth Move

Growing in faith, increasing in love for one another, and persevering amidst persecution – these were the signs that encouraged Paul, the signs that he took to be clear indicators that God was at work maturing and building that young church into an effective force and witness for the Gospel.

Now the question is, how do churches today measure up against Paul’s three criteria? Even more to the point, are churches even concerned to measure up to these criteria? Or have they, in fact, replaced them with other, imported models of what a mature, effective church ought to be like?

In 1983, a book appeared under the title *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* by Kennon Callahan. This book enjoyed a great deal of popularity. In it, Callahan outlined twelve things which, in his opinion, if present are sure signs that one’s church is effective:

1. Specific, concrete missional objectives;
2. Pastoral and lay visitation;
3. Corporate, dynamic worship;
4. Significant relational groups;
5. Strong leadership resources;

6. Streamlined structure and solid, participatory decision making;
7. Several competent programs and activities;
8. Open accessibility;
9. High visibility;
10. Adequate parking, land, and landscaping;
11. Adequate space and facilities; and
12. Solid financial resources.

Now, in all fairness to Mr. Callahan, let me be the first to say that this is not an entirely unhelpful book. There are some useful things said in there from which church leaders can benefit. But what distresses me about this book, and so many others like it which consistently get rave reviews, is that in their methodology of determining what the essentials are for an effective church, they so seldom turn to the Scriptures. More often than not, they simply borrow ideas from corporate business models. Many of the models that are influencing the wider evangelical church are ones which do not seem to be aware of what Paul said about the church, including what he said here, in 2 Thessalonians about the marks of a maturing church.

And so, one application from all of this is to say to church leaders, “Please make sure that when you sit down to plan and think and dream about the ministry and mission of this church, the first port of call is the Scriptures, and especially passages like this. Further, when you sit down to evaluate the progress of this church in months to come, don’t start with the attendance, the budget, Sunday school enrollment, or other such things. Start by asking yourself whether it is obvious that the faith of the people in this church is growing. Ask yourself if this is a church which other people could look at, from the outside, and see that our love for one another is increasing. Ask yourself if this is a church that is persevering under trial and hardship.” Start there, not with the budget. I have seen a number of churches that were stone, cold dead, but that still had abundant financial resources.

This word is not only for leaders, but for members as well. If the day should come when you have to move and look for a new church in a new city, please don’t start with worldly standards such as the size of the congregation, how new and shiny the buildings are, or whether or not they have a praise band. You too need to start with Paul’s words to the Thessalonian church. You need to ask yourself if the church you are considering shows evidence of growing faith, whether the love of the people for one another is increasing, if this church would stand its ground in hardship and trial, or if it would compromise the truth. Start there. Ask questions. Get longtime members to tell you stories with names, faces, dates, and details that demonstrate these things. Anybody can say, “We’re a very loving church,” which is fine. But don’t settle for that. Ask for examples – recent examples. Then you’ll have a better idea.

Learn from Paul what sort of things we ought to be looking for in every church as a sign that God is present and is maturing his people in faith, love, and perseverance.

VI. Fifth Move

There is, I believe, at least one more thing we can learn from Paul's words here in the opening verses of 2 Thessalonians. It has to do with the art of Christian encouragement. It is instructive to pay attention not only to what Paul said, but also to how he went about encouraging the Thessalonian Christians.

Notice what Paul said in verse 3: "We ought always to thank God for you." In putting his encouragement in this form, Paul steered a path between two very common mistakes that Christians make in their thinking and practice of encouragement. As Stott points out, the first mistake is mere congratulation and/or flattery. While it may not be our intention, when our encouragements of one another simply focus on the deeds of the person we are encouraging, it can very often lead to pride and/or be something which we use to manipulate people, flattering them so that they will approve of us. Paul did not simply say, "Great Job Thessalonians, you're marvelous, wonderful people."

The second mistake that Christians make in this area is to say nothing at all to or about others, but simply direct all of our thanks to God. The problem here is that we don't recognize the truth that God acts through human agents with very real blood, sweat and tears as his people respond to him in obedience. When we fail to appreciate the real people through whom God works, they feel discouraged, and are torn down rather than built up. They wonder if their efforts are appreciated, if their ministry is in fact considered valuable, and if it just taken for granted.

Avoiding these two mistaken paths, Paul took a middle way. He thanked God *for* the Thessalonians, and he told the Thessalonians about his thankfulness. *To* God, *for* them. To thank God for someone's ministry or faithfulness is a practice which is both encouraging and, at the same time, humbling. It lets people know that their efforts are appreciated and have not gone unnoticed. But at the same time, it places those efforts in proper perspective, recognizing that when they are working it is "God who is working through them" to accomplish his purposes (Phil. 2:13). This sort of encouragement builds up without puffing up, without tempting people toward pride or an over-developed sense of their own importance.

My prayer is that as we strive to grow in faith, in love for one another, and in perseverance amidst trial, Paul's words of thankfulness to God for the Thessalonians will be echoed on the lips of others who express the same thankfulness to God for the faithful, persevering, loving ministry of our churches.