

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 10: 12 - 22  
New Testament: 1 Thessalonians 3: 6 - 13

Please pray with me. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Over the course of the first two weeks of our study we've focused upon how the Thessalonian church has survived and even thrived against all odds. We've focused on the negativity surrounding them. We've talked about Paul and Silas being arrested and beaten in Philippi and we've talked about anti-Roman zealots rioting and harming people in the name of Christ thereby further complicating matters for the young church in Thessalonica trying to practice love, peace, and acceptance. Indeed, either one of those previous two sermons could have been entitled "The Collective Character of Faith" because really, that is what we have been talking about all along. Just as Paul, his companions, the Thessalonian church, and ourselves still here today have to deal with people generating negative impressions of Christianity and Jesus through their actions and behaviors, so too is the inverse true. We have every opportunity, like the Thessalonians did, to be encouraging and uplifting one another; to be practicing love, grace, mercy, compassion, and reconciliation and thereby generating positive impressions of Christianity and Jesus through our actions. This is the positive example of faith set by the Thessalonian church that had Paul and his companions so excited to write to them and so desperate to see them that they sent Timothy back to them even though they couldn't go themselves.

Today's reading focuses on Paul and Silas' reply to Timothy's glowing report. The report has filled them with such joy and relief that even despite continued distress and affliction for Paul and his companions they have been comforted. A pastor comforted by the faith in action of his congregation. Despite their longing to be with them, just the report of their love and faith in action is enough to comfort and sustain Paul and Silas through tough times and affliction. "The faith of the Thessalonians does not benefit only themselves ... One prominent feature of Paul's remarks is that the Thessalonians' faith serves to encourage the apostles in the midst of their own difficulties. Just as Paul has earlier reported that the belief of the Thessalonians has become 'an example for all believers in Macedonia and in Achaia,' (as discussed previously) so here their belief has buoyed the apostles themselves."<sup>1</sup> Congregations have every opportunity not only to support and uplift one another, thereby setting a positive example to the surrounding community of what faith and love look like, but

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<sup>1</sup> Gaventa, Beverly Gaventa. *First and Second Thessalonians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Editor: James Luther Mays; New Testament Editor: Paul J. Achtemeier). John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; 1998. 44.

an opportunity to support and uplift those who serve them; pastors and staff members. These are the behaviors that Paul speaks so eloquently about.

This is where our Old Testament reading comes into play. This positive impact on the broader community is not a concept introduced here in Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica. Living a life of love, grace, mercy, and reconciliation is something that God has called all people to for all time. Remember, the Hebrew people were to be a model of what heaven on earth could look like when they lived the way God commanded them to live. What does heaven on earth look like? What specifically were the Thessalonians doing as they lived out their faith in action? Executing justice for fatherless and the widowed. Loving the sojourner in their land giving them food and clothing. Revering God in humble submission; serving God and holding fast to him. Indeed, this is what putting faith in action and loving God looks like. These are the behaviors we have the opportunity to model, as the Thessalonians did, to offer for friends and communities a look at what faith in God looks like.

Faith in God is not as hyper-individualized as our United States culture would like it to be. Faith is not *just* about your, our, personal relationship with Jesus. We are a body. That's the analogy Paul uses elsewhere. And a body functions best, most effectively, when all parts of it are working together and in harmony. "This passage pushes all believers to acknowledge the corporate character of Christian faith. Faith is not something that belongs to the individual or even the local congregation or church. Faith is public in that the beliefs and actions of individuals influence others."<sup>2</sup> I know that for some this can feel intimidating. Some people don't necessarily want to be an example for others to follow. I get that. What this sermon series has been reminding us of though is that when we choose to be disciples of Jesus we do not have a choice. We are watched. We are observed. We are, let's be honest, evaluated for how our lifestyles, actions, and behaviors do or do not match up with what people know about Jesus, which is that Jesus is loving. You are an example to others whether you like it or not.

So then today before you lies a choice. And the same choice lies before you tomorrow and everyday after that. What kind of faith will you live and model? A toxic, judgemental, hypocritical faith that gives other Christians a bad name and reputation? Or a humble faith that models love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

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<sup>2</sup> Gaventa, Beverly Gaventa. *First and Second Thessalonians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Editor: James Luther Mays; New Testament Editor: Paul J. Achtemeier). John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; 1998. 47.

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? I pray that we all make the choice for the latter everyday. Amen.