

Imitation

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[0:00] Thessalonians, the early churches persecuted, the church in Thessalonica is no different, so bear that in mind as we read these first 10 verses. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of Thessalonians, in God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father the work of faith and labor of love and steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction.

You know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake and you become imitators of us and of the Lord. For you received the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all believers in Macedonia and Ikea.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Ikea, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us, the kind of reception we had among you and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living true God and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath of God.

Well, every church needs encouragement and even churches that are fairly strong churches can have their problems. So we think of the church at Philippi. Philippi was placed in a particular area where about 10 years after that letter being written, they were going to face quite horrendous persecution. It would be around the time when Christians would be brought into the Colosseum and fed to lions for amusement. So the church at Philippi had that ahead of them historically when we look back into history. The church in Thessalonica, you will remember if you read Acts carefully, was born out of a riot. There's great trouble surrounding this early church.

[2:36] And in this early church, there are these young Christians who now need instructing in the faith in order to remain firm and to understand that Jesus is returning and that he hasn't already returned because there's a little confusion over those who already died, what will happen to them in the second coming? If the Lord has already returned, what's going to happen to them? So there's this confusion in this church that needs addressing. But the strength of this church is in the fact that they have received the word of God in full conviction, sorry, in affliction, but full of conviction.

They are a strong church, but they are a young church. And we reading this recognize just how comfortable we have it as a church. And this is a good thing because this is the work of God. But sometimes the comfort hides the hidden dangers. Whereas when persecution is so obvious and so blatant in actually happening, it's very clear to understand what the dangers are. When things become more comfortable like they have for the church in the West, it becomes almost, well, it doesn't almost, it has become very difficult to spot where the dangers are because you can be, get taken along with the culture of the day thinking, well, this is, this is the type of life that the West has made for itself.

And of course, there's plenty of Christian churches who are doing the equivalent of putting a temple tax into Roman gods. There's this, this duality that's existing rather than a full commitment to Christ. So the church, the church lives in difficult times, regardless of what time it is. It's not always the case that the difficulty is persecution though. Sometime it is nothing more than the sheer affluence of the society that you live within. And you have to say to yourself, no, this is really, life does not consist of the abundance of things. Trying to remind yourself of that in the West is much harder

than it is to perhaps remind yourself of that in poor countries. Okay, but so we have these words to remind us. This young church doesn't have necessarily great wealth, although Thessalonica, well, most of the early churches had places where there was wealth. You think of Lydia, in particular, the seller of purple cloth. That's just another way of saying she's a very accomplished businesswoman and she's, she's made a lot of wealth and what have you. And, you know, she, financially, she was probably the, the, the, the, the chief contributor to that early church.

[5:37] Well, in Thessalonians, we have a young church that are, at least they are committed to the word. Life is hard, various trials, they are persecuted. The word has been received in much affliction.

And so I want us to pay attention in particular to just a few words that Paul mentions to this church and why I think these couple of words here in verse 6 are the reason that explain the strength of the church.

So this is in verse 6, And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I think just these few words alone are sort of like the key words. Like, now I understand, Paul, why this church is able to stand on its own two feet in huge amount of difficulties.

It's receiving what's happening to them in joy in the Holy Spirit. They're receiving the word of God in affliction, which means they are receiving the word of God in difficult times. Times when it would have been easier to say, Well, let's not talk about that now. Life's a bit difficult.

[6:44] Let's have this conversation when things get a bit easier. Perhaps we need a new politician. Perhaps we need a new state governor. Perhaps we need a new something. But no, they're willing to receive the full word of God, regardless of what it might cost them.

Now, one of the things that Paul is able to identify in this church is how salvation has been worked out in their lives. So he says early on, before he gets to verse 6, that he is able to notice in them their work of faith, verse 3, their labor of love and their steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what Paul is saying is this, that these are God's fingerprints. I'm able to see that God is at work within this church because he's left his fingerprints everywhere.

And his fingerprints are here. Your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfastness in the hope. This is God leaving behind the marks of his salvation, or rather the outcome of what it means for a church to be saved by God.

In other words, it's absolutely impossible for God to create something new and for you not to see it. You go back to the original creation, God speaks and something happens.

[8:02] God separates and something happens. I was saying in the first service this morning that creation has a beautiful pattern of form and filling, and the new creation, that is us in Christ Jesus, had that same beautiful pattern of form and filling, that God creates something new through separation.

So in Genesis, he gathers the waters together and the dry land appears. He doesn't create dry land. He's already created the world, but the land appears by gathering the waters together.

And so by gathering and separation, you then have distinct parts, water, seas, and hills. And so God has a beautiful way of bringing out this form and this filling through separation, not just through creating.

Well, in exactly the same way, he has created the church by what? Gathering them out of the world, separating them, and through separating them, they became a distinct people of God.

So gather, separation, distinction. In other words, the church is formed in almost exactly the same way you have the form and filling that you find in Genesis 1 and 2. That God has a beautiful way of doing things.

[9:18] He makes things, then he fills things. But sometimes he makes things by separating them. And that's what we see in Genesis, and that is also what we see in the new creation.

The church is not spoken into existence out of nothing. The church is never spoken into existence out of nothing.

The church is spoken into existence out of the world. In other words, God takes the raw materials, fallen though as they are in the world, He speaks the gospel into the world, His word.

That word produces faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And from that, you have separation, and then you have distinction. So God is, God follows His own workmanship. God's got this beautiful pattern of creation through gathering separation and distinction. So the world is not, the people are not created, the church is not created out of nothing.

[10:21] We are created out of fallen human beings that are separated from that fallenness, from that unregenerate state, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And then we become this holy, separate people. We become this church. And the evidences of that work of God in this church is seen in their work of faith, labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope.

God is at work in this church. The other identifying mark that God is at work in this church is by the sheer fact that they have continued to follow Jesus through severe persecution.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have met many people who have turned back from following Jesus in a very comfortable world.

And you think, well, perhaps that produces a turning back more often than persecution does. Well, not so if you read Hebrews. Hebrews is quite clear that to become a second-generation Christian, which is what Hebrews was, they were not first-generation Christians.

[11:36] They were those who received the word after those who received the word. But it was pre-AD 70, and so the Jewish customs were still going strong.

You still had the temple. You still had the Day of Atonement every single year, all the way up to AD 70. All of this was still continuing to happen. And then so for these Jewish Christians, they were tempted to go back to the old ways.

Well, perhaps things aren't any different. Perhaps things are just the way that they were. Perhaps. And why make life more difficult by saying that Jesus is Lord when we've got to live amongst the Romans?

So it was never easy to follow Christ. And so turning back from following Christ, whether it's through persecution or through comfort, means that there is something missing.

And the thing that is missing is that conviction, that full of conviction or the joy of you really believing in what you have received.

[12:40] And my point, or not my point, but the point that I think Peter and Paul makes constantly throughout the New Testament, is that one of the defining marks of the Christian is that they don't turn back.

One of the defining marks of the Christian is that they persevere in the faith. Now that doesn't mean that some Christians can have lapses where life is so difficult, they're struggling to put everything together and they're just falling back into a period where they're saying, I just can't cope with any more of life, Lord.

I've just had enough. That can happen. But even when that's happening, you've not rejected the faith. You've not really turned your back on the faith.

What you're doing is you're saying, I'm just struggling a lot, that I don't know if I can move any further forward. So you're not, there's no real denial there.

And that faith that's there is, of course, imperishable. It is given to you by God. And it gets you through. And then a few months later, you recognize it was a hard time, but now you're back just the way you were.

[13:52] That's the perseverance. So one of the defining marks of the grace of God in the church of God is the fact that the church always perseveres. I've always said the greatest danger to life in terms of what age are not your teens, but it's between your 50s and upwards.

You look at the amount of men in Scripture that failed in their old age. My biggest fear is, is what's ahead of me, not what is, I've been forgiven of my past, I've been forgiven for the future, but some of these great struggles are the failures that men can have and even women can have in their older life.

And so one of the things that I must be convinced of to keep me close to God is that the gift that God has given me will cause me to persevere through anything, through the trials, through the difficulties, whatever it may be.

And when I'm convinced of that, I know that when I have lapses and difficult times, I'm going to get through. And I'm going to get through because the faith that God has given me gets me through. Now this is crucial. What Paul says here in 1 Thessalonians is slightly revealing, or very revealing, and it's here in verse 6.

[15:17] Imitation. Notice how Paul says that you, this is the church, you have become imitators of us and of the Lord, and you have received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Let's just start with this idea of imitation. How important is it to imitate Christ? I'm going to say it's extremely important. Why?

Because there just so happens to be a pattern to faithful living. And when you get this, this is the very benchmark of all your discipleship. Everything that happens in Sunday school, everything that happens in the church follows this very simple principle.

There is a pattern to faithful living. And therefore, it's very easy to spot when someone is not living within that pattern. Therefore, imitate me, copy me, and you will learn the pattern of faithful living. Now, some of you who have used cake cutters or you have used any kind of mold or templates or anything will understand the importance of imitation. That when you don't know how to do something, you take a template out, you place it down on your material, you draw around it, you cut it out, and suddenly, you've got the template.

[16:36] Imitation. Why? Well, you could do it from scratch, but in doing it from scratch, you could make a number of mistakes, you could miscalculate your numbers, or whatever it may be. And therefore, having a template that has been proven to be trustworthy and true, that's been used many times before, suddenly becomes not a cheat, but the very means by which you can get it right.

It's not less authentic by copying someone else. But too often, we tend to think of Christianity, unless I can do it, unless it's my own, unless I own it, that I'm not being genuine.

No, no, it's more genuine to copy someone who is faithful, rather than trying to go it alone. And one of the reasons why this young church is so mature in that sense, they're young in terms of the amount of years the church has been in existence, but the reason why they're so mature is because of this idea of imitation.

The reason they have got so far ahead in so short amount of time is because they have imitated those who are mature, and most importantly, the Lord. So imitation is not a cheat, it's rather a model of strengthening and maturing a church, and a model that should be followed.

So I want you to appreciate the importance of imitation, because it follows the pattern of faithful living. How you remain committed through difficult times will imitate someone who's remained committed through difficult times.

[18:13] How do you stay away from drink? Well, don't ask the man who has difficulty with drink, go and speak to the man or the woman who overcomes those difficulties.

In other words, the world tends to reverse these things around. Most of the young people that want to become counselors have normally gone through difficult times and think that now they've got the experience needed to be able to share.

But if imitation is true, then it's not experience of bad things we need to learn from, it's the imitation of how to avoid those things in the first place. Now, I understand that the world doesn't think like this.

The world tends to think that in order for a minister, for instance, to understand the struggles of the congregation, he too has to go through those struggles. If he has, say, an easygoing life without any kind of struggles whatsoever, he's unable to sympathize with the congregation.

And of course, empathy is not a word that the Bible uses. It uses sympathy because the two words do not mean the same. And Jesus sympathized with our weaknesses. He doesn't empathize for a very good reason.

[19:22] Because if empathy is often understood as you being in the same position as me and we can help each other out, no one feels inferior to

the other. But sympathy, properly understood, is more like a man standing on the side of the harbor throwing you a life ring.

I don't need to get in the water to save you. In fact, I'm in a better position to save you if I stay on the side of the harbor. The trouble is with this is now there's an inferiority complex.

Well, you've not got yourself into the trouble that I'm in. Why? I can't listen to you. You don't understand. Well, that is nothing more than a little bit of pride because that person who is not in trouble is in the best place to help me out of trouble.

The person who has overcome going into difficulties and not ended up in those difficulties is the best person to teach me how to do it, not the person who's experienced hundreds of them.

And so this idea of imitation means that there's now a standard to imitation. We imitate those who are faithful to the Lord and we imitate the Lord. We imitate those who know how to get through it, not those who have had lots of experiences.

[20:36] We're not looking for empathy here, so let's all join together in our weakness and feel sorry for each other. We're looking to get ourselves out of the difficulties that we're in and we need someone to show us how to do it.

So it's a matter of pride not to imitate someone. It is really a matter of pride to say, I'm going to do it all on my own and I'm not going to imitate someone who's more faithful and has proved consistent.

And the reason why this young church has become so faithful and has maintained sort of a very sort of young maturity in Christ is because of the sheer importance of imitation.

So there seems to be no doubt to me that as we look at the church of today that the reason why the church is quite weak is because it no longer practices imitation.

Everyone wants to be their own person. Everyone wants to be quite genuine, thinking that genuineness doesn't come in the form of imitation. But it seems to be here that if imitation is one of the keys to maturity, then we avoid it at our own loss.

[21:48] what we learn here is that imitation is a biblical model for strengthening the church. It is a biblical model for strengthening the church.

This then raises another difficulty and that is having people to imitate. Having people to imitate. And this will take us back to the faithful witness because if we're now called to imitate people and the Lord, what type of people are we to imitate?

Well, they're going to have to be faithful. They're going to have to honor God and love God and follow God and obey his commandments and walk in his ways. They're not going to be perfect. They are not going to be perfect and we understand that.

But nonetheless, imitation is an important role. So what about, well, shouldn't I just come to my own conviction? Shouldn't I just wait for my own conviction?

My answer is no. You should never wait around until you understand it and you should never wait around until you are convicted by the truth. The impression of imitation must be laid on the church heavily because you are maturing believers who don't know any better.

[23:01] I don't know about you, but you can remember perhaps teaching your young children how to hold a knife and fork. Do you remember how difficult it was? Do you remember how long it took to get them to stop picking their food up with their fingers?

and then the complication of food being invented that you could only eat with your fingers? And now you're trying to have to say, well, knife and fork for this, spoon for this, fork and spoon for spaghetti, whatever.

Okay. Then it's chicken drumsticks. Okay. Fingers. It's a minefield. So what do you do in a situation where children are just too young to explain everything to?

You say, just copy me. Imitate. So I don't think it's less genuine either to be told what to do. I'm a very firm believer of telling children what they ought to believe and not wait around for them to come to that conclusion themselves.

Because they may not actually come to that conclusion themselves. And this is why we proclaim the gospel. This is why we say. Now, of course, God has to convict. The individual has to repent.

[24:11] They have to be full of conviction themselves. All of that's true. I'm not taking away from any of that. What I'm trying to say is

that the strength of the early church was clearly, at least here in Thessalonica, is clearly revolves around this idea of imitation.

Following those who are like Christ. And so if we're seeking to raise the next generation, forget about the Sunday school curriculum. Forget about any of that.

Forget about let's just be godly people who can tell others this is how you do it and not be ashamed of saying this is the way to live because there is a pattern to faithful living.

We are in great danger if people are allowed to make up their own mind about everything as if there is no pattern, as if there is no template, as if we can manage to get to the same place by doing it in multiple different ways.

But I think it's quite clear throughout the New Testament that there is a pattern to faithful living.

What then about conviction? The conviction that a person must have to live faithfully.

[25:25] Well, we know that a Christian is convicted by the Word and the Spirit. The Spirit convicts, the Word convicts, and the Spirit and the Word doesn't contradict each other, so they convict together.

They also assure, they also encourage, they do a number of different things. And so what happens when the child or the adult who's just come to Christ doesn't have the same convictions that you do, that does not share the same understanding that you do?

Well, again, you go back to imitation. You keep copying me. So I'm, for instance, if we were to put this into a math lesson, I don't know about you, but I quite like the idea of teaching children their times table by rote.

Then when they're of the age where they can actually do the sum, they can go back to what they remember and go, now I know what I'm working towards. It makes perfect sense to me. It makes absolute sense to me.

Get the information in your head and sort it out later. Dorothy Sayers got it right when she said we need to teach our children back to the trivium, the grammar, the logic, and the rhetoric.

[26:35] Fill their heads with what they need to know. When they're of the age where they can sort it out, then they will have the information to sort out. It seems clear. I think it's exactly the same when it comes to the Christian life.

That you fill your head with the word of God and it takes, sometimes it can take a very long time to put it all in order and it especially can for young believers. And therefore, that we go back that imitation leads to conviction.

But if we wait around for conviction, if we wait around for everyone to understand everything, we don't actually get anywhere. Nothing moves forward. So this idea of imitation is the most important thing.

So what is the relationship then between imitation and conviction? I think the relationship is this.

That the Christian church is called to imitate those who are faithful in the Lord because there is a pattern to faithfulness.

Therefore, as we mature, we mature in our understanding but we mature within a pattern. So now, everything that we have to sort out fits within a template, a pattern, rather than there being no pattern and we're trying to decide what's in and what's out.

[27:54] And this is what Paul is saying to this early church. That, and you became imitators of us and the Lord for you received the word in much affliction and the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Part of the imitation that this early church learnt was one of the most difficult ones of all. And that is how to receive the word in affliction. Why would anyone receive the word, get punished for receiving the word, get afflicted for receiving the word and continue to receive it while they're copying others who have done the same?

And why are they copying others who have done the same? Because there's a pattern to faithfulness before the Lord. They are mature, they will know what they're doing, let's copy them even if we don't fully understand what's happening to us.

So the early church sets the pattern. Well here's the exhortation as we close. The reason why Paul can be so thankful to God for this church where he can express this huge amount of thankfulness to God is because he recognizes God's fingerprints over this congregation.

Their work of faith, their labor of love, their steadfastness and hope and also this imitation leading to conviction, leading to a number of other things in the letter if you were to read it through.

[29:21] In turn, these people have become great witnesses. So much so, Paul says, I don't even have to say anything if you read verse 10, sorry, if you read verse 9.

For they themselves report concerning the kind of reception we had among you and how you turned from God to idols to serve the living God. Sorry, must be verse 8. For not only has the will of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Ikaea, but your faith in God has gone forth from everywhere so that we need not say anything.

So, so close, so great is their witness, so good is their imitation of Paul who brought the message to them in the first place. They have copied him down to a T to such an extent where Paul doesn't even have to go to those places to reclaim the gospel anymore because it's already happened through them.

This is why Paul can be thankful for this church to God because all of this is the work of God in the life of the people of God. So let me finish with this. I appreciate that you are an individual and you need to appreciate that God made you as an individual.

He made you unique but at the same time he did not make you to be convicted of individualism, the right to rule your own life.

[30:52] Individualism is very contrary to the church and the gospel and therefore you must understand that though you are an individual you are not separate. Though you are an individual you are connected in a body with the people of God.

That though you are an individual you are someone who belongs and therefore there is a pattern of faithful living and that pattern is copied through imitation. Amen.