

1 Thessalonians: Everyday Jesus Followers

FAITHFUL

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Layne Lebo

January 5, 2020

Whether we make New Year's resolutions or not, the beginning of the year is a good time to reflect on the year that has passed and make new commitments for the year ahead. I'd like you to reflect on this statement as we start the New Year at McBIC on this first Sunday of 2020. As your pastor, I'm convinced **The greatest challenge we face as followers of Jesus is living with our feet firmly planted in this world, while also living as citizens of Jesus' kingdom.** Think about the things we all struggle with: our health, relationships, finances, our jobs and how we manage our time. Those are difficult issues for anyone, but they're uniquely challenging for those of us who follow Jesus, because we live in two kingdoms. Take finances as an example, we're not just thinking about financial security in this world; we're also responsible to consider how the stewardship of our finances advances Jesus' kingdom. Fortunately, we're not left to figure this dilemma out for ourselves. Much of the New Testament specifically addresses the question of how we live in this world and the kingdom of Jesus simultaneously.

During the 4 Sundays of January we're going to explore the Apostle Paul's initial letter to the 1st Century church at Thessalonica. New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, notes that Paul's letters to the Thessalonians—he wrote two of them in our New Testament—address the confusion in this church about the “coming of Jesus,” and the implications his coming has for the church in the meantime. In other words, Paul's letter to these mid-1st Century believers in Greece addresses the same challenge you and I face today.

As I prepared for this series, I landed on the title, “*Everyday Jesus Followers.*” I noted 4 themes in this letter that are captured in the words: *faithful, receptive, holy* and *focused*. Each of these words explains Paul's answer to the dilemma of how we live in this world, while also living in Jesus' Kingdom. During our study of 1 Thessalonians we'll focus on one of these words each week, starting today with the word *faithful*.

When I hear the word *faithful* I think of words like loyal, consistent and persevering. Faithful friends, faithful spouses and faithful followers of Jesus quickly come to mind. Sometimes

what we associate certain words with and what the dictionary defines them as are vastly different, but Webster defines *Faithful* as “steadfast in affection or allegiance : loyal.”

The concept of *faithfulness* is prominent in the Scriptures—occurring 142x—and in Galatians chapter 5 the Apostle Paul lists *faithfulness* as one of the Fruit of the Spirit along with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. The heading over verses 2-10 of 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 reads, “*Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ Faith.*” Many of the Apostle Paul’s letters to 1st Century churches recorded in our New Testament are corrective, but Paul writes very affirming words for these 1st Century followers of Jesus living in the Macedonian (modern day Greece) city of Thessalonica. Before we take a closer look at the faithfulness of the Thessalonians, I want to give some background about Thessalonica and Paul’s letter to these 1st Century followers of Jesus.

Over the course of his evangelizing and church planting, the Apostle Paul is known to have taken at least 3 missionary journeys. The church at Thessalonica was founded by Paul on his 2nd missionary journey around 50 A.D. In chapter 17 of the Book of Acts—written by Paul’s traveling companion, Luke, we read this account of Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica.

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea...When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. Acts 17:1-9 and 13-15

Maps

After Paul left Berea and continued to travel to other places planting churches, Timothy returned to Thessalonica to pastor the church there. Several months to a year after planting the church at Thessalonica, Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians from the Greek city of Corinth and sent it to the church. With the possible exception of his letter to the church at Galatia, 1 Thessalonians is the earliest letter we have in the New Testament. Sometime after writing his 1st letter Paul learned that things in Thessalonica had deteriorated. The persecution the believers were facing had gotten worse; a report was circulating among the believers that Jesus had already returned for his church; and, the problem of people quitting working to wait for Jesus' return had escalated. So Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to address these concerns.

Thessalonica was founded in 316 BC by the Macedonian general Cassander who named the city in honor of his wife. The city was a busy seaport at the head of the Thermaic Gulf and it was an important communication and trade center. Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia and also the capital of the province. A historical note I found interesting is that during WW I the Allies entered the town of Salonika (ancient Thessalonica) to use a port that would take them up the coast to Serbia. While in the city, the Allied troops noted the extreme unhealth of the area—it was surrounded by swamps for miles, fever and malaria were common and infant mortality was high.

Paul typically began his ministry in new cities in the synagogue, so it's believed that there were some Jews in the Church at Thessalonica, but the passage I read from Acts chapter 17 seems to indicate the church was largely Gentile in membership. Paul had to leave Thessalonica abruptly after a short stay, because his life was in danger, and the young church was left with little support in the face of persecution. Paul's purpose in writing was to encourage the new converts in the midst of their trials—he also wanted to give them instruction on what it meant to live godly lives and to ensure them of the future of believers who die prior to Christ's return.

Today we'll look at verses 1-10 of chapter one. This passage begins with Paul's typical greeting.

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

We learn from Paul's greeting that the letter was written from Paul, Silas and Timothy. Paul always traveled as part of a team and Silas (also known as Silvanus) was a frequent missionary companion. You might recall that in Acts 16 it was Silas who was worshipping with Paul in prison when God sent an earthquake that miraculously freed Paul and Silas from prison in the Greek city of Philippi. Timothy grew up in the city of Lystra (present day Turkey) and came to faith in Christ through the influence of his mother and grandmother. Paul met the young man on his first missionary journey and later on a return visit to Lystra took Timothy with him to preach the Gospel and plant churches. Paul's practice was to keep moving after planting a church so he could preach and plant churches in other places and Timothy would frequently be left behind to pastor the church and help the believers grow as disciples.

Now we move to the main part of chapter 1. I'll read verses 2-10.

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 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. 1 Thessalonians 1:2 & 3

We tend to look at the past with rose-colored lenses and see only the good and that's definitely true when it comes to churches in the New Testament. It's not uncommon to hear people say something like, "*I'd like to find a New Testament church.*" By that statement they generally mean a church that's healthy and unified and committed to worship, discipleship and evangelism. But many of the churches Paul wrote his letters to—Corinth, Ephesians and Galatians come quickly to mind—had serious problems and Paul's letters are filled with challenges, corrections and rebuke. Unlike those letters, Paul's 1st letter to the Thessalonians is affirming and encouraging.

Look again at the 3 statements he makes in verses 2 & 3. Paul compliments them for their: "*work produced by faith,*" their "*labor prompted by love,*" and their "*endurance inspired by hope.*" Those statements point to a church that was spreading the good news of Jesus out of their own experience; a church that was serving others in need; and, a church that was enduring difficulty and even persecution well because their hope was in Jesus.

I'll pick up reading again in verse 4:

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 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. 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. And so 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. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 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, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

These words lead us to see that Paul viewed the church in Thessalonica as a model for others...

- Paul's sharing of the Gospel wasn't just spoken words; it was confirmed by the power of the Holy Spirit and the Thessalonians responded to the conviction God put in their hearts.
- The believers imitated what they saw in Paul and Timothy and Silas' lives and became models for others throughout Greece, so that everyone knew of their faith.
- The Thessalonian Christians received the message of Jesus with joy even though they experienced persecution.
- When these followers of Jesus accepted the message of Jesus their lives were transformed. They stopped worshiping idols and began worshiping and serving Jesus.

In sum, the Thessalonian Christians were faithfully loving and serving God while also living in the world and loving and serving others. As I studied this chapter I asked the question, "*How are we doing at McBIC in living as everyday followers of Jesus?*" "***What encouragement and affirmation would I give to our church as we head into a new year?***" This isn't an exhaustive list, but these thoughts came quickly to mind...

- I'm blessed by your receptivity to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in your lives. You're not content just to learn about Jesus; you want to experience Him and what He has for you.
- I love your commitment to live your faith outside of these walls. It's tempting to look at the church as a safe place to hide, rather than as an equipping center where we're empowered to go out and serve others. We frequently hear stories of how people are partnering with God to do his work in our community, in the Harrisburg region and around the world.

- You love and care for each other well. Visiting the sick, taking meals to people who have had babies, helping friends move, meeting financial needs of those in difficult spots.
- You volunteer your gifts and time in ministry to children, teens and adults at McBIC. You give generously to meet our needs as a church and to allow us to continue to expand our ministry footprint. You faithfully pray for our church and its ministries.
- You encourage, support and pray for me as your senior pastor and for my family and you do the same for our staff and families.

These are ways I believe we embody Jesus' heart for his Church today.

I also have a challenge for us as we walk through 2020. I've noticed that followers of Jesus (and this goes beyond McBIC) often respond to words and ideas they hear based on what is being said in our culture, rather than taking our cues from God's Word. For example when topics are raised like the LGBTQ community, immigration, gun control, President Trump and the rights of women and people of color, we tend to respond with emotion and polarized views based on what we hear on CNN or Fox News or from our colleagues at work or our classmates at school, rather than from a world view shaped by Scripture and the example of Jesus. My heart is that we would seek God and his kingdom and allow his Holy Spirit to shape and mold our minds and hearts in the midst of a cacophony of other voices telling us what our values should be, how we should think and how we should live.

I'm convinced that faithfully living as everyday followers of Jesus means we embrace the Apostle Paul's words from Romans 12:1 & 2 where he wrote, *"Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform and longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."* Romans 12: 1 & 2