

"Marks of a Faithful Church" – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)

Jesus is still fulfilling His promise. Jesus is still building His Church. Right here in Coram, in this little corner of the universe, almost as far away as you can get from Jerusalem we are involved with His work. There is no enterprise more important than building the Church. As Christians, it should be our primary focus because we are the body of Christ. We are His hands; we are His feet; we are His witnesses in a world that desperately needs Him. He gave us a charge; He gave us work to do.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; " (Matthew 28:19-20)

It is our prime directive. It must be our primary focus.

If we are to be a faithful church, we need to be about the work of building the Kingdom of God. And I see that happening here. I am so thankful that I get to be part of this body of believers, that I get to be a part of this church family. Because we do demonstrate the marks of a faithful church. But friends, we can always do better and that is part of the reason I feel led to exposit Paul's First letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul established the Thessalonian church on His second missionary journey. I'd like to have you read about it this week, so I'm giving you a homework assignment. Read from Acts 17:1 through Acts 18:5. Pay particular attention to what happened in Thessalonica, and to the travels of Paul, Silas and Timothy.

But for now, let's take a look at the map on the screen. Paul and his companions had been called to Macedonia. They came to Philippi and established a church there. Of course, they got beat up and tossed into jail and were asked to get out of Dodge. Then they traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, and came to Thessalonica.

As was Paul's practice, he first went to the Synagogue to preach Christ on three successive Sabbaths and won a few converts, but not so many Jews. Most of the new Christians were Greek God-fearers and leading women. The new church consisted mostly of Gentiles. They apparently met in the house of a guy named Jason. Paul taught them the fundamentals of the faith, what it means to be Christians.

Unfortunately, most of the Jews there were pretty unhappy with this turn of events, so they started a riot. The Christians there hustled Paul and Silas out of town, and they went to Berea. Paul then continued his missionary work in Athens, and eventually in Corinth, where he stayed for about 18 months.

Now, as you read through your homework, you will notice that Timothy apparently stayed at Thessalonica. Silas might have stayed in Berea or Athens or he might have traveled with Paul all the way to Corinth, but at some point, Silas went back to Thessalonica.

I think Paul sent Silas there to find out how the church at Thessalonica was doing. Silas brought Timothy to Corinth to give a report. And it was a good report.

Paul then wrote the letter we call First Thessalonians after receiving this report. He wrote it to encourage them because it wasn't easy being a Christian in Thessalonica.

This letter we're looking at this morning is one of the oldest of the Pauline epistles. It was written from Corinth, probably in 51 AD. Galatians might be older, but not by much.

Although there isn't a ton of explicit doctrine here, there is much for us to learn and much for us to explore, so let's get started.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:1)

Here is a typical Pauline greeting. It is how Paul liked to start his letters. Notice that he includes Silvanus and Timothy in the greeting. Silvanus is the Roman form of Silas. Silas was Paul's companion on the second missionary journey, launched from Antioch. Timothy was a young guy they picked up on the way, in a place called Lystra, as we learn from Acts 16. Both Timothy and Silas were important partners in spreading the Gospel and building churches.

Paul sends them a blessing. He wishes them grace, that is, the unmerited favor of God. He wishes them peace, which is only available from the Prince of Peace. He acknowledges that this grace and peace can only come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)

The next thing Paul tells them is that he is praying for them.

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, (1 Thessalonians 1:2)

I can relate! I pray for you all the time. I am so thankful for you. I know I've told you this before, but the very last thing they ask you at Village Missions Candidate School is "Are you willing to go anywhere we send you?" There is only one right answer, and some folks find it a little bit scary.

"What if they send us to a really icky place?"

Well, Kris and I didn't have any hesitation, because we had already come to the conclusion that God would send us to the community that was absolutely best for us. And here we are!

I give thanks to God for you all. I pray for you every morning. In fact, I pray for you throughout the day. I pray that the Lord would bless you richly. I pray that He would draw you closer to Himself. I pray that He would give you a powerful desire to live for Him, to live *coram Deo*, that you would grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, that you would progress toward maturity. I pray that God would add to our number those who are being saved.

I also pray that I would not let you down. Kris and I have been called to this church, this community. I desperately want to serve faithfully. I want to finish well. So please, pray for me ... pray for us.

As Paul prayed, he thanked God for some very specific things.

... remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. (1 Thessalonians 1:3-4)

In these two verses, we see the marks of a faithful church and because the Church is made up of individual Christians, these are also the marks of a faithful Christian. This is what defines us as Children of God. This is what defines us as Children of the Promise.

First and foremost is the **work of faith**. Now, this work is actually done for you by Jesus. You are saved by your faith in Jesus Christ. And your faith is a gift granted to you by a gracious God. The work of God is to believe in the One whom He sent. (John 6:29)
Because ...

... as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

It is all about faith. If you want to be saved, you must believe in the name of Jesus Christ.

“Well, what do I have to believe about Him?” you might ask. Let me give you the basics.

First you have to believe that you are a sinner. It shouldn't be hard, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) We're all guilty of cosmic treason against the Creator of the universe and since God is immaculately just and holy, He must punish every sin. But here's the deal: You get to choose who will endure your punishment. You can choose to pay the penalty yourself ... not a good plan because the penalty is the eternal wrath of God, an eternity of suffering in the pit of hell. Think of the worst pain you have ever endured in your life, the worst physical pain, the worst emotional pain. I guarantee you, it doesn't even come close to the horrors of hell, and that pain will last forever.

So you could choose to endure the wrath of God yourself, or you can choose to let Jesus pay your penalty instead.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Even though you are a dirty rotten sinner, God still loves you.

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

All He asks of you is that you just believe. Admit you are a sinner and turn to the cross.

... that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Romans 10:9-10)

Please believe! If you are having trouble believing, pray for faith. Pray for the faith to accept the sacrifice Jesus made you your behalf. Pray “Lord, help my unbelief.”

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

That's the first, and I believe the most important mark of a faithful church. It is the first and most important mark of a faithful Christian: the **work of faith**. You are not saved by your works, but if your faith is genuine, God will use it to produce faithful works.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

... it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)

This brings us to the second mark of a faithful church: **the labor of love**. You see, true faith inevitably produces godly fruit and godly fruit is nothing more than the result of

conforming to God's will. And all of God's prescriptive will is encompassed by Jesus' two great commandments:

Jesus said to him, 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

Now, I admit, it is not particularly easy to do. In fact, it is impossible without the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit, but it is what we have been called to. Jesus said:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

That would be hard enough. Sometimes our Christian brothers and sisters can be sort of hard to love. But Jesus didn't stop with our friends. He told us we have to love our enemies too.

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, (Matthew 5:44)

We struggle with that, don't we? Too often we fail. Brian Wechsler, our executive director, had to send out a reminder to Village Missionaries this week. Too many of us were passing on some pretty unloving communiques regarding the election. We all need to be very careful how we utilize that great medium of grace, truth and love we call Facebook!

If we want to be a faithful church, and if you want to be a faithful Christian, you need to be engaged in the labor of love. And friends, it is labor. It takes intentional work. Because this is agape love. It is not the love of feelings, it is the love of volition. I love you when I give you what you need even when you don't deserve it.

The marks of a faithful church include the work of faith and the labor of love. Finally, the faithful church demonstrates the **patience of hope**. But this is not hope in a vacuum. This is not wishful thinking. This is the act of resting in the promises of God. Paul links this up very effectively by saying it is the ...

... patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father

Do you believe the promises of God? Do you believe that ...

... all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Do you believe that ...

... neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

If you do, then you should be able to put up with a little weirdness in the short term. As Paul relates:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

Our hope must not be in this world. Our hope is in the promise of a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. So, we need to demonstrate patient endurance, just like God does for us. Remember,

... the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation (2 Peter 3:15)

If God was not patient with us, nobody would be saved. I think we should be able to practice the patience of hope for a bit longer. There are still souls to win. Today is still the day of salvation.

So, as Paul begins this letter, he thanks God that the Christians in Thessalonica were demonstrating the marks of a faithful church. They were demonstrating the work of faith. They were demonstrating the labor of love. They were demonstrating the patience of hope. These are important benchmarks because they demonstrate the fact that our salvation is authentic, that our church is authentic. So, we should ask ourselves: Are we demonstrating the work of faith, the labor of love and the patience of hope? Are they abiding in us? Are they more evident as time goes on?

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

When we do that, we know we are of God's elect. Paul rejoiced because of the report he got from Timothy. Because the Thessalonians demonstrated the marks of a faithful church, he was convinced,

... knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. (1 Thessalonians 1:4)