

Gospel Shaped Church (2) – Evidence We Are Chosen by God

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Paul writes; **“We always thank God for all of you, remembering you constantly in our prayers.”** That struck me. It struck me that Paul chose to always give thanks for all of them. Always thankful for all, no one left out! We can so easily lean towards criticism, irritation & negativity towards our brothers & sisters in Christ - or worse towards envy, bitterness & anger. How about instead we determine to be a people who lean towards thankfulness for one another & let’s make such thankfulness the foundation for praying for one another. No matter what way we feel led to pray for or minister to our Christian brothers & sisters may positive thankfulness for them be the starting point.

Paul said a similar thing to the Romans in 1:8; **“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you”**. Later in his letter to them there will be theological & practical instruction & correction but first he thanks God through Christ Jesus for all of them. This should be our starting point with one another. Yes we may need to exhort, challenge & confront one another at times but let thankfulness come first. And until we can be thankful for a brother or sister in the Lord then we are not ready to speak into their lives. If we can only be critical but not thankful then it is because there is something needing dealt with in our hearts.

Think of a reason why you can thank God for every individual who comes to this church. Let’s focus on the positives in one another’s lives. This will help guard our hearts from unnecessary, unhelpful & even divisive criticism of one another. Like Paul, Silas & Timothy; can we be always thankful for all? Thankful for every other person in this fellowship & for every other Christian we know. This is a challenging call straight from God’s Word to our hearts today. Even to the troubled Corinthian church which was full of factions & rivalries he wrote; **“I always thank my God for you because of God’s grace given to you in Christ Jesus”** (1 Cor. 1:4). The first note in the *Gospel Transformation Bible* regarding 1 Thess. says; *“The apostle Paul was not put off by the reality that he was ministering to an imperfect church.”* This is partly because he could think of each individual & be thankful.

Now with all that said we must also note there was a lot to be thankful for in the believers in Thessalonica. While not being perfect they were one of the most exemplary churches in the NT. We see this clearly in these opening verses. One of the things Paul emphasises in these verses is that the quality of their faith, hope & love helped to evidence they had been chosen by God’s sovereign love (v4). So before I go any further I want to ask a question: *If these verses were used as evidence to help prove God has chosen us what would be the verdict?* I want to hold this question over this chapter as we look at it together. For since this is what the gospel produced in this church it is also a vision of what it should produce in our lives & fellowship. Paul continues;

V3-5 **“We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work of faith, labour of love, and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing your election, brothers loved by God. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance. You know what kind of men we were among you for your benefit.”**

Here we find the overarching evidences of true gospel produced Christianity – faith, love & hope... And the words connected to each of them in verse 3 – work, labour & endurance – teach us something about the genuine gospel produced character of these great Christian qualities. Paul is convinced these believers have been chosen by God because of the evidence he sees in their lives & because of what he, Silas & Timothy personally experienced when delivering the gospel to them.

Let’s think about what Scripture reveals about their faith, love & hope, realities which equally belong to & should be evident in those of us who find ourselves in Christ. John Stott notes that each of these qualities is outgoing: *“Faith is directed towards God, love towards others & hope towards the future... coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Another person writes; *“Faith rests on the past; love works in the present; hope looks to the future.”* Every true Christian without exception is a believer, a lover & a hoper! Without these realities there is no genuine work of the Spirit. Together God uses these realities to totally re-orientate our lives, as we find ourselves drawn up towards God in faith, out towards others in love & on towards our future hope with Christ. Up, out & on... that is the Christian life.

These three phrases; **“work of faith, labour of love, and endurance of hope”** are a brief description of what true Christianity looks like in action. None of these words or phrases are passive they are all active. This is the action the gospel produces, prompts & inspires in the lives of genuine believers! Paul opens this letter full of thankfulness for what the gospel has produced in the lives of these believers. And if each of these realities is not evident at some level in our lives then there is something seriously wrong. So let’s look at these phrases individually.

Firstly, **“work of faith”** or faith that works. Paul was confident these Christians had been chosen by God because of the good works being produced from their lives of faith in Christ. Real faith in Christ produces transformed lives & out of this transformed life good deeds increasingly flow. Of course the words of James come to mind; **“What good is it; my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can his faith save him?”** (2:14). He says in v17; **“faith by itself, if it doesn’t have works, is dead.”** He says in verse 20; **“Foolish man! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless?”** Have you got the productive faith Paul is talking about or the useless faith James is referring to? Faith in Christ is a faith that produces! James says in verse 26; **“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”** Is there evidence of the life of Christ in your life or is there no sign of his breath at all in your attitudes & actions?

Is your Christian faith working? Is it producing what it is meant to? This little phrase of Paul helps highlight that he was in total agreement with James on this issue - real faith works. Even Paul's powerful words in **Ephesians 2:8-10** highlight this. We do not work our way to God, we do not earn salvation; it is God's free gift – this is very clear – but since the electing love of God unites us to the True Vine fruit is borne & if it is not then something is wrong. The works are not the root, they are not the source, they are not our security & therefore they are not what we look too. Christ alone is & it is grace alone that connected us to him! Therefore it is because we are connected to Christ, because he is our life source that fruitful works of grace come forth from our lives. They are the unavoidable result & evidence of connection to Christ.

This word work more or less covers everything we do – our living, preaching, praying, serving, conversation, employment, worshipping, charity, giving etc. Everything can be a work of faith in Christ. It covers what we do in life, family & church. It is doing all we do with Christ-centred focus, it is doing all we do for his glory & it is doing all we do with gospel produced character that flows from life in him. A few people could do the exact same work, for one it will be a work of faith, for another it will just be a work needing done & for another it could be a wicked work done for one's own benefit. **“Work of faith”** has a sweet smelling aroma to it because it is a work that flows from being in our Lord Jesus Christ. It smells of the beauty & character of Christ himself. Can that be said of our work? It is not a work done to impress God or others or to gain for self, it is a work birthed out of wonder, gratitude & love for all Christ has done for us & it reflects that.

There is a big difference between the stench of works done in the flesh & the fragrance of work of faith done in our Lord Jesus Christ. **Listen to these words from Galatians 5:19-26.** Are our works a work of the flesh or a work of faith in Christ? Are they works that carry the stench of sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies & things like these or are they works that release the sweet aroma of the fruit of the Spirit of Christ? That's what this world needs to smell from us.

Jesus used the analogy of a good tree & bad tree a few times in the gospels. Let's turn to one example in Matthew 12:33-37 (cf. 7:15-20). Are we a good tree or a bad tree? The only way to be a good tree is to true root ourselves in Christ! If the fruitful works of grace are not being produced in our lives the answer is not working harder the answer in making sure your faith is truly rooted in the Christ revealed in the true Gospel! Paul ends this verse with **“in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** This phrase is connected to each of these three phrases very carefully by Paul. **“We recall, in the presence of our *God and Father*, you work of faith... in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** These actions of faith our actions done in our Lord Jesus Christ - not outside of him, not to get to him, not to earn his favour but because as Paul says we have been elected & loved by God.

Secondly, **“labour of love.”** This love is part of the fruit of the Spirit produced in those led by the Spirit, those found in Christ. The word **“labour”** is a stronger word than the word **“work”**. The Greek word translated **“work”** focuses on the deed itself, but the word for **“labour”** points to the effort expended. One commentator writes; *“It is an effort that strains all of one’s energies to the maximum level.”* This is the love produced by life in Christ & of course it reflects his love for us expending himself completely on the Cross! We looked in depth at our call to love one another a few weeks ago when I preached the message *Life Together in Christ*. I think it’s the most important message I’ve preached in Westport so far. There is no escape from the call to love one another as Christ has loved us. **Again Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 are worth turning to.**

This is the love we are called to love another with. Of course our labour of love includes love for God & love for the lost but for whatever reason it seems Christian’s often find that easier than loving one another. The emphasis is never on how loving others are but how we are to love. In fact if people were easy to love, & if we found it easy, we probably wouldn’t need these verses or many others in the NT. We’d love to form a church out of people we like & always find easy to love but that is not an option God has given us. However God purposely places us in fellowship where loving the people around us will strain all our energy at times because he is teaching us to love like him. If you feel that strain you are in the right place, if you don’t you are probably isolating yourself at some level. And let’s not assume we are always easy to love!

When the rubber hits the road, it takes effort to not to gossip about someone you don’t like but are called to love. It takes effort when you have your own issues to work through to listen patiently to someone who could potentially drain away every last bit of energy you have. It takes effort to be patient & kind; or even just not to be rude to someone who has offended you, or lied about or to you, or who has had a little dig at you about something. Did you know these things happen in church life? It takes effort to not insist on our own way, to bear one another in love, to not be irritable or resentful; to bear all things & endure all things etc. This is all part of the labour of love, & then of course there is sacrificing ourselves for one another in the context of all this. We can only learn to love like this by knowing God’s love for us – we’ll come back to that. (How the awkward truth of election helps us here... V4 cf.)

Thirdly, **“endurance of hope.”** The idea behind the word endurance is *staying under pressure* & the word hope points us to the future return of Christ & our future in him. No matter what is going on now it will all be worth it in the end. The second coming of Jesus is something referred to in each chapter Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. This chapter for example ends with the idea of waiting **“for [God’s] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”** So I won’t say too much more about it now, except that knowing he is coming again & what that means for us is what enables us to stay the course under pressure... Understanding Christian hope fuels Christian living today...

Again let me finish this morning by pointing out all our faith, love & hope is in our Lord Jesus Christ. All the believing, loving & hoping is in him.