

### Do Not Underestimate the Power of the Gospel

If I asked you: “What have you learned most during this pandemic (that’s since March 15<sup>th</sup> by the way),” what would you say? Again, just listen to what I am asking: “What have you learned most during this pandemic?” Speaking for myself, I have learned a lot of things – both good and bad, sad and funny, predictable and interesting, encouraging and gut-wrenching. But here’s what I’ve learned far more than anything else: Don’t underestimate the power of the Gospel. Don’t underestimate the good news of salvation through faith in our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ and its powerful effect on God’s people.

Someone out of love and kindness texted me this past week, asking: “How are you?” I struggled how to answer that question. I thought of giving my usual answer: “I’m fine.” But knowing the person who asked me, I felt I should be forthright with her, and I said, “I am concerned what this pandemic is doing to our church. There is such a disconnect. I know that we are e a church, but in many ways it doesn’t feel like we are a church. All our areas of ministry have taken a big hit. But I have to trust that the Gospel is doing its work.” And do you know what? It is. The power of the gospel hasn’t stopped enlightening, encouraging, strengthening, comforting, and uniting God’s people. For that I am incredibly grateful, just like the apostle Paul was for the Thessalonians.

Listen to what he wrote to them:

**“We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually 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. For we know, brothers (and sister) 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 with deep conviction.”**

The way the apostle Paul felt toward God about the Thessalonians is the same way I feel about you. I am so thankful to God for your faith, and one of my greatest privileges during this pandemic is to give thanks to God for those whom I serve.

There’s a reason Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians, rather than giving thanks to the Thessalonians themselves. It’s because he knew how in spite of the strong opposition the Thessalonians faced for their faith in Christ, they remained true to the Gospel, and he knew because of how strong that opposition was, it could only have been God through his gospel who kept them true.

Consider the typical Thessalonian Christian: from a pagan background, likely couldn’t read or write, likely a manual laborer or slave, committed to a God different from all the other gods in Thessalonica, experienced serious harassment for their faith from family and friends, and knew fellow Thessalonian Christians who had been physically punished, imprisoned, or killed for the faith.

Then consider what Paul experienced when he was with the Thessalonians. Because of Christian persecution, he was forced to flee Thessalonica. Paul described this sudden, painful separation from the Thessalonian Christians as being “torn away,” or more literally being “orphaned” from them. As the separation went on, Paul became increasingly concerned for the Thessalonian Christians, wondering what effect the continued persecution had on them and their faith. So Paul sent Timothy to encourage the Thessalonians and to report back on the condition of the church.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the report that came back from Timothy is the cause for 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5 and the apostle Paul’s sincere gratefulness to God, because in spite of fierce opposition and much affliction, the Gospel’s power lived and thrived within the Thessalonians. Look at the evidence itself. Paul said: **“We continually 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.”** The Gospel did not stop doing its work within the Thessalonians and the Thessalonians did not stop doing the work of the Gospel. That’s specifically why Paul gives thanks to God for them, because without God and his Gospel, there is no **“work produced by faith, or labor prompted by love, or endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

During these tumultuous days, the frustrations we feel as Christians might be different than the Thessalonian Christians to a certain degree, but in many ways they are the same. Let’s not forget how we have had to stop meeting in person for worship and Bible study. Let’s not forget how we were kept from celebrating Good Friday and Easter the way we are used to celebrating. Let’s not forget how we have had to resort to video Sunday School, video Bible study, Zoom catechism, Zoom youth groups, and Zoom meetings. Let’s not forget how we have had to deal with ordinances, capacity limits, and masks. Let’s not forget all the fellowship events and outreach events we have had to cancel. And maybe more importantly than anything else, let’s not forget the challenge the current culture and climate of our society has had on our church, our mission, our ministry, our fellowship, and our unity.

And then, let’s not forget the painful separation your pastor and staff minister have felt from those they love nearest and dearest to them. They have felt **“torn away”** in many ways, literally **“orphaned”** from the flock they have been called to shepherd and serve. And the longer this pandemic goes on, your pastor and staff minister have a growing concern for their flock. Are the sheep remaining faithful? Are the sheep growing and learning? Are they watching the Bible study and worship videos? Are they continuing to **“work, labor, and endure”** because of the **“faith, love, and hope”** they have in our Lord Jesus Christ? By God’s grace and the power of the Gospel, the answer is: “Yes.” Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the apostle Paul has taken the words right out of your pastor and staff minister’s mouth: **“We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.”**

But please understand this about our thanks: There is no reason for any of us to gloat, there is no reason for any of us to take credit for the thanks, there is no reason for any of us to romanticize our church during these difficult days, because an honest observer of each of our lives during these days would have to say of us: “What an odd collection of sinful characters.” Yet in spite of

that, listen to what Paul said, **“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 with deep conviction.”** Did you catch that? In spite of that fact that there is nothing within us that would incline God to love us, in spite of the fact that in God’s eyes there is nothing morally attractive about us, in spite of the fact that we are all unworthy creatures, God set his affection on us before the creation of the world and chose us to be his own out of his unconditional, uncaused, unmerited love.

Just give thought to what it means that you have been chosen by God. Perhaps the hymn writer Fanny Crosby expresses it best:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!  
O what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of his Spirit, washed in His blood.

How can you not be staggered by such love! How can you not be staggered by the comfort, confidence, and strength such love gives! How can you not be staggered by the power of the Gospel! Do you see what kept the Thessalonians Christians true to the faith? Do you see what has and what will keep you true to the faith? Do not tire of giving thanks to God for his grace and power in your life, and do not underestimate the power of the gospel. Through this pandemic, may we continue to work, labor, and endure in the faith, love, and hope of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are a church because of the gospel. We continue to be a church because of the gospel. God bless us all! Amen.