

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Productive Church

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Pastor H. B. Charles tells a story about a woman he knew who showed up at church and always prayed the same simple prayer—"O Lord, thank you Jesus." Week after week, she prayed this prayer. The kids at church got to where they would start laughing every time she opened her mouth, because they knew it would be that same prayer—"O Lord, thank you Jesus."

Finally, someone asked her, "Why do you always say the same simple little prayer? She said, "Well, I'm just combining the two prayers that I know. We live in a bad neighborhood and some nights there are bullets flying and I have to grab my daughter and hide on the floor, and in that desperate state all I know how to cry out is, 'O Lord.' But when I wake up in the morning and see that we're okay I say, 'Thank you Jesus.' When I got to take my baby to the bus stop and she gets on that bus and I don't know what's going to happen to her while she's away, I cry, 'O Lord.' And then when 3:00 P.M. comes and that bus arrives and my baby is safe, I say, 'Thank you Jesus.'"

She said, "Those are the only two prayers I know and when I get to church God has been so good I just put my two prayers together, "O Lord, thank you Jesus."¹

Open up Paul's letters, and most of the time, you'll hear him talking about how he, in response to God's goodness, prays. And it's usually some variation on the same basic prayer, "Thank you Lord." What Paul is giving thanks for depends on which church he's writing to. "Thank you Lord, for the faith exhibited by the believers in Rome." "Thank you Lord, for the spiritual giftedness of the believers in Corinth." "Thank you Lord, for the generosity of the believers in Philippi." "Thank you Lord, for the expansive love of the believers in Ephesus."

Today's text follows a similar pattern. As Paul begins his letter to the believers in Thessalonica, he greets them and then says, "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers" (v. 2). Note too that it's not just Paul praying. It's Paul and his leadership team, in this case Silas and Timothy. Together, they've become like parents to the Thessalonians (2:7, 11). And like children who are never far from their parents' thoughts, the Thessalonians are constantly on the minds and in the prayers of Paul and his missionary coworkers. "We *always* thank God for all of you," writes Paul (v. 1).

Whenever the Thessalonians come to mind, Paul's first inclination is gratitude. In fact, the opening section of this letter has so much gratitude in it that it's not completely clear when or where Paul stops giving thanks. Some say verse 5 while others argue that it goes on through verse 10. There's another section of thanksgiving in chapter 2 (vv. 13-16), as well as a brief word of thanks in chapter 3 (v. 9). Though opinions vary on that question, there's no mistaking that this letter has a profusion of gratitude. When the gospel arrives and starts calling forth faith from the hearers, the basic reaction should be, "Thank you Lord."

Remember that Paul's gratitude is directly primarily to God because he knows that the fruit he sees in the lives of the Thessalonians has its roots in the grace of God. In other words, without the loving initiative of God, who has come to save through Christ, there would be no congregation for which to give thanks. That's why Paul goes on to identify some of the essential signs of God's grace that he sees in the Thessalonian believers. "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" (v. 3).

Faith, love, and hope. You may recall this trio from 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul is reminding the Corinthians about the supremacy of the gift of love within their congregation. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (v. 13). Here in 1 Thessalonians, we have the same three, but in a different order. Plus, each of these qualities is introduced and governed by another term: "work produced by faith," "labor prompted by love," and "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

These are more than just eloquent words of affirmation. They're also a clue to what Paul will talk about in the rest of the letter. This is something Paul usually does. He uses the greeting and thanksgiving to provide clues about what's to come. As pastor Earl Palmer has pointed out, we need to pay attention to Paul's prayers because what he prays about at the beginning of the letter is what he often talks about in the rest of the letter. Palmer says,

Maybe you have had this experience when you were in college and went home for Christmas break. You are sitting down for dinner and your mom says, "Let's pray. Lord, thanks for bringing Mary back this vacation. I hope we have a wonderful time. I hope she studies really hard during this time and does well in her school work and earns a lot of money." From that prayer you know that there will be conversations on those subjects! This is true of Paul, too.²

Paul prays with thanks for the Thessalonians' "work produced by faith." He's probably not thinking of a particular act of faith, but is speaking more generally of how their faith is active. In other words, faith is more than just a statement of belief or intellectual agreement with a theological idea or an inward orientation of the heart. Genuine faith is outward and practical. It comes to expression in the lives of those who profess it. Paul and the others on his leadership team have seen and heard of the ways that the Thessalonian believers exhibit their faith, particularly in their life together.

Secondly, Paul also prays with thanks for the Thessalonians' "labor prompted by love." The word he uses for "labor" has to do with physical tiredness induced by work, exertion, or heat. This is love that takes the form of sacrifice. It's demanding, and leads to a certain kind of fatigue. We sometimes use the phrase "labor of love" to refer to something that requires significant effort and leaves us with a sense of weariness, yet also a deep sense of satisfaction at having worked for the good of others.

Thirdly, Paul prays with thanks for the Thessalonians' "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." He doesn't mean that the Thessalonians are by nature cheerful, optimistic people. No, Paul is talking about a particular kind of hope. This is hope *in our Lord Jesus Christ*. In other words, hope grounded in the promise of Jesus' return. The loving initiative of God, which began to work in the Thessalonians' lives through the proclamation of the gospel, will be brought to completion at the coming of Christ.

Work, labor, and endurance. These were the essential marks of the new life that the Thessalonians were practicing. These weren't their achievements or accomplishments. The work, the labor, and the endurance sprang from faith, love, and hope. And where did the faith, the love, and the hope come from? They came from God's presence and activity

among the Thessalonian believers. Listen as Paul prays, and you'll see that it all comes down to, "Thank you Lord."

One preacher has said, "When the grace of Jesus penetrates the human heart, it rebounds back to God as gratitude."³ I believe that's part of what Paul is expressing in today's text. The grace of Jesus has penetrated his heart, his coworkers' hearts, and the hearts of the Thessalonians. And this grace is rebounding to God in the form of Paul's prayer of thanks. Thanks not only for the grace, but more specifically for the ways that grace is showing up in the life of this particular church.

Today, I give thanks as well for the ways that God's grace shows up and shows forth in the life of our congregation. Take for example today's vote of affirmation for our church's officers and committees for 2019-2020. At one level, we could just view that as a routine matter in the life of our congregation. Our Nominating Committee seeks people to serve, makes its recommendations to us, and we give it our stamp of approval. It's just an annual formality. That would be one way to look at it.

But at another level, this is way more than just a list of who's doing what in the church. It's actually a line-by-line description of how the grace of God manifests itself in our life together. Through our gifts in preaching, teaching, administration, hospitality, giving, serving, and many others, the gospel accomplishes its purpose among us. From the first name on the list to the last, we're each saying, "Thank you Lord," by offering ourselves to him and trusting him to use us to strengthen our congregation.

Whatever part you play, I say thanks to you, and thanks to God for you. Remember too that not every role is included on our official list of officers and committees. What's more, some forms of ministry and service in our church are less visible, and get less publicity than others, but are no less essential. I think of those who serve in our nursery, those who do repairs and maintenance on our building, those who count the offering and process it for the bank, and those who set the tables and organize the food so that we can enjoy a fellowship meal each month. There are so many individuals who serve in humble, faithful ways that enable our church to be what it is and do what it does, week in and week out.

When you reflect on our list of officers and committees, you may note some changes here and there. But for the most part, you'll see many of the same folks serving in the same places where they've worked for a long time. That's not just a matter of repetition, or of having fewer people to do what needs to be done, though these are certainly factors. But it's most of all a matter of faith. Faith that wants to be active through service in the church. It's also a matter of love. Love that works hard and sacrificially for the life of God's people. And it's a matter of hope. Hope that generates endurance and steadfastness in the work of the Lord.

Work, labor, and endurance, rooted in faith, love, and hope. That's what I see when I look at the list our Nominating Committee brought before us today. I see a congregation that wants to be active and productive for the Lord. And I see it not just on paper but in person, in your lives, as together we wait for God's Son from heaven. While we wait and work, we voice our gratitude to God for one another. So join me as I lead us in saying, "Thank you Lord."

¹ H. B. Charles, "A Psalm for Giving Thanks," preachingtoday.com.

² Earl Palmer, "Teammates in Christ," Preaching Today, Tape No. 146.

³ John Piper, "Grace, Gratitude, and the Glory of God." Desiring God website. November 26, 1981. Accessed September 26, 2019 < <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/grace-gratitude-and-the-glory-of-god>>.