

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, September 21, 2011 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study

CONTAGIOUS CHRISTIANS “A Christianity That’s Catching – A Study of 1 Thessalonians”

Introduction

There are a lot of things that are “catching.” Colds and the Flu are catching (By the way it’s just about time to go get your Flu-shot). That is why every year when “Cold and Flu Season” rolls around people start lining up to take a “Flu Shot.” It’s so catching! There are many other sicknesses and diseases that are catching, but that’s not all that’s catching. Attitudes and behaviors can be catching as well. That could be good or bad. The first letter of Paul’s to find its way into the collection of New Testament books was 1 Thessalonians. Although a rather brief book or letter, it is one of the most positive statements we can read that portrays a first century congregation. Those Thessalonians had a faith that was catching!

What does it mean to have a faith that is catching? _____

What makes a faith catching? _____

In our day, when the church is all too often viewed with jaded, cynical eyes, this affirming letter need to be studied and declared in our churches. I believe you will be encouraged and challenged as we work our way through it. You will see first-hand before your eyes a group of “Contagious Christians” portrayed.

Ultimately, I hope this study will boost and encourage each of us to become infectious with our faith... contagious with our Christianity, that the whole world might catch what we have in our lives as believers. This healthy dose of 1 Thessalonians ought to help us on our way toward a healthy contagious faith.

A Church With the Right Stuff *1 Thessalonians 1:1-10*

Emerging from ancient Macedonia was a dynamic body of people who lived in the busy, free, affluent metropolis of Thessalonica. This town’s citizens were influential, its economy was stable, and its location along the earliest know, “freeway” – Via Egnatia – was enviable. Goods from the east and the west poured into this city. In its heyday, when the population was around two hundred thousand, some consideration was given to making Thessalonica, rather than Constantinople, the “capital” of the world. In the first century A.D., the evangelist and apostle Paul ventured into Thessalonica and, during a brief visit, formed a body of believers there who comprised the city’s first Christian church. And what a dynamic group they were! With determination, zeal, confidence, and a Pauline style, they proclaimed the good news of Christ like thunder rolling through a canyon. As we shall see through our study of 1

Thessalonians, these first-century saints were models of authentic Christianity. They made Christianity contagious to many in their day. As a result, the example they left us is worthy of our attention and application to our lives.

I. REALISM: KEY TO A BALANCED PERSPECTIVE

There is a fine line between healthy admiration and unhealthy exaltation. It's one thing to look upon a person or place with genuine respect and delight, but it's another thing altogether to exaggerate the greatness of an individual or location. We want to honestly and fairly assess Thessalonica, the Christians who lived there, and the apostle who gave them their start. In so doing, we will strip away the veneer of idealism and discover the realistic heart of this ancient yet timeless letter. God has inspired and preserved it so that we can understand and apply it, not just be awestruck by it. So let's begin to achieve a proper perspective by getting an overview of the founder of the Thessalonian church, the city in which it existed, and the situation that prompted the writing of 1 Thessalonians.

1. **The Founder** – The Apostle Paul founded the church at Thessalonica. However, contrary to what many think today, he was not a super-evangelist, a flawless church planter, or a dynamic speaker.

A Realistic Look at the Apostle Paul

- (1) **A New Testament Picture of Paul** – The common opinion of Paul in his own day was conveyed in these words; *“His letters were weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor. 10:10)*
- (2) **A Historical Picture of Paul** – One ancient writer/historian described Paul as *“a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body [that what I am “a good state of body”... it means “fat”], with eyebrows meeting and a nose somewhat hooked.”* (Onesiphorus of Iconium, “Acts of Paul and Thecla 3)

**These comments should tell us that God's strength is best manifested through human weakness and that His greatness is usually exhibited in humility. Paul could not sway the masses with impressive speeches and a charismatic presence, but he could be a willing, tireless servant for the living God – the One who can truly change and prepare people for everlasting life. The same is true for you and I. God works powerfully through a willing and humble (broken) servant. Spiritual pride and ego get in the way... always!*

A Realistic Look at Paul's Reason for Writing

It is approximately one year after a three-to-five-week stay in Thessalonica that Paul wrote this first letter to the Thessalonian Christians. His purpose for writing was primarily 3 fold:

- (1) **To affirm them** –
- (2) **To exhort them** –
- (3) **To teach them** -

**The same purpose for this study*

2. **The City** – As was stated earlier, Thessalonica was a thriving metropolis in the first century. Indeed, even today it is one of the largest cities in modern Greece, though it bears a new name – Salonika (or Thessaloniki).
3. **The Situation** – Paul wrote this letter while he was in the middle of his second missionary journey. He had left Thessalonica and, after a short stop in Athens, moved on to Corinth (see Acts 17-18). No doubt Paul had heard reports on the progress of the Thessalonian church

which caused him to reflect on his time with them. So from Corinth he penned this letter, probably the first of his recorded letters, around A.D. 50.

II. BALANCE: SECRET TO A COMMITTED CONGREGATION

As we move through 1 Thessalonians, it will quickly become apparent that the recipients of this letter were not given to extremes. They managed to maintain balance in their spiritual walk with God. With this in mind, let's work our way through the first ten verses of this correspondence.

1. Greeting (v.1) – Although Paul composed this letter, he did it in conjunction with Silvanus (the Roman form of the name Silas) and Timothy. All three individuals were colleagues in Corinth, and they had been active in the establishment of the Thessalonian church (Acts 17:1-4, 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

(1) **“to the church of the Thessalonians”** – They sent the letter *“to the church of the Thessalonians.”* The preposition “to” tells us that truth did not come from the church; the church did not dictate truth. Rather, the church in the New Testament was a recipient and student of the truth that the Holy Spirit taught through His human mouthpieces (in this case it was Paul and his associates, today it is through those He calls and equips to preach and proclaim His word). **Today the situation is similar: When the Scriptures are taught, the church is to open its ears and listen; then it should obey and proclaim what it hears.*

(2) **“in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** – Also observe that Paul gives the heavenly address for the Thessalonian church. He says it is *“in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Once individuals trust Christ for their salvation, they are transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of light (Colossians 1:12-23). They become citizens in God's forever kingdom, and they can never lose their citizenship (see John 10:27-29, Romans 8:31-39). Now since this is true, citizens of God's kingdom are expected to live a certain way. Their lives are to be marked by grace and peace.

2. Thanking (v.2) – After this brief opening, Paul turns to giving thanks, *“We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.”* How easy and enjoyable it is to pray for people who give us reason to be grateful! They often prove to be accepting and affirming, real instead of phony, and supportive and giving rather than subversive and grabby. Just as the Thessalonians gave Paul reason to be thankful for them, we should also give others reason to be grateful for our presence in their lives. **Can I tell you how thankful I am for you in my life.*

??Testimony Time: Who are you thankful for in our church and why? Affirm someone in your church family. The pastor is off limits!

3. Remembering (vv.3-5) – Paul specified three things about the Thessalonian believers that caused him to regularly remember them in prayer:

Paul remember them for three things:

- (1) **Their “work of faith”** – That is, their good works that flowed from their Christian faith.
- (2) **Their “labor of love”** – Put another way, their active toiling, serving, working, ministering, reaching out that was prompted by their love.
- (3) **Their “steadfastness of hope”** – Their ability to persevere under the pressure of life because they had their hope fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ.

These first century Christians did not hide their Christianity or try to live in isolation from one another. Instead, they worked together to incarnate their faith in a disbelieving, antagonistic

world. Notice that they could do this because they knew that they were no longer under God's wrath, but were now "beloved by God," chosen by Him for salvation (v.4). And this was possible because the gospel was presented to them, "not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit (the divine side) and with deep conviction (the human side)" (v.5). Paul and his companions brought the good news of Christ to the Thessalonians with the firm belief that it was true (Acts 17:1-3) and with the caring desire to live it out before them (1 Thessalonians 1:5, 2:8-12). They came with answers and transparent humility before them.

4. Affirming (vv.6-8) – In these verses Paul affirmed the Thessalonian Christians for two responses they made to the gospel message:

Paul affirmed 2 things in them:

(1) **Modeling the gospel** – The first words of encouragement concern their personal modeling of the gospel before other Christians. Verses 6-7, "You became *imitators* of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering you welcome the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a *model* to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia."

**notice that in spite of the risks and discouragements in their way they still modeled their faith for all to see... that's contagious faith.*

(2) **Proclaiming the gospel** – The second affirmation was given because of the vigor with which they proclaimed the gospel to non-Christians. Notice *verse 8*, "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." People, even far away from Thessalonica, had heard the good news about Christ because a group of Christians in one locale took the initiative to get the word out to every place they could. Obviously, they had the right stuff. They did such a good job that Paul could hardly utter a word wherever they had been without someone saying, "Some Thessalonians already gave us the message." How quickly the gospel would spread today if each Christian would simply do what they did so many hundreds of years ago!

5. Reporting (vv.9-10) – Wherever Paul went, people told him of the change that they saw among several individuals in Thessalonica. They reported to him how many Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (v.9). That is, they turned from what was dead and leading to everlasting death to what is alive and leads to everlasting life. These believers also expectedly waited for the coming of Christ from heaven (v.10). In summary, the Thessalonian Christians manifested the responsibility to take the truth to the lost and to live out the truth among the saved. They also displayed their anticipation of Christ's return but without becoming complacent in their Christian responsibility.

III. COMMITMENT: CHALLENGE FOR A GROWING CHRISTIAN

From this brief portion of Scripture, we can readily see that the Thessalonian Christians had the right stuff. They exemplified balanced commitment tempered by realism in their spiritual lives. We can have what they had as well, but it cannot be achieved without commitment. A good place to start is to make the same commitments that the ancient Thessalonians clearly made. Let's look at them together and make them an essential part of our Christian lives.

1. **Commit yourself to Christians by standing ready to accept and support them.**
2. **Commit yourself to non-Christians by remaining available to meet their needs with your words and your life.**
3. **Commit yourself to Christ by staying free of any entanglements that keep you from living each day as if it were your last.**