



Becoming a Model Church

Sermons from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

A heart filled with Thanksgiving

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

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Preacher: Roy Summers

Introductions

You and I do not need reminding that we live in a celebrity culture, where people are judged by how much money they have, how many followers they have on Twitter, their looks, their accomplishments and who they hang out with.

It has always been this way, but perhaps we are more influenced by this way of thinking today through electronic media than previous generations. Recently I began to read a biography of the American Newspaper giant, William Randolph Hearst, but I gave up, because what the author thought was important about Hearst was irrelevant to me. Here is a taste of his concerns:

“By the late 1920s, Hearst owned 26 newspapers in eighteen cities, a large and profitable stable of magazines, a growing radio network, a film studio, many blocks of prime Manhattan real estate and one of the world's largest art collections. He was also in the early stages of building what would become the country's most spectacular private house: a 71,000 sq ft hill-top castle..”

What I wanted to know was the man's character: did he love his wife faithfully; did he care for his children and his parents when they grew old; was he honest in his business dealings and did he die well? But these issues were of no interest to my celebrity biographer!

The danger is that we can so easily drag celebrity judging into the church, forgetting that God judges very differently from the world. What a man owns, how big his house is, how well educated he is, what worldly success he has enjoyed, are of no interest to heaven! And what size a church is, how big its budget, how many movers and shakers it has in its congregation, do not matter to God! The Scriptures challenge us to think differently and to repent of worldly thinking and not to be conformed to the world's standards.

So how are we to judge a church? By what criteria, if not by celebrity cultures' values? Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians gives us a wonderful opportunity to see how God judges a church because Paul calls this church a "model church" *"you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia"* (1:7) So churches can measure themselves against this church and can learn what it means to be truly great in God's kingdom, and how to aspire to greatness. This morning we learn that a successful church in the eyes of the Lord is a church which has FAITH, LOVE and HOPE, verse 2: *"We continually remember before our God and Father, work produced by faith, labour prompted by love and endurance inspired by hope."*

"A successful church" writes David Pawson, commenting on this verse, *"is a church with a lot of faith and a lot of hope and a lot of love in it. It may be small or large. It may have a lovely building or meet in a tin shed! A successful church is a community that has these marks of God's family: faith, hope and love"*

The question we need to ask ourselves, not only as a church, but as individual believers, is do we have faith and love and hope? If so, then we have the Lord's approval! I read this week about a young Christian man by the name of Alan from Ramsbottom - not exactly your "Chelsea" or "Harrogate." What is more he made his living repairing electric razors - not exactly, a lawyer or an entrepreneur. But this ordinary young believer made an outstanding impact among the youth in his area as he quietly worked among them, started a football team, and shared the Gospel with them.

Before we turn to faith and love and hope, three tests of spiritual greatness, notice two features of Paul's introduction which we should not pass by.

First, we should note that Paul "Christianises" his letter. In those days the tradition for starting a letter was: Sender—who is writing; Recipient—who it was for; Greeting—best wishes. What does Paul do? He does not throw tradition out; instead he takes the tradition of his day and Christianises it, he Gospel-ises it! The sender is the same, the names of the three men who planted the church Paul, Silas and Timothy. The recipient is different though; he does not simply write "to the Christians at Thessalonica" or "to the church at Thessalonica" - he adds "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He spiritualizes it—he wants to encourage the church to know that they have a relationship with God the Father and God the Son, that's what "in" means. They are not on their own, God the Father and God the Son are with them, and will sustain them, protect them and provide for them! The Greeting too has been Christianised. Paul wishes them Grace and Peace. Grace is God's undeserved favour and kindness to sinners who do not deserve it, and Peace is our new relationship with God through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Paul takes lead and turns it into gold; he turns it into something that honours the Lord Jesus Christ. He is encouraging us to take an ordinary email or text and add something Christian to it to make it beautiful and encouraging. I recently wrote to a Polish Christian and, humbled and challenged by how he responded, Hi Roy, Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's take our ordinary texts and emails and make them gospel beautiful! And what about your Facebook page! What an amazing opportunity to shine a light to the world! By what you do not post—

arguments or smut, and by what you do post—a Bible verse, a word of encouragement, and so on! Our good friend Sebastian takes Sunday morning's sermon, translates it into Portuguese and preaches it on Facebook!

Then notice, secondly, how Paul prays for his Christian friends. *"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father..."* Paul makes a habit of praying for his Christian friends.

Why does he tell them he is praying for them? So that they know he cares for them—doesn't it encourage you when someone says "I am praying for you?" How often does he pray for them? "Continually," regularly, not just occasionally, but regularly. How many of them does he pray for? All of them! The ones he finds easy and the ones he finds difficult. It could be that some of Paul's jealous enemies had spread lies like, "Paul likes the Jews more than the Gentiles or the young people more than the old people" and Paul is correcting the lie—not true I love and pray for everyone. What does he pray for them? He finds some good grace in them and thanks God for it! He thanks God for the faith, the hope, the love that he sees in them.

Here is a wonderful pattern for us! Let us remember one another in our prayers. You could take church directory and pray through it, little by little.

So what are the marks of a model church? How should we make a judgement? Well, a model church is filled, in the first place, with people who have....

(1) An Active Faith ("Your work produced by faith")

"We continually remember before our God and Father, your work produced by faith." A great Christian, a great church, in God's eyes, is a church, a believer that has faith, faith that acts, that works. What does Paul mean? In the New Testament, one of the marks of true faith is that it leads to a changed life, to good works. Faith, when it is true, results in tangible write-downable changes in life. Paul, rejoices that the lives of these people have been changed by the Gospel, that their faith has been accompanied by works. *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such "faith" save him? ... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead"* (James 1)

One of the changes in their lives was that they left their idols behind, verse 9, *"You turned to God from idols."* All the things they used to place all their trust in, well now they turned that trust to God.

If you and I have real faith in Jesus Christ, then our lives will be different! Isn't this one of the biggest misunderstanding in our land? 54% of the population still calls itself Christian, but there is no way that every other person in the UK is a Christian, our country would be radically different! Crime would be down, divorce would be down, loneliness wouldn't exist and the churches would be packed full every Sunday! (Out of that 54% only 4% act on that faith and meet with other Christians on a Sunday!)

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought, since Jesus came into my heart! True faith

changes lives! Do we see that at Manor Park? Yes by God's grace we do.

But there is another side of faith, besides a changed life. Faith is revealed in risky actions that demonstrate a complete trust in God. Abraham leaves Ur when God asks him to do so! Throughout its history, Manor Park Church has been blessed with that sort of faith! Fourteen years ago when they took on their first pastor, they couldn't afford it! Eight years ago when we planted our first church, we did not have the manpower or the finances! And two years ago when we took on Mike we did not have the finances! If the church had waited to have the people and the money to do these things, we'd still be waiting! But the church stepped out in faith and God has always honoured that faith! He has provided all the people we need! He provided a full-time couple in Randy and Amy and he has provided us all the financial resources we have needed up to this moment in time, to support this Gospel expansion!

Model churches do not do what they can do, they stretch out in faith beyond what they can do and trust God. And so do model Christians. They stretch out and do and give what they cannot do and give, and discover the mighty resources of Almighty God.

In the second place, a model church is a church filled with...

(2) A love that labours (“your labour prompted by love”)

Model Christians are people who love other Christians, with actions that are costly. The word Paul uses for labour means “hard work.” Model Christians serve one another with a sacrificial love that expects no return. The supreme example of sacrificial love is the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, who “went out of his way” for us.

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2)*

I wonder what acts of “out of the way love” sacrificial love, Paul heard from Timothy. Perhaps, “I heard of one Christian visiting another Christian in hospital day after day?” “I heard of someone giving up a week's wage to help someone buy a donkey to start a business.” “I heard of a brother risking his life defending his fellow Christian in court.” “I heard of a Christian who was tired at the end of a working day, but spent time in the evening in church business, or at a kids club, or counselling someone.” Reports of sacrificial love.

I hear a new term this week, “elongated adolescence.” I'd never heard it before. In today's world,

apparently, some young people never grow up. They experience an elongated adolescence from their teens way into their thirties. Life is just about fun, binge-watching Netflix, sport, hobbies, personal enjoyment. The Gospel challenges that view of life and encourages us to give ourselves to the sacrificial service of others. And there are many young people among us here at MPC who have forsaken “elongated adolescence” to serve God’s people in the evenings and weekends with a sacrificial love, and many older people do that too, and we thank the Lord for that.

A model church, a model Christian has a faith that acts, a love that labours and finally....

(3) A Hope that endures (“Your endurance inspired by hope”)

Model Christians and model churches, don’t give up, whatever the difficulties, because they are inspired by this beautiful thing called hope. Hope is the deep conviction that the sure promises God has made in his Word will one day be fulfilled, though they don’t seem to be answered today. Hope, supremely, is believing that the promise of eternal life in a new heavens and a new earth, will be fulfilled beyond the grave. Timothy's report to Paul was filled with stories of hope! I wonder what they were like?

John recently lost his wife of 20 years, but although he is grieving, he grieves with hope. Mary’s husband has been put in prison for 10 years for his faith, but she keeps on trusting in hope that the Lord will meet all her needs. Simon’s health is deteriorating fast, yet he keeps cheerful, because he knows he will have a new body one day.

How do you and I compare with these tests of true greatness?

Do we have a faith that works, that transforms our lives and stretches out to do new and difficult things? Do we have a love that serves when it hurts? And do we have a hope that helps us to keep on going against the odds?

I may be biased, but I believe all these three virtues are found among us here at manor Park Church, for which we thank the Lord.