



Becoming a Model Church

Sermons from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

The Heart Christian Ministry

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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#1 Introduction:

What are the most valuable activities we can do in life?

We are making our way through Paul's first letter to the young Christians living in Thessalonica, and we have arrived at chapter 2:17 through to 3:10. These verses convey one theme, which is best approached, not through the front door, but through the side door – and with a question: What are the most important activities we can do in life? The most valuable deeds, works, actions, enterprises? How can you and I make the most valuable use our time, in the fleeting years of our short lives?

There are all kinds of mundane necessary things that just have to be done each day: making ourselves presentable, resting, cooking, exercise, sleeping, jobs around the house, and so on. We're thinking this morning of the rest of life: How can we use the rest of our time, to the greatest profit?

Someone will ask: How can we weigh the activities we do? How can we evaluate them, how are we to make the judgement - **this is** more valuable than **that**? Is the opinion of the world, to be our standard? If so, the most important activities we can engage in are perhaps the “#metoo campaign” or “Global Warning” —but the values of the world are always changing; in my youth, it was the bomb: we were all encouraged to join the CND and go on marches against nuclear weapons.

No, the present passing values of the world are not to be our guide. The standard by which to judge the value of human activities is the day of judgement. Every believer will stand before the judgement seat of Christ to give an account of their lives: *“For we will all stand before God's judgement seat?” (Romans 14:12)*. This is not the same judgement faced by unbelievers: the outcome of our judgement will not be heaven or hell: that outcome has been determined by believing in Christ Jesus, *“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..”* says Paul, no condemnation in this life, and no condemnation in the life to come, praise God. No, the judgement seat for believers is our works, our deeds:

“If anyone builds on this foundation (that is Christ) using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown to be what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be

revealed by fire, and the fire will test the quality of each persons' work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” (1 Corinthians 3:13-15)

The most important activities are those that will survive the fire of Christ's judgement. The ones we should pursue most are the gold, silver, precious stones, not the hay or stubble or wood that will be burnt up. The verses before us reveal what activities are gold, silver and precious stones, which I am going to summarise like this: *The most important activities we can do in this life are those where we serve people, and especially God's people, in a Christ like way.”*

The people around us, each made in the image of God, are the most precious entities in our lives. Not projects, not possessions, not things, not education, not money, not qualifications, not businesses, not houses, or cars, but people. In addition, it is how we serve the people in our lives that counts, that matters. So we may work in a factory or be a missionary; we may be a teacher or a plumber; we may be a mother or an evangelist; it is how we serve the people in our own calling that matters. Moreover, we must add, it is especially serving God's people that counts, *“Do good to all people” says the apostle Paul, “especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (Galatians 6:10)*

The reason I start with this long introduction is because I fear that as we viewed Paul's extraordinary love for people, his remarkable people-focus, someone here will say, “But Paul's a pastor, Paul's an evangelist, Paul's a church planter, Paul's a missionary. Of course his life is all about people. My life is different. My life is about washing and cooking and cleaning. My life is about buildings or accounts. My life is about selling clothes. My life is about sweeping roads. Or whatever.” And then what Paul says about his focus and love for people might go in one ear and out the other!

Yes, Paul is a pastor, church-planter, evangelist and missionary, but his focus on people is what Christ expects of us all, whether we are called to parent, sell clothes, or whatever our calling. Let's look at Paul's remarkable love for people, and then let us apply the teaching to our lives.

#2 Paul's love for people

Remember the story? Paul is on his second missionary journey, he was badly beaten up in Philippi, yet he continued on to Thessalonica, perhaps even limping there, who knows, with his friends Silas and Timothy. In Thessalonica, many people became followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, from different sectors of the community. A church was born! But Paul has enemies as well as converts: so let me prepare MPC for this fact: whenever the Gospel is preached faithfully, Satan will stir up opposition—let us all be warned. Let no-one say this year, next year, next decade, “I did not know that true churches and true pastors would be attacked by Satan.” I am warning MPC. The opposition was so severe that Paul was bundled out of Thessalonica under cover of darkness just weeks after arriving! His jealous enemies, inspired by Satan began persecuting these new believers, with Paul out of sight. That's the setting of these verses:

Verses 17-18 *“But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way.”*

Paul uses the Greek “orphaned” to describe his pain of being separated from his Christian friends. Paul isn't saying that he felt like a parent who has suddenly lost track or sight of a child, and is suddenly filled with blind fear! No, he says he felt like a child whose parents have been suddenly taken away, like the children in refugee camps we see all too often on our screens. “When I was bundled away from Thessalonica, I felt like a devastated little child who has suddenly lost mommy and daddy and felt utterly lost and bereft and bereaved in the world!” So Paul tried—again and again - to visit them, because he had this intense longing to be with them. But he couldn't because Satan stopped him. Then in verse 19-20s, Paul reveals that people are the most important things in life to him:

19 For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

When Jesus returns, when Paul gets to heaven, what will give him the most joy? I planted ten churches; I wrote thirteen letters that have ended up in the Bible? No, what will give Paul most joy is people, people, people, people, people, people, and people.

Verses 3:1-5. *“So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.*

Paul feared that through all the persecutions thrown at them Satan might have led them astray. So when his deep anxiety together with the pain of separation had reached breaking point, Paul, who was now in Athens, decided to send Timothy to find out how they were getting on. This was a great sacrifice for Paul who found the idol worship at Athens deeply troubling and would have wanted Timothy to stay with him. Paul sacrificed his own comfort and sent Timothy to find out how they were, and to strengthen them.

Verses 3:6-10 With Timothy's report, Paul's emotional state changes from being downcast to pure elation! *“But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see*

you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

The greatest emotional highs and the greatest lows of Paul's life were not connected with money or promotion or stuff but with people: He was most down when others were in trouble—or he thought they were, and he was most up when others were thriving!

One of the most astounding sentences in this letter, perhaps in the whole of the New Testament is verse 8: *“For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.”* “What makes you come alive Paul? What makes you really tick?” Knowing that my Christian friends are standing firm!

So, What are the most important activities we can do in this short life? The most important activities we can do in this life is to serve people, and especially God's people, in a Christ like way: *That's what we are to take away from 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10*

How are you and I to respond to God's Word, morning?

#3 Applications

(a) A personal test—what do you value most of all?

There's a personal test here—what matters most to you and to I? In our hearts, before God, what do we value, most? A comfortable life? Money? Houses? Health? Possessions? Fame? Career? Education?

People or stuff? The reason we should ask ourselves this question is two-fold.

If we value things more than people, it could be that we are not yet true believers, because one of the distinguishing marks of a true believer is that God has poured his love into their hearts: *“whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:8)* *“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.” (1 John 3:14)*

If things matter more than people, perhaps the Spirit of Jesus does not yet live in our hearts. And today, while there is time, we should seek him, believe in him and follow him.

But the other reason, we should put ourselves to this test, is to test our spiritual health. We can all backslide and lose out first love, thorns and thistles can creep into our lives, which choke the good seed of the word, and before we know it our time is consumed with things rather than people: the people God has put in our lives, families, home groups, church, neighbourhood, places of work, should be the most important priorities of our lives.

I read many biographies, stories of people writing up their lives. And I have noticed, especially when unbelieving men write their stories, it's all about their work, and hardly a word about their wife, hardly a word about their kids! I finished reading the life of Albert Pierrepoint, England's last hangman,

recently, and there was almost nothing in the book about his family except in the dedication:

“To Anne, my wife, who in forty years never asked a question.” (which I guess is a good thing, if your husband is a hangman!)

We know we are a healthy believer and that we are growing as a believer if, like Paul, people are becoming more and more important as the years go by. (And we can be sure that we are backsliding if things are becoming more important than people.) So Paul’s words provide an opportunity to test our hearts and lives.

(b) An encouragement—your people focus is good!

But these words also provide us with a word of encouragement. Perhaps, as you have been listening to Paul’s people-focussed life, you’ve been thinking, “people are my focus too.” What most discourages you is when people are in spiritual peril, and what delights you most is when they are spiritually thriving and growing. People are your focus. You may not have many gifts but you faithfully serve others in your family, neighbourhood, and in church life, with your prayers, your widow’s mite and your cup of cold water. Be encouraged! Serving others in a Christ like way is the most important thing you could do in life.

(c) A challenge—maintain for focus and love for others

A test, an encouragement, and then a challenge for us all. Let us make people and our love for one another the focus of church life. MPC is a very loving church. Two people this very shared with me how friendly visitors find MPC. How welcomed and loved they have felt as they come among us. Let’s keep that focus and pray that the Lord will increase our love for one another.

When we get to heaven, how much money we earned, how famous we were, how educated we were, all of these things will be unknown and irrelevant. This old world with its priorities will seem a queer old place – should we ever reflect upon it! So many things we thought were important in this life will be irrelevant in the world to come. But what will matter is all the people that were touched by our lives. John, over there, who you shared the Gospel with. Mary who you encouraged when she was downhearted. Simon, who you prayed for, for years. Selena who became a believer through the gift that enabled Sarah to share the Gospel with her in South Africa. Seth who you advised and helped him to cope as a parent with the “terrible twos” or the equally “terrifying teens.” Sophia, who was rescued through the work of Tim and Tina in Thailand - you prayed for them. Or perhaps Steven, your son, who you took the time to read the Bible to as he was growing up, and who is in heaven because of you. What will matter in eternity is not things, but people. May the Lord help us to become more like the apostle Paul, who had become like the Lord Jesus, and may his Spirit help us to put people first.