

## **MESSAGE FOR SUNDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER.**

“I really can’t say enough good about you!” So, echoes Paul’s sentiment at the beginning of Thessalonians. He has ample reason to express thanks for them in his prayers. He has no doubt of God’s work in them. People enjoy speaking of their faith, and Paul can hold them up as exemplary. Yet all is not perfect. Paul, like a good parent, utilises the opportunity for praise to inject some hope as well. He outlines here a specific area in which the Thessalonians need further growth and that growth comes through prayer. They are called to pray for what they can be in light of what they have already become.

Paul acknowledges the great transformation God the Father, through Son and the Spirit, has already accomplished as the basis for continuing growth into an even greater reputation of faith.

Paul visits Thessalonica, according to Acts 17, on his second missionary journey. This was an important city, the capital of the Macedonian province, located on an inlet and on an important trade route. The converts to his message would have previously participated in the often-pagan rituals of this bustling city, prominent among them worship of Roma, the embodiment of the ideals of the Roman Empire. When these people heard Paul’s message and accepted its exclusive call to worship the God of Israel alone, they would have faced not only questions, but also rejection and possibly persecution from their families and neighbours. The historical situation in which they converted set them up for a robust and compelling witness of intense and costly faith.

Paul casts the Thessalonians actions as important and praiseworthy as they indicate their ability to follow Christ. Paul begins by saying that the church finds its calling in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul points out that initially, God loved them and chose them. Continuing the story of their faith, the gospel came to them by power, assurance, and the Holy Spirit. They turned from idols to God. Jesus rescued them from eschatological wrath. God is responsible and deserving of thanks. Good things happen because they aim all their deeds at God, hope for Lord Jesus Christ as they imitate him, and accept tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The work of God in them has created and sustained their faith.

Because of God’s work in them, they are worthy of praise because they have turned from their previous religious expressions to serve the living and true God. Attention is drawn to the fact that the previous gods were dead and false. Paul explains that because they are imitating Jesus and his apostles, they are therefore worthy of imitation themselves.

Paul praises them for their endurance in faith. At the close of the first chapter, Paul asserts that they are waiting for God’s son from heaven. Paul’s well-known discussion about the

return of Christ in chapter 4, shows that they have no doubt Jesus will come again; they only need some reassurance about those who have already died without yet seeing him.

Paul also expresses gratefulness for their *labour of love*. Paul states that he really does not need to teach them about loving each other because God has been their teacher. They have heard it and now done it, loving not only one another, but the whole of the family of God throughout Macedonia. There is always room for more love, but this is an element of their faith, and to Paul, a vitally important one in which the Thessalonians are thriving.

In giving thanks for their work of faith, Paul still has much to tell them about work in this letter. He lifts himself and his fellow Christians up as examples of those who worked with diligence even as they were proclaiming the gospel. Paul again stands as an example reminding them twice in his letter of the labour he exerted on their behalf. Paul points to other examples when he admonishes them to respect those who have authority over them, who labour and work among them. Then he instructs the Thessalonians to continue in their work, specifying even the tangibility of working with your hands, so that need would not exist among the believers and they would give a good witness to those outside the body of Christ. Paul makes a direct link between work and love. One way in which they can excel in their love is to work with their hands so that none among them have any need.

Paul's practical advice to the Thessalonians is that faith and work are not mutually exclusive. They have been transformed by their belief in Christ, but that does not mean that regular life has come to an end. They are still responsible to be faithful in their vocations. For them to continue to grow into their stellar reputation, work needs to be an element right along with faith, hope, and love.

It is through Christ that they have their strength. It is Christ who gives them hope and the ability to love one another. The Thessalonians are setting a good example to others and have learned well from Paul and others.

Paul's letter is as relevant to us today as it was to Paul's first listeners. We are also called to faith, hope and love. However, we are also called to labour for God's kingdom. Work does not save us, Christ has already done that on our behalf, but we each have a calling from God. Whatever our vocation, God equips us for it. That may be a vocation that takes us away from our homes into a workplace. It may be a call to stay exactly where we are to care for a loved one, neighbour or God's creation. However, Paul reminds us that we are also called to prayer and specifically to pray that in light of what we have already become through Christ we should pray for God to show us what we can yet become.