**Real Joy**

**1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 (ESV)**

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***1*** *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.* ***2*** *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,* ***3*** *remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.* ***4*** *For we know brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,* ***5*** *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.*

Letter writing has become somewhat of a lost art. People today tweet on Twitter. They post on Facebook. They text on smart phones and they email on computers. But very, very seldom does anyone write a letter. It’s likely that very few here have written a handwritten letter in the past month, perhaps even in the past year.

I brought a box today of letters. These are letters that I personally wrote to Kimberly when we were in college. And these are not the sum total of them. This is just one of the boxes of letters that I wrote to Kimberly. If you ever wondered about the question, “How does a guy like you convince a girl like Kimberly to marry him?” the answer is found in these letters. (Laughter!) I wrote as many words as I possibly could to her during the college years. Almost every day I would write about a page and save it up for two or three days before I would send it. In those letters, I would talk about happenings in my life. But then I would share with her devotional thoughts that I would learn from God from His Word as I fellowshipped with Him. I would share with her prayer requests. I would ask for prayers that she would have and then I would write out prayers on behalf of her in those letters. I would write some poetry and include a whole bunch of mushy words.

Writing letters allows the writer to slow down a bit in their thoughts to consider the best words for the best thoughts and to include them. Writing letters also allows the reader to slow down in listening so that they can glean as much of the communication, the sharing, that the writer intended. And you don’t just have sort of one pass through it, but over and over, they are able to read and receive more and more with each reading.

As an aside, if you are wondering what to give to your dad on Father’s Day, I can’t think of something that a loving dad would desire more from his sons or daughters than a handwritten letter. I would challenge you to think of writing a two-page handwritten letter. Fill the letter with your thoughts about what you have learned from him, why you may respect him or esteem him, what he means to you, memories that you have shared that bring a smile to your face, your hopes of enjoying future relationship. As a bonus, when he reads it, you may even get to see him cry because it will be so powerful an impact upon him.

Letters are really important for building relationships. We know that because God put 21 letters in His New Testament. When He began to speak again in the coming of Jesus, through the Word, He gave us 27 books. 5 of those are history and 1 of them is revelation of the future. But 21 of them are letters. Most ofthese letters are written to local churches. A few of them are written to individuals, but most of them are written to the church for churches to have them read out loud as they assemble together, to listen together to what God would say to them.

These letters that God included in His Word are not words written merely by good men. God used the instruments of apostles like Paul and Peter and John, but the Holy Spirit superintended the writing of these men so that what they wrote is exactly the message that God wanted to communicate to His church. God designs not only for that specific church in that specific location, here it is the church in Thessalonica in the first century, to receive this message, but God made these letters so perfect, so full, so authoritative, so complete, so sufficient, that every church in every culture throughout all time would receive them, listen to them, heed them, and gain blessing from them. And that’s why we’re studying 1 Thessalonians. We’re studying it because God wrote a letter. He used the Apostle Paul, but God Himself wrote a letter. This letter teaches us much about what His church is to be. And I pray, and I ask you to pray with me that we at Bethany would grow and be transformed into the church that God designs us to be, to experience that real church.

Remember from Acts 17 we learned that Paul and Silas and a team of missionaries arrived in Thessalonica, this city in Macedonia, to plant a church. Now Paul and Silas have already planted a church in the city of Philippi. It’s their first church plant in what is now known as Europe. But there, they are beaten. They are imprisoned. They are really painfully mistreated. They ultimately are released, and upon their release, they travel 100 miles down the road to a big city, a very wealthy city by the name of Thessalonica. Here is a map for you.



Philippi is north of the Aegean Sea. That’s the first church that Paul would plant in Europe. They travel from there 100 miles westward, toward Thessalonica. Now, Acts tells us that Paul spends three Sabbaths teaching in the synagogue. He teaches the Jews there in Thessalonica. None of them are believers in Jesus, but he teaches in the synagogue how the Old Testament all communicates and instructs us that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise again and that indeed, Jesus is that Messiah. Well, he ministers also to the Gentiles in the city. We’re not told exactly how long he is in Thessalonica, but it’s a short time, likely two or three months. But in that time, a church is planted. There are many Gentiles who come to faith in Christ. There are some very wealthy women who come to faith in Christ, and there are a few Jews as well who come to faith in Christ, and they form this church. The church attaches itself to Paul’s heart. He sees its birth. He nurtures her in her early stages, but then there are some Jewish leaders from Philippi who hear what Paul is doing in Thessalonica and they go to Thessalonica and they stir up trouble for Paul and Silas and the team. They stir up a riot there, so that Paul is chased out of town.

Paul leaves Thessalonica then, being chased by persecutors, and he arrives at the city of Berea. And there in Berea, he also continues to proclaim the gospel, and a church is formed there. While in Berea, he is instructed to travel south into southern Greece, to the city of Athens. He takes a ship, he leaves Timothy and Silas in Berea for a short time. But as he is in Athens, he’s going to realize “I need Timothy and Silas to be with me. This is tough-going here in Athens.” So he sends a message and calls them back to minister with him in Athens. And they do that for a little while.

But while he is in Athens, Paul’s heart is constantly stirring for this new little church in Thessalonica. He is just praying for them passionately, constantly, thinking of them by name. He’s really concerned because he didn’t have that long to establish them in the gospel. He knows that Satan is out to destroy churches. He knows that sin can enter in and false teaching, so he’s wondering what has happened. So he says, “Timothy, instead of being here with me in Athens…I need you here, but instead of being here with me, I’m going to send you back up to Thessalonica.” Paul would have liked to go to them himself. He made several plans to go to Thessalonica personally, but he was always hindered in that travel. So Timothy then makes his way back up to Thessalonica and there, he spends some time with the church to discover how they are doing. Meanwhile, Paul now makes his way over to Corinth. He is going to establish a church there under the power of the Spirit, and he’s going to stay eighteen months.

When Timothy returns, he returns back to meet up with Paul in Corinth. And in Corinth, he shares everything he discovered about this new church plant in Thessalonica. There are some really, really good things that are happening there, but there are also some troubling events, some difficulties that this church is experiencing. So the Apostle Paul’s heart is full for them, and he writes a letter to them. It’s this letter that we are studying today. This church now is likely only six months old since its inception. So it’s a very fresh letter. It’s a letter built on new relationships, but intense love, intense devotion for these people.

There are four problems that Timothy outlines. First he tells Paul, “They’re growing in faith, they’re growing in hope, they’re growing in love, but here are some problems. First of all, Paul, there are some leaders in this church who don’t like that people are so attached to you. So they’re spreading slander about you. They’re tearing you down. And there are a lot of people in the church, people who love you, who are listening to the slander and they are thinking lower and lower and lower of you.” You can imagine how that must have stabbed Paul’s heart. “Why would they do that? All I’ve done is try to be nice to them. I’ve suffered on behalf of them.” And now in six months time, there are people in the church who are whispering. “Paul is not that great of a leader. He’s only in it for himself. He’s in it for the money.” Paul is thinking, “Oh, no! We have to right this ship. We have to restore this relationship.”

Another problem is that this church continues to suffer persecution. People are without jobs. People are being harassed as a result of their faith in Jesus. And they are struggling with this pain that is a result of their faith in Jesus. And so Paul says, “I need to encourage them not to give up, not to quit.” Another thing that is happening in this church is that this church is planted in a culture that is in chaos morally. Specifically, it is in chaos regarding sexual practices. And the church has removed themselves outside of their culture, but they’re still being tempted. And there are some in the church who are engaging in sexual immorality. And Paul says, “I need to encourage them to fight hard for purity. This is the will of God.”

And finally, this church has become confused because when Paul was there, he talked to them about the second coming of the Lord Jesus, about the kingdom that Jesus was going to establish. But in that six months time, there are some in the church who have died. And they’re wondering, if they die before Jesus comes, does that mean that there’s no hope for them to enjoy the promises of the coming kingdom? So Paul says, “I need to help them understand sound doctrine regarding things to come.”

These four problems are all going to be written about in 1 Thessalonians. So here, this young church, six months old, has problems. Can you believe that? Can you believe that a local church has problems? Isn’t that remarkable?! You would expect that if this is the family of God and this is the creation of God, that it would be a place where there wouldn’t be any problems. It would be free of conflict. It would be free of gossip and slander. It would be free of temptation and of sin. But here it is; the early church. “We wish we could be like the early church,” people say. The early church had problems just like the 21st century church does. We ought not be shocked that there are problems in the church. There are always problems in the church because we are not yet glorified. Every one of us struggles with sin. Every one of us struggles with understanding and holding on to sound doctrine. Every one of us has brokenness in relationships.

But the Apostle Paul refuses to let the problems that are now in the church in Thessalonica cloud his joy over them. And that could have happened, couldn’t it? Especially with the slander that is taking place against him. But even the other things; he spent so much time talking about future things, and yet they’re still confused about what is going to happen to people who die in the Lord. He has talked to them about sexual purity, and yet there are some of those members of that very church who are now going back into those practices and being tempted. He could have been really discouraged and sort of down in the mouth about this church in Thessalonica, but he’s not. He maintains his joy. He bursts out in this letter with a shout of joy. He is so thankful for the miracle, the supernatural work of God in establishing this church and in growing this church.

We learn a principle from the Apostle Paul’s example for us. That is that gratitude transforms our attitude. When we give thanks to God for the amazing things He does, we are able to not be overcome by despair over the problems or over the things that yet need to be done. And that’s the Apostle Paul. He is bursting forth with gratitude, recognizing the grace of God in the midst of this people.

If you are taking notes today, Paul gives to us four specific reasons why we are right to thank God for our own local church. I think it’s an important practice because if we don’t give thanks like the Apostle Paul gives thanks, for our own local church, attitudes begin bending downward rather than upward. Gratitude produces a change in attitude. And oftentimes, the bad attitude we have about our own local church has nothing to do with the circumstances. It has everything to do with whether our heart is bent upward in thanks to God for His work in our midst. And so the Apostle Paul gives us four reasons why we are a people who are right to thank God for the local church, indeed our own specific local church.

**Reason #1: The Church receives life in the Father and the Son.**

This is pretty amazing in verse 1! Paul writes

***1*** *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,*

Letters in those days all began with the names of the people who are writing. And here it is Paul, Silas, that is Silvanus. Remember, they were the ones beaten and imprisoned in Philippi. And then there is young Timothy, this apprentice.

*To the church of the Thessalonians*

So already, a church has been established. The word “church” simply means “assembly.” Now in the Roman culture, there are a lot of “assemblies” that take place, even as there are in the 21st century America. In our day, we have assemblies such as a Rotary Club. There are people who assemble together for a specific purpose. There is an assembly that we call in our state, the University of Illinois. They get together for a purpose of education and sometimes to support their own athletic teams. Here in our own city, there is an assembly of the Peoria Symphony. If you’re part of that or if that’s a membership you hold where you listen to the Peoria Symphony, you are part of that assembly. You get together for specific purposes at specific times and engage in activity together. It’s an assembly. A Health Club is an assembly of people, of people coming together to a specific place for a specific purpose. So people assemble together regularly for many, many, many different reasons. It’s likely that if we sorted through the drawers of our clothes, we would find t-shirts and hats that communicate various assemblies that we have been a part of or are a part of. But what is different about this assembly, this church? The word “church” simply means “assembly.” What is different about this assembly? Well, what makes this assembly unique from every other human assembly is that this assembly is

 *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:*

Now, in saying that this assembly, this group is in the Father and in the Son, Paul is not merely communicating that this group belongs to God the Father and the Son or that this group is founded upon God the Father and God the Son. Paul is communicating that this group has life, spiritual life because God the Father and God the Son joined together breathing spiritual life into her. This assembly, this church draws hervery life, spiritual life, from the Father and from the Son. This assembly didn’t begin because Paul and Silvanus and Timothy marched into Thessalonica and said, “Hey, let’s start a group and let’s ask this group to meet together regularly, and now we can be an assembly.” No, God the Father and God the Son joined together to bring life, spiritual life, into a group of people whom God designed to meet together as an assembly for specific purposes. These are purposes related to worship, purposes related to His mission in this world. In John 15, Jesus talks about this life that we have from Christ and from the Father. Jesus says this.

**John 15:1-4** “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser . . . Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.”

Stay connected. Be joined. Be unified because God, the triune God, is the source of all life. When we connect ourselves vitally to Him through Jesus Christ, His life flows into us. And not just us individually, but us together as a group, as an assembly. There is no individual group, assembly, or individual person who can have life in themselves. They can’t say, “I want to have spiritual life, so I’m going to work hard to obtain it.” No, if we have spiritual life individually or as a group together, it’s because we are connected as a branch is to the vine. And by virtue of that union with Jesus Christ, the life of Christ flows into us. And that life then produces external fruit. Jesus says, “You can’t produce fruit unless you abide in Me.”

There are two applications from this basic principle that our life flows from God the Father and God the Son into us. Again, it’s not just individually, but it’s also together as an assembly.

1. As members of the church, we rely upon our union with Jesus to bring spiritual life into our church family.

That might seem sort of basic Christianity, but it’s so easy and tempting to stray from this very simple principle. So if we don’t remember this principle for instance and root ourselves in it, it’s easy to look in our church and say, “I see some dry spots in our church, some spots where it doesn’t appear to be much spiritual life. What do we need to do in order to have some life in our church?” It’s easy to flow to human activity, human product as a dependence to bring spiritual life. So we might say, “Do you know what our church needs? It needs some jazzier music. If we had some jazzier music, then we would have more life in this church. What our church needs is we need more prayer meetings. If we had more meetings where people got together, that’s what would bring life. What we need is better children’s programs. If we had some children’s programs and they were excited about this and they were having fun while they were doing it and learning, then we’d have life.” Now, there’s nothing wrong with any of those and a host of other more ideas. It’s right for people to get together and say, “What can we do together to bring glory to God?” But beloved, that’s not where spiritual life flows. That’s not the source from which spiritual life flows. Spiritual life flows only from our vital union with God through Christ.

2. As members of the church, we rejoice in the spiritual life God gives to us.

We hold that life as precious. We are stewards of that life, so we nurture that life. We refuse to neglect her, to mistreat this life that God has given. It’s a precious, precious gift to have the life of God. And so we act appropriately, each of us in the church, as stewards of this life.

We know that the life God gives to us individually is connected to the life that God gives us together as an assembly. So there are not two different kinds of life that God gives. He doesn’t say, “Okay, I’m going to give you, Ritch, spiritual life in you, but then separately I’m going to give life to the local church of which you are a part.” No, it’s one and the same life. When He gives me life as an individual worshiper, it’s the same life He gives to us together. They can’t be separated.

Oftentimes in American Christianity, we do that. We say, “Well me and God, we have a life together and I hope that group that I happen to go to or I happen to belong to, I hope they have life.” And that life seems to be distant. It seems to be third person. But it’s all the same life. It is interconnected. I can’t enjoy this life individually with God while this life over here is a wreck, corporately. And so God has called each one of us to invest the life that He gives to us individually in a way that is corporate, that is part of this assembly to say, “You’ve set me here to be part of the pursuit of a healthy corporate assembly life.” So as we nurture our church’s life, we nurture our personal life. As we nurture our personal life with God, we nurture our church’s life. It’s one and the same.

The first reason why we give thanks is that we have life in God the Father and in God the Son. This is supernatural. It’s amazing! We didn’t create this thing. God did. And so we celebrate that. The second reason why we give thanks to God for the church is

**Reason #2: The Church receives faith, hope and love.**

***2*** *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,*

Paul is in Athens. He is in Corinth, but he is still thinking about this church in Thessalonica. And as he thinks about it, he prays and prays and prays for them together, corporately. He prays for members by name, individually. He is constantly thanking God in his prayers. Membership in the local church spurs us to think often about our own spiritual family. Paul thought about this spiritual family that he was integral in founding as an instrument in the Holy Spirit’s hands. But he constantly thought about them. How much more then if we are part of that family, if we are members, if we are participants and sharers in the life of God in this family, do we think about our own family? Do we allow our own church family to roll through our minds and our hearts?

A weak church is one in which people have a really, really, really great time on Sunday, but then throughout the rest of the six days of the week, there’s hardly a thought about that assembly. It’s sort of an insignificant assembly. It’s sort of like the health club. I go there, and Monday, Wednesday and Friday I think about it because I’m there. But otherwise, I’m not thinking about it. That’s not what the church is. The church is integral to our life. Again, remember, our individual life with God is the very life that God gives to us corporately. It’s one and the same. We’re tied together. So membership in the local church spurs us to think often about the spiritual family.

And then as we think about that spiritual family, we pray often for that family. And as we pray for that family and all of her needs and all of her difficulties, we also remember to thank God constantly for that family. The church grows strong in her worship of God when her members thinkabout her through the week, when her members pray over her through the week, and when her members give thanks for her through the week. Paul says the word “constantly.” Do you notice that?

***2*** *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,*

That word “constantly” appears four times in the New Testament, and three times in this letter. It is used here. It’s used also, if you skip over to chapter 2, he says

**1 Thessalonians 2:13** And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

He thanked God constantly for that. Every time he thought of this church he thought, “Man, God worked in their life to bring about an understanding that this Word is not just the word of man. It’s the Word of God.” That word is also used then if you skip forward to 1 Thessalonians 5, it’s in a command. Paul says

**1 Thessalonians 5:17** pray without ceasing,

He says, “I’ve given you my example. I’m praying for you constantly. Now, pray for one another in your own church constantly. Pray without ceasing. Pray, pray, pray, pray. Think and pray. Think and pray over one another’s lives.”

There is somewhat of a conviction of this in that we have to ask, how often does my own church family roll through my heart and roll through my mind? Again, this is central to a real church. It’s what makes a church real and authentic. It’s a building block. It’s fundamental. Paul sets an example, but then he also gives us a command.

When we experience problems, especially in the life of our own church, we typically give one of two responses. We either grumble or we pray. We know one is sourced in the flesh. The other is sourced in the Spirit. I have to confess that sometimes I grumble about some things in life. My wife, Kimberly, is a great encourager to me. She listens to my complaints and then she often will ask this question as I grumble, grumble, grumble, grumble. She’ll look at me and say, “Ritch, have you prayed about that?” Well, I like to grumble. What do you mean, have I prayed over this? It’s very convicting because I really don’t have a response to it other than, “Oh, you know what? I don’t think I have.” The things I pray over, I tend not to grumble over. And the things I grumble over are the things I have neglected to pray over.

So Paul says, “I pray for you, and I also with prayer, give thanksgiving to God. There are some amazing things that these problems would completely cover over and hide from my view if in my prayer, I didn’t thank God.” I want to always keep in view what God has done, that’s supernatural, that’s amazing, that’s wonderful, that’s lovely.

***3*** *remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

There are three virtues, Christian virtues that he talks about. Number one is your work of faith. Number two is your labor of love. And number three is the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now first, take a step back from these three and observe that Paul says, “I give thanks constantly.” But he doesn’t give thanks to the Thessalonians. He doesn’t say, “Man, I really want to thank you for your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfastness of hope. I just can’t thank you. I can’t praise you enough for that.” That’s not what he says. He says, “I thank God.”

You see, the Apostle Paul is acknowledging that work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope is not produced by the self-efforts of this church. It is produced by God. That’s why he thanks God for this effect. If we have faith, love and hope, it is because God gives these to us as a gift of grace. We can’t ever brag about them as though we made them for ourselves. We can’t say, “Look at us. Look at our faith. Do you see our love? Notice our hope over here.” Now, once God gives these gifts to us, we have a stewardship over them. It’s not as though we’re passive with them. But we cannot manufacture them. They come from God as a gift. And so, whenever they exist inside a church, it’s always “Thank you, God. Thank you, God. Thank you, God.” Let’s take these individually.

**--Work of faith**

Faith is simply trusting in God. It’s trusting in His sufficient provision. And here he says it is genuine faith that produces a work. He’s so thankful that they have the kind of faith that produces a work. There are good works that please God and there are good works that displease God. God rejoices over works of faith; works that are produced by faith in Jesus and total dependence upon Him, trusting in Him. But God does not rejoice in works of self-righteousness.

Many good deeds accomplished in the church are works of self-righteousness. That is to say they flow from a heart that hopes to somehow maybe gain God’s approval through the merit of those works. They flow from a heart that desires perhaps some recognition from others or from a heart that simply wants to feel good about itself. It says, “I’m a pretty good person because look at what I’ve done.” God takes no pleasure in a work of self-righteousness. Here is what God says about a work of self-righteousness in Isaiah 64.

**Isaiah 64:6** We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

We’re all completely needy. All our works produced by ourselves are like a polluted garment. The King James says “like filthy rags.”

The gospel is a gospel of grace. We are rescued from our sins on the basis of God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Faith is not a work. Faith is simply a beggar looking upward with empty hands to the One who has all provision and saying, “Feed me! Feed me! I need what You can provide.” Yet, once we obtain faith, that faith is never passive. Genuine faith that looks up to God and says “Feed me,” as it is being fed, it produces within us a longing to do something for God’s glory. It’s a faith that is not content with being in an easy chair. Faith in Jesus generates good works in us. And this is what James talks about when he says

**James 2:14** What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

The answer is no. It’s a kind of faith that is manufactured. It’s not true. It’s not real. God loves works of faith. They are acts of worship by His church. They are works that don’t flow from our own self-effort, from our own pride or self-sufficiency, but works that flow from our helplessness, our neediness and our dependence upon Christ.

Paul has seen some false conversions in his life experience. And as he is in Athens, he wants to find out how this church is doing. When he gets to Corinth, Timothy finally returns with a full report. And Timothy is describing how their faith has actually made a change in life. So we don’t do good works in order to gain entrance into God’s family. We do good works as a result of being received by God solely on the basis of our faith. And we say, “Now that I’m in the family, I want to bring glory to the Father who adopted me for no reason other than that He loves me.” Timothy is giving a report that yes, that is here in the church. And Paul says that’s from God. “Thank you God for these works of faith!” But he doesn’t stop there. He also talks about

**--Labor of love**

Our labor flows out of love as well as out of faith. Love is simply rejoicing in God as God. Love says, “Praise you, God, that you are God, that you are the source of every good gift. I love you! I adore you! I praise you. I want to draw near to you.”

Once again, God does not rejoice in labor for labor’s sake. He doesn’t say, “You guys are all working hard. That’s all I care about. I don’t care about your attitude. I don’t care about your heart. You’re just getting her done and that’s all I really care about.” That’s not the way God is. God cares deeply about the motivations of our heart to such an extent that some labors, some works account for nothing. They will all be burned up because they’re not flowing from a source that is rooted in the gospel, rooted in God Himself.

Now, the church is a working church. The church is a laboring assembly. We have family business to attend to. God has given us a business to attend to. He tells us about that business in Matthew 28.

**Matthew 28:19-20** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

That’s our business! This is our work. If we are members of God’s family, then we are an owner in this family business. And every one of us has a part to accomplish in this family business. But once again, what is the motivation of our heart in engaging in the family business? Well God says, “If it’s not wrought out of faith or just dependence on God and trust in His sufficiency, if it’s not wrought out of love, a desire to adore God and to give Him what is His due, it’s not the kind of work, it’s not the kind of labor that is going to accomplish the effect that My work is designed to accomplish, and that is worship.” Paul writes this:

**1 Corinthians 13:1-2** If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,

That’s a work that is an amazing accomplishment.

**1 Corinthians 13:2** but have not love, I am nothing.

Paul is saying it’s actually possible to do some really impressive things, but if it’s not born as a labor of love, it’s nothing.

**1 Corinthians 13:3** If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

There is no reward in that kind of labor.

This past week, I had the joy and privilege, Kimberly and I did, of being part of our youth camp. What an amazing group of teenagers this church has as well as Bethany Community and Living Hope. I thank God for them. I thank God for their faith and their hope and their love. I saw that on display in many ways. I looked at those who came to camp from our church to labor with these youth. Many of them labor with the youth all through the year. And many of them, if not most of them, took vacation time. Now vacation time selfishly is a time where I get to relax and do what I want to do. I think of a beach in Florida. But many of these men and women took vacation time to spend with our teenagers at a summer camp. I looked at them, and do you know what I didn’t hear when I sat at the table with them? I didn’t hear, “I took vacation time. Don’t you think that’s a pretty good thing for me to do to be with the teenagers? To suffer through them because they keep me up all night and they kind of have problems? Especially, they are a bit unruly. Don’t you think I’m a pretty good person?” I didn’t hear that. When I heard them talk about the work, I heard love, love, love for these teenagers. Love, love, love for God, but also love, love, love for these teenagers. I thought, “Praise God! God brought that to pass in our church and I get to see it. I get to see that first hand!” That’s real church. Because the Gospel is a story of God’s love, it cannot be communicated rightly without love at the center of the story teller’s life. It can’t be. A church that lacks love is completely unable to tell the story of the gospel. Completely unable!

The church has many needs for labor in order for her to be a place where disciples are made. I want you to think of Sunday morning and how much labor, how much work has to go into Sunday morning. You think of greeters and ushers and welcoming servants and musicians and sound and lighting experts, Sunday School teachers and coffee engineers, nursery workers, table leaders, tons of servants doing a lot of work. But a church is not healthy simply on the basis of labor. Human labor can accomplish a lot of impressive things. It can move mountains. But for us to make disciples for the glory of God, our labors must be labors of love, a love that God produces in our hearts through the gospel. And God knows the difference. Finally Paul says not only work of faith and labor of love, but also

**--Steadfastness of hope**

Hope is this joyful anticipation of a promised future. God made a promise to us about a future that is amazing! And He says it’s not right now. Right now is a lot of brokenness and a lot of suffering and a lot of persecution, a lot of temptation and a lot of failings, a lot of difficulties. That’s what is right now. He doesn’t lie to us about what to expect in the present, but He doesn’t lie to us about what to expect in the future. He says hope is while you are experiencing this here…it’s not that you’re in denial of what is here. You’re talking about it. You’re praying about it. You’re encouraging each other in the midst of it. You’re bearing each other’s burdens. But you’re also not just fixed here. You’re also putting a lot of energy to thinking about there, the day that is yet to come, when all the promises are fulfilled. And you’re thinking about it to such an extent that some of the joy of that future day is realized even right now.

Imagine you’re on a baseball team and the coach tells you that Saturday we have the game and we’re going to win the game. We’re going to hoist the trophy together. He gives you a great picture of what it’s going to be like to be the championship baseball team. And the night after you listen to that coach’s speech, you go to bed and it’s all you can think about. You can imagine hitting that walk off homerun. You can imagine what it’s like to have your team hike you up on their shoulders and together you hoist that trophy in the air. To have your picture in the paper and the story written about your team. And as you think about that that night after the coach’s speech, you think about it to such an extent that you have a smile on your face. You’re like experiencing it. It hasn’t happened yet, but it’s as though you’re experiencing some of the joy of that amazing day right now, even before it happens.

Now here is the problem with human hopes. Human hope may or may not be realized. So that coach’s promise can be broken because he’s not God. He’s not in control. But beloved, when God makes a promise, it’s 100%. This is why hope is the eager anticipation. It’s the certain expectation. God says, “Beloved, you’re going to win. You are born again to a living hope. You are born again into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

God says, “Here is my promise to you, church. One day you will be completely free of sin. You will be in a state where you won’t even be tempted by sin anymore. Further-more, you’re never going to have a tear again. No more sorrows, no more pain, no more suffering, no more death. You’re going to be reunited with every one of your loved ones who are in Christ. You’ll stand before God in His glory. You’ll be blown away by the amazing brightness of His honor. You will see Jesus face to face. And when you see Him face to face, you’re going to be transformed into His likeness. You’ll be presented before the Father by the Son as one who is completely faultless, without blame, without blemish. You will receive the victor’s reward. Furthermore, you’re going to have a home. In the Father’s house, a room is being prepared by Jesus for you which you will dwell in forever and ever. In that place, you will never experience sickness or weakness, death or broken relationships ever again. Does that sound good?

That’s our hope. And it’s right for us to think about that. And that’s what the Thessalonian church was doing. That’s why they had questions about the future. It’s because they were thinking about the future and the promises that God made for them. And Paul says this is what makes us steadfast, what makes us persevere, endure. When they’re suffering persecution, what keeps them from just quitting? “You know, it’s not worth it to follow Christ because it makes life too hard.” What keeps them steadfast? It’s hope. It’s that this day here is going to happen and that day in the future will be forever and ever. I’m enjoying some of that day now just simply based on the promises of God, just simply based on hope. The last two reasons, very quickly, for why Paul gives thanks to God,

**Reason #3: The church receives God’s love and election.**

***4*** *For we know brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,*

It’s amazing! He has chosen you. Think of that! God does not love us or choose us because of anything in ourselves. Paul says, “I thank God that you are a people who are loved by God and chosen by God. It has nothing to do with you, so I’m not kind of blowing smoke in your direction to kind of puff you up. I’m just saying that God loves you all. He loves you with an infinite, amazing love. He sent His Son to die for you, and He chose you to be part of His family. I am just jazzed when I think of you, to know that that’s true. That’s amazing! I’m always thanking God for His love that is set upon you and for His election.”

**Reason #4: The church receives God’s power through the Gospel.**

***5*** *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.*

“When you heard the gospel of God, when you heard His Word proclaimed to you, it came in power. It made spiritual transformation. The Holy Spirit was set upon you so that there were changes in your life and nothing else could explain it. So I thank God for you.”

I have two questions. First, are you a member of Jesus’ church? It’s the most important question. The same question is asked, are you born again? I’m not asking if you are a member of this church. You can be a member of this church and not be a member of Jesus’ church. It’s possible. We just took in ten members. Praise God! We trust that they’re all members of Jesus’ church. We’ve asked them their testimony. It’s possible to be part of the physical local church and not be a member of Jesus’ church. Are you a member of the assembly? That when you heard the Word of God, you received it not as the word of men, but as the power of God to bring transformation in your life. Are you one of those? Does your life give evidence of this work of faith, this labor of love, this steadfastness of hope? Is that you? If it’s not you, call out to God and ask Him to grant you faith, to grant you that kind of love, to grant you that hope. He is the provider of every good thing. Call out to Him in your need and say, “God, I need faith in order to embrace Jesus as my Savior.” He will grant the humble cry of the penitent sinner.

Secondly, I would ask you, are you the kind of member over which Paul thanks God? Are you that kind of person? One that Paul would look at and say, “I thank God you’re in this church. Because of you and God’s work in you, God is being glorified in this place.” He’s boosting this quotient, this level of works of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope for His glory. Are you that kind of member? Let’s pray if we’re members of Jesus’ church and members of this one that we would be that.