

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
July 24, 2016**

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

"The Church – As It Should Be"

Hymns: 528 – 530 – 533 – 540

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

¹ Paul, Silas, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to you.

² We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. ³ We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by 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 simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 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, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead

— Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

- I. Recognizes that it is the creation of God's grace
- II. Treasures the Gospel of Christ in its midst
- III. Eagerly seeks to model Christ's love in life

Dear Fellow redeemed, elect of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord —

It was break time in the office. As the employees gathered around the coffee pot, they noticed that Pete seemed to be in a particularly good mood. When asked the reason behind his smile, Pete explained, "My wife paid me a great compliment this morning — one I bet none of you guys has ever heard from your wife! She said I was a model husband." "A model husband, hey?" Bob said. "That's right. Aren't you impressed?" Pete replied. "I don't know," Bob answered. "Have you ever looked up the definition of a *model* in the dictionary?" "No, can't say I have," Pete admitted. "Well," Bob said with a grin, "according to *Webster's Dictionary* a model is defined as a small imitation of the real thing."

The Christian church is supposed to be a model of her Lord, Jesus Christ. But too often, it seems, it fits *Webster's* definition: a small, often poor imitation of the real thing. We all see the flaws. I know you do, even as I do. In my former district office, I heard about the coldness of some churches toward strangers, the hurtful experiences some have had in their church, the feeling of being catered to, or ignored on the basis of social standing or wealth. Sometimes I find it hard to understand why the Lord allows the world to draw its conclusions about Him from what they see in the likes of us. I want to say to that watching world, "Blame this cracked and blurred mirror, not the One whose perfect and beautiful image I am supposed to reflect."

Now look at the title of this message today: "**The Church — As It Should Be.**" Perhaps when you read that, you thought

about putting on a flak jacket? Such is not my intent. There is no perfect church; or, as someone once said, “If you ever find the perfect church, don’t join it — because when you do, it won’t be perfect anymore.” There is no perfect church, there is only a perfect Lord who has perfected His body, the Church, and you and I as members of His body.

Our text this morning provides an opportunity to review what the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ should be, with the understanding from the very beginning that no church does it all perfectly. We are imperfect human beings who are privileged by grace to serve a perfect Lord.

I.

The church in our text, the church in Thessalonica was a church that had no right to be — not humanly or reasonably speaking. The people in this city of 200,000 worshiped idols, namely those gods of Greek mythology whose home was supposed to be on nearby Mount Olympus. Why would they turn from those popular gods to the God proclaimed by a traveling threesome of missionary Jews? Moreover, when Paul and his companions arrived in Thessalonica, Paul was still nursing wounds he had received in Philippi as a result of a court-ordered beating there. Then Jews from the local synagogue accused Paul of disloyalty to the Roman government because he preached of a king other than Caesar, and so after only three weeks he was forced to leave Thessalonica in the middle of the night. Who could expect a church to be successfully planted under such conditions?

But the seed of God’s Word had taken root. That was the good news Silas and Timothy brought when they caught up with Paul in Corinth. Against all expectations, that infant church in Thessalonica was alive and thriving, living proof of the power of God’s Word and the grace of the Holy Spirit! So, with great joy, Paul writes the first of all his letters to this church: ***“We know, brothers***

loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (vs.4-5). What did Paul want these new Christians to remember? First, that that gospel wasn’t Paul’s, it was God’s gospel. And second, the power that turned hearts from the worship of idols to the worship of ***“the living and true God”*** (v. 9) wasn’t the result of great preaching style, but a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. Third, he wanted them to know that the ***“deep conviction,”*** the certainty with which they believed the message, didn’t come from some inner decision or emotional response on their part; it came as a gift from God.

A church as it should be will always be quick to recognize that it has no reason for being except for the grace of God. This church did not come to be because surveys showed this community would be an ideal place to plant a church. It is God who calls a church and its people into being. The Lord of the Church still says of us today, ***“You did not choose Me, but I chose you”*** (Jn.15:16). This is a truth I believe needs to be emphasized in the church today because too often we hear the very reverse: “I took Jesus to be my Savior,” we hear, or, “My life really changed when I found Jesus,” as if He was the one who was lost and the believer found Him! I wonder if this accounts for why there is no longer a confession of sin in the worship services of many Christian churches today. Did you know that? Very few churches today do what we did at the beginning of this service, confess, “there is nothing good in me”; acknowledge that because of my sins I am deserving of God’s punishment, not His love. But when we forget what we were — sinners, by nature and in actual deed — that’s when we lose our appreciation for God’s election and His calling of us. And when that appreciation of God’s grace diminishes, people begin to think they are doing God a favor by spending time worshiping Him on a

Sunday morning, or even feel free not to worship Him at all and yet brashly claim that they are still walking with God. A church as it should be will recognize that it is God's grace alone that has called it and every believer into being.

II.

This brings us to the second thing that made the church at Thessalonica a church as it should be: they treasured the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul writes, *“you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit (v.6). ... you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (v.9).* What was this message the Thessalonians welcomed with such joy? The same message which caused the hearts of two men to burn with fire as they walked along on Easter afternoon and Jesus opened the Scriptures to them. The same message which put a smile on the face of a dying man and tears of joy in my eyes as I shared the Gospel's promise with him just a few weeks ago. It is the gospel of God's love for a world of lost humanity. It is the Good News that *“God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them” (2 Cor.5:19).* And why not? Because God chose instead to put those sins on His perfect Son who paid the price for every sinner by dying for us on a cross that we helped to fashion. This is the One Paul is referring to when he says, *“Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (v.10).* That storm of God's judgment should have washed over us like a cold flood with God's rejection. Instead, Jesus took our place, endured separation from His Father so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God.

Now that same Savior comes to us through the Gospel. In the water of baptism, His Word claimed us as His own and made us God's children. He holds out bread and

wine and says, “This is for you, My body, My blood. You are forgiven!” We are welcomed as God's own children! The heavenly Father's ear is open to our prayers. Under the dynamic ministry of law and gospel, the fear of judgment and of punishment is gone. So also is the need to pretend we are something we are not. God has seen us as we are and He hasn't turned His face away from us. In Christ, He has spread His garment of grace over our nakedness. We have been unconditionally accepted in Christ Jesus!

The church as it should be will treasure this gospel, this Good News. It will regard it as its dearest possession. It will accept no substitutes, allow no rules of men nor that of human reason to take its rightful throne, for it is at such a table that the church's prodigal sons and daughters enjoy a banquet of richest grace. And the emotions are those of joy and relief, of gratitude and worship.

III.

Now let's see what happens when the message of God's love, this Gospel of our Lord, gets rooted in people's lives.

“We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ,” writes Paul (v.3). Clearly, the Gospel of Christ had stamped its impression first on the hearts and then on the lives of these believers in Thessalonica. Their joy in Christ was so obvious, so apparent and so inspiring to everyone that Paul says, *“you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”* This tribute is even more amazing when we read that these Christians were persecuted. Some were hauled into court and fined for being Christians. They were ridiculed and beaten. Yet they pressed on, inspired by their hope in the Lord Jesus. A few years later members of this church in Thessalonica served as a model for the Corinthian Christians. Despite their extreme poverty, they were generous in

support of the Gospel. Today we still point to them as a model for Christian giving. Even more important, Paul says, ***“The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia — your faith in God has become known everywhere”*** (v. 8). The words describe a ringing out that is like that of a trumpet blast. In both words and actions these Christians were a witness for Christ.

As we live in relationship with others, how we live makes an impression upon others. Neighbors or friends may ask where you attend church because they see the love of Christ at work in your life and desire the same for themselves and their families. When we forgive one another as we have been forgiven, when we express confidence and hope in traumatic situations, we are imitators of Christ to our neighbors and friends. Even how we manage the treasure God has given us, giving Him first place, may cause others to marvel at the sincerity of such a faith, for the world recognizes the truth of Jesus’ words, ***“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”*** (Matt.6:21).

In reading this letter to the Thessalonians, I remembered another passage that says, ***“You are the letter of Christ, written not in ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts”*** (2 Cor.3:2). A church can have the best pastor, the greatest choir and organists, a fine facility, and enjoy the most Christ-centered sermons, but the message, the letter that will be read and examined by the world out there isn’t the one you hear from this pulpit ... it’s the one you write with your life every day.

In Thessalonica that human letter read, “Jesus is our Lord and Savior. He comes first in our lives. We’re living for Him, and He is coming to take us home.” That short summary of their faith explained their hope, their endurance of suffering, and the sacrifices they were willing to make to promote the gospel of Christ.

May this same Gospel which so touched

the Thessalonians touch our hearts also, ***“not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction”*** (v.5). Then we will also be the church as it should be, and God will be glorified through us.

Amen.