

Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
“Following an Example”

A young Catholic priest decided to enter a monastery. He joined one particularly strict monastery. The head monk told him, at his indoctrination, that they were sworn to TOTAL silence. They could not speak one word at all. However, every ten years, they would be permitted to speak two words. After 10 years of total silence, the head monk or Abbot indicated it was now time for him to speak his two words.

The monk said, “Bed hard!” And then he resumed his silent study and work. Another 10 years passed, and the head monk again indicated it was time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, “Food bad!” And then he resumed his silent study and work. Another 10 years passed and the head monk again indicated it was time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, “I quit!” The head monk shook his head and said, “I knew this was coming. You’ve done nothing but complain for the past 30 years!”

I must confess that one of the skills I seem to lack, or at least find difficult to use, is to complain. Over my life time I have endured all kinds of bad things, rather than voice my disapproval. I’ve been told more than once, that I am a people pleaser, and I’d rather stew and fret about something than express it openly. Interesting fact is my tongue is very short. It barely sticks out of my mouth.

I have joking said many times that it became so short because I was always biting it, instead of speaking out. So, I have endured bad food in restaurants, over inflated bills for services and been taken advantage. I have, I confess endured difficult parishioners, and rough church meetings, because I cannot find myself complaining. One time I will never forget was in my first pastorate. We were having a church meeting over a contentious matter.

For the life of my I cannot remember what it was. One of our influential members came to the meeting with a T-shirt, that read, I kid you not, “You are entitled to your opinion as long as it is the same as mine.” He said it was a joke by I saw the truth in those words. I think I lost a whole inch off my tongue that evening. Letters of complaint are just as difficult for me to write.

I have actually written a few that were never mailed, or sent by email. I simply vented, and stored it away, or erased it. Have you noticed that letters of complaint rarely begin with a warm heartfelt greeting? It is unlikely that when one is making a formal request or reprimand, that one writes a letter beginning with encouragement or thankfulness. This is also true for letters written in antiquity. The opening was usually designed to set the stage for what followed.

Paul’s letters were different from most letters of complaint or concern. His first letter to Thessalonica was the first letter he wrote that we have a copy of, and likely the first known recorded words of the New Testament. Paul had recently left Thessalonica, and somehow word got back to him about something that worried him. Paul sent Timothy to the young church and then sends his first of two known letters. In Timothy’s report to Paul, in the letter before us today, was written that Timothy reported that many in the Thessalonian church held Paul in high regard.

Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

This was a good thing for what follows in the letter is difficult to hear. The Thessalonians maintained a deep affection for Paul, as he founded the church there, and preached the gospel to them. So, Paul sets out, in his letter, to provide encouragement, pastoral care, and some corrective advice. All to encourage the young church family to persevere in the Christian life.

The letter itself follows a standard ancient letter format. It has an initial greeting in verse one, followed by verses 2-10 which are words of thanksgiving or blessing. He does change one normative word in his greeting, by not using the word “greeting” itself, but the word “grace” and adding the Hebrew word of greeting “Shalom” or peace. The thanksgiving part is what lies before us today, and in a nut shell, it is a recap of his relationship with them. He talks about their initial conversion to Christ, and goes on to describe the result of their faith in Christ.

Paul points out how the faith of the Thessalonians led them to acts of generosity. The church family became noted for its steadfastness in hope. Notice he uses the triad: faith, hope and love. It’s a favourite of Paul’s, and we see later in this letter and in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul was accused by rivals of being a false teacher, so he points out that the Thessalonians turned from their idols and followed Christ because of the power of his preaching, and the Holy Spirit.

This reference to idols, is important because it indicates that the majority, if not all the church in Thessalonica were made up of Gentiles. Their faith brought upon them opposition, and yet the Thessalonians remained true to their belief in Christ through the gospel Paul preached. The Thessalonians now have become a wonderful example to other believers, not just locally, but also other churches in the near Mediterranean basin.

In the end, Paul is telling them that they rightly discerned that following Christ means having faith in Christ, and doing good works for others. As the letter of James explores this same conclusion with these words. “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and upon going away, immediately forget what they were like.” (James 1:22-24) What a very apt illustration to capture what Paul is saying.

Why do we look in a mirror at all? To see how we present ourselves: is our hair straight, our makeup on properly, our teeth white enough. Some people like what they see in a mirror, others wish it was a different image they see. I wonder sometimes about those who undergo plastic surgery for vanity reasons. Who told them their nose was too big, face too wrinkly, or tummy too loose? Most likely they told themselves after looking in a mirror.

Michael Jackson, yes, I said Michael Jackson, has a song that I think is his best, called “The Man in the Mirror”. He sings in part. “I am looking at the man in the mirror, asking him to change his ways...if you want to make the world a better place, you’d better take a look at your face.” I get the importance of self-evaluation, but not obsessively so, like Narcissus of Greek myth. Paul agrees we need a mirror to examine ourselves, but it is not one made of glass.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that a big part of their transformation to people of hope and services of love, is from their imitating him, and his companions and most certainly, God. This word imitation is a big one in this letter.

Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The qualities to be admired are demonstrated by Paul, Timothy and his other companions. Compare yourselves, Paul is saying, to we who faced opposition, mistreatment in Philippi, and who demonstrated pure motives in their ministry. Observe he says, how they did not chase after the praise of people, even though as an apostle he could have expected it, and even demanded it.

This an awkward phrase because in claiming humility, Paul seems to lose humility. These character traits are what we will look at in length next week. Paul's point is clearly about the reputation the Thessalonians had clearly developed in other places, because they imitated Paul and God. In their spiritual journey, what did people see when they thought on the church at Thessalonica?

Clearly, according to Paul, observers noticed the hope and experienced the love the Thessalonians imitated from Paul and God. When people thought of this church community in Thessalonica, it brought good things to mind. Their "reputation preceded them". I think churches have a great deal of similarities with a business enterprise. I know there are significant differences as well, but hear me out.

We are reminded at every annual meeting, that churches are often seen by banks and government entities not as charities, but as "not for profit" businesses. Anyone who has ever owned or worked in a business knows that reputation is everything. You can advertise in every conceivable method, but if a business' customers don't like what they received in the way of goods and services, it is very hard to lure them back, or keep them from disparaging your business. Like, why do you go to a certain restaurant you've never gone to before?

Likely it's because someone you know, went there and had a great meal and great service. Case in point. It's 5pm, still thirty minutes to go before Mr. Wong's restaurant in the US opens its doors for dinner. The line snakes down the street and around the corner. A few people have bookings for tables of six or more, but not many, most are walk-ins who know that if you're not dining with a bigger group, and have no reservation (house rules), then you need to get there early. Mr. Wong's reputation precedes his culinary offerings.

There is clearly no time for the management of Mr. Wong's, to worry about what the dozen other restaurants within walking distance, are doing, and no urgency to allocate resources to traditional marketing campaigns. Like the Mr. Wong team, every one of us has a choice. We can spend the majority of our time either managing our reputation, or keeping pace with our competitors, or we can deliberately create the reputation that precedes us.

If we are to imitate God, there are lessons to learn from Paul. "Be ye imitators of God!" How we view ourselves and the ministry we undertake in Christ's name should be a reflection of God in Christ. The things we see of goodness, grace and love demonstrated by Jesus need to be incorporated in us. Not that we are perfect in this endeavor; far from it. Paul says interestingly enough, in 1 Corinthians 13:12 that "we see dimly in a mirror".

There is imperfection in our vision of God in Christ. And just like a mirror there are things that interfere with how we see our reflection in Christ. All the big character flaws we can think off can certainly cloud our vision; like hatred, self-centeredness, and greed etc.

Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

It is very difficult for the world observing us, to see Christ in us when we are presenting a flawed image to the world.

Years ago, I stumbled on a great illustration of flawed vision involving mirrors. Once there was an old rich man who had a very cranky attitude. No one liked him, and no one wanted to associate with him. One day he went to his rabbi, and asked him if he might help him discover what was wrong with his life. Why was he so unliked? The two men talked for a while, and then the rabbi, had a brain storm about how he might convey the man's problem.

First, he asked the man to look out the office window and tell him what he sees. The man stood there for a moment before saying, "I see some men and women and a few children." "Fine" said the rabbi. Once more he led the man by the hand across the office to a mirror hung on the wall. "No look and tell me what you see." The man frowned and said, "Well obviously, I see myself." "Interesting" the rabbi replied.

"The window is made of glass, and the mirror is made of glass. But the glass of the mirror has been covered in silver. As soon as you add the silver, you cease to see others and instead only see yourself." (P. 151 of Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks)

I remember seeing an interview with Rich Little years ago. I don't know how many folks remember him. He is a world-famous impressionist and is Canadian actually. He was born in Ottawa and is now 82 years old. You can see his work on YouTube if you want to see how spot on, he is with his impressions. In the interview, he said he spent hours listening and watching his subject and then practicing in a mirror until he got it right.

In trying to imitate Christ, I get the sense that all our lives we are practicing imitating him correctly. When we examine our lives, we should be asking how much of Jesus do I see in me? Unlike trying to get his voice and mannerisms right, like an impersonator, we seek to imitate him by our character, and how we see the world. That is why the Gospels are so important for us. The gospels give us a picture of Jesus to imitate.

Not that we get it perfect every time, not at all; but more and more as we let the Holy Spirit work and convict us of needed adjustments and changes, we show more and more of Christ to the world. Jesus said himself, "They will know you are my disciples if you love one another." Are we therefore a people of love? Are we imitating Christ's: forgiveness, grace, peace, acceptance and care? Do we care about our neighbours no matter who they are?

The reality is; the moment someone knows we claim faith in Christ, is the moment we are being compared to him. If Christ's presence in our lives has no evidence of transforming our character and our activities in this world, then are hardly a good imitation of our Lord.

Have you heard the funny story about a police officer who observed a car being driven very aggressively, weaving in and out of traffic? The officer observed as he followed the car that the driver shouted what appeared to be obscenities at other drivers and pedestrians; even honking their horn in frustration. The officer even noticed a finger raised on occasion. Finally, the officer had had enough and pulled the driver over.

Sunday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Upon approaching the car, the officer was surprised to find a grandmotherly looking woman behind the wheel. The officer asked for her license, insurance and registration and the officer confirmed it was her car. The lady asked the officer why he pulled her over. She hadn't sped very much. She obeyed the stop signs and stop lights. "Well", the officer said, "its like this. I saw you being very aggressive, shouting obscenities, and giving people the finger. Then I noticed your bumper sticker that read, "Follow me to Sunday School", and I figured with your behavior, the car was stolen."

It matters that our words match our character and behaviour. If people do not see Christ exhibited in us, they will correctly identify us as hypocrites. Who are we imitating? What are we seeing in the glass dimly? The ancient Greek Philosopher Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living". I might alter it a bit, and say that an unexamined faith, is not worth having."

"Be ye imitators of God!" Otherwise, the world only sees us and that can be a very fractured picture indeed.