

How We Behave

Upon This Rock, Part 4

I Thessalonians 1

A young man was visiting Amish country in Pennsylvania – he happened to see an old Amish couple coming out of a store, walking over to get into their horse-drawn cart. He ran over and said, “Hello, sorry to bother you, but I’ve always wanted to meet an Amish couple.”

The woman elbowed her husband in the ribs and said, “What did he say?” The farmer looked at his hard of hearing wife and said, “He wanted to meet us.” The young man went on, “So you farm nearby?” “Yes,” the man politely said, “we’ve been farming here all our lives.” His wife ribbed him again and said, “What did he say?” The Farmer said to her, “He wanted to know if we had a farm nearby.”

The young man asked, “Do you have children?” “Yes,” the man said, “We have seven sons and three daughters living near us;” and before he could finish, his wife interrupted, “What’d he say?” The farmer said, “He just wanted to know if we have any children nearby.”

Then the young man said, “You know – you might not believe this, but I dated an Amish girl once . . . but she turned out to be so bossy and irritating and wanting to tell me what to do and never would let me make up my mind.” Again, the wife ribbed her husband and said, “What’s he saying now?” The farmer looked down at her and said, “He says . . . he thinks he knows you.”

Let me ask you a question? How do people know you? And what does our culture think about, when they think about the church?

It might not be a laughing matter.

My wife found this recently and showed it to me;

- A group of fish is called a school;
- A group of clams is called a bed;
- A group of bats is known as a colony;
- A group of deer is called a herd;
- A group of sheep is referred to as a flock;
- A group of bees is a swarm;
- A group of hyenas is a clan;
- A group of lions is a pride;
- A group of wolves is a pack;
- And a group of alligators is a congregation.

A group of alligators is called a congregation: big mouths, lots of teeth and they eat people – that is not a very flattering use of the word, congregation.

What would we be called by those in our world? How do they know us?

Well, frankly, that has a lot to do with how we behave.

Thus far in our series on The Church, we’ve discussed,

- Who we are;
- Why we belong;
- Why we exist.

And today, I want to begin to identify from scripture, how we behave.

Turn in your New Testament to ***Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians.***

This was the only New Testament church where Paul said they were an example to all the other churches.

Whenever I think of the way a church ought to behave, and certainly our own, I cannot help but think of this church in Thessalonica.

And as we expound our way through a verse or two, let me outline our study by giving you three characteristics of how a church ought to behave – not just in the 1st century, but in our 21st century world today.

The first characteristic is simply this; we:

1. Mimic faithful role-models.

Let's drop in at *verse 6* – notice just the first phrase. *You also became imitators of us and of the Lord.*

The word imitators comes from the Greek word *mimetes* (μιμητης) which gives us our transliterated verb to mime – to imitate – you can easily hear the word mimic in mimetes.

The word originally referred to someone following someone else's lifestyle or teaching.

So here the Thessalonians are known for following in the footsteps of not only the Apostle Paul but of their Lord and Savior.ⁱ

A little later on in this paragraph, these same believers will be commended for becoming examples themselves.

In other words, they are following the example of Paul and Jesus – and they are about to be followed themselves by others.

And that principle is truer than we probably know!

You are probably following somebody right now . . . you look up to someone . . . you are challenged to imitate someone's demeanor or spiritual discipline . . . and the truth is, somebody else is probably following you!

Children certainly are.

Isn't it remarkable how a child not only learns how to talk but he learns the same accent of his mother and father. Isn't that scary? They repeat word phrases and physical gestures.

Here's a question worth asking yourself from time to time: if somebody is truly following you, where are you leading them? As one author wrote, "Are you a stepping stone for them, or a stumbling block in the path of life?"ⁱⁱ

And by the way, don't ever use the excuse that you just never had very many good examples and that's why you're not a good one.

These Thessalonians are living in the middle of a pagan culture.

They are surrounded by unbelieving co-workers, professors, salesman, tradesman, and neighbors . . .

and they are committed to following the example of Paul – who many have never been around personally – and they are committed to following the example of Jesus – who none of them have ever seen.

And yet they are known for their passionate, diligent mimicking of these faithful role-models.

So who is your role model? Who are *you* following?

That can be a bad thing, by the way . . . and it can be a good thing, too . . . it all depends on who you are following.

And it is true not only of individual Christians but churches.

Churches tend to follow churches. Ideas and trends and methods are copied and reproduced. I get magazines even though I don't subscribe to them of what churches are doing; what kinds of buildings churches are building; what kinds of audio and light systems churches use; what kinds of ministries churches are accomplishing. A lot of the ideas are shallow or misguided, but some are worthy of imitation.

In fact, in 9 days we are about to have hundreds of pastors descend on this campus for a three-day conference for church leaders. We've planned 40 workshops on so many crucial issues facing the church – why? Because the New Testament communicates this pattern; pastors mentor other pastors (like Paul to Timothy and Titus); churches model ministry for other churches – like the church in Thessalonica.

This is only our second year for hosting this pastor's conference and the growth over last year's first effort has been exciting to see. We have pastors and church leaders coming from 25 different States and several different countries including Africa, South America, and China.

Listen, it is nothing more than the responsibility of not only the believer to be an example but the local church.

It is nothing more than taking on the personal responsibility of leading in your life. The apostle Paul here doesn't say, "I hear you are imitating Jesus and me. . . you need to knock that off . . . just imitate Jesus . . . just leave me out of it."

No, he actually encourages it.

In fact, in a letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, *Be imitators of me as I follow Christ (I Corinthians 11:1).*

Evidently following a faithful role-model is commanded – and it becomes a responsibility to not only follow a faithful role-model but to become one.

And if you do . . . and we do as a church, we become a little more like the local church in Thessalonica.

Here’s how we behave: we mimic faithful role-models; secondly, we should:

2. Model joyful responses.

Notice *verse 6 again; You also became imitators of us and of the Lord* – now follow this – *having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.*

That’s a phenomenal statement. The word for tribulation here is *thlipsis* (θλιψις) – and it can be translated intense “pressure”.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, even though the pressure was intense for them to disbelieve the gospel and reject Christianity, they believed it.

In fact, Paul uses a word here for *received* that could be translated *welcomed*. They *welcomed* the word; like you might welcome into your home a friend or family member whom you dearly love . . . c’mon in!

The Thessalonians were welcoming the word and effectively inviting the word into the home of their hearts.

Here’s how we behave – we put out the welcome mat for the word . . . we long for the word . . . we love the word . . . it has a standing invitation from our hearts to c’mon in.

And don’t miss this . . . their response was in the midst of intense pressure and *tribulation*.

But did you notice – their reception of the word produced joy, by means of the Holy Spirit.

So they evidently welcomed the word, and they also welcomed the tribulation that came from obeying the word.

One of my commentaries mentioned the first century letter from Diognetus to a friend in which he describes these early Christians. I did a little digging and found the letter – it’s quite lengthy, so I edited it down – let me read some of it to you – it sounds like it could have been describing the Thessalonians . . . and as I read a couple of paragraphs from the letter I want us to ask the question – is this describing us?

He writes, “Christians are not distinguished from other men by country, language, nor by the customs

which they observe. They do not inhabit cities of their own, use a particular way of speaking, nor lead a life marked out by any curiosity. [Yet] . . . they display to us their wonderful and admittedly striking way of life.

They live . . . but they do so as those who are passing through. As citizens they participate . . . with others, yet they endure everything as if they were foreigners. They marry, like everyone else, and they have children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They share a common table, but not a common bed.

They love all men, but are condemned by all men; they are put to death . . . they are poor . . . they lack everything, but overflow in everything. They are dishonored . . . they are spoken ill of . . . they are reviled . . . they are insulted and repay the insult with respect; they do good, but are punished as evildoers; and when punished they rejoice as if they were raised from the dead.”

How’s the pressure out there? Oh, it’s intense . . . it never lets up . . . we never catch a break! But I have the word and the Holy Spirit uses it in my life and heart to produce peace and comfort and joy.

And now look what happens – notice *verse 7 – so that* – in other words, here’s the practical application of the word and the work of the Holy Spirit in your lives – *so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia (that’s northern Greece) and in Achaia (all the way down to the southern province of Greece).*

You became an example to this nation.

That word Paul uses, for example, is the *tupos* (τυπος) – from which we get our word, type. The word originally referred to the mark left by the blow of a hammer or the marking of a die as in the making of a coin so that it ended up with an impression on the face of it.^{iv}

When Paul says to the Thessalonians here – and remember, he doesn’t say this of any other New Testament church – when he says to them here that they *became an example* – he’s effectively saying, you are making an impression on all the other believers in this part of the world.

That does not mean they were perfect . . . no church is . . . but they were given by Paul as a pattern worth following; they were an impression worth repeating.

They were simple people . . . yet profoundly influential throughout all of Greece.

Their responses to the word and tribulation were giving them a hearing like never before.

Earl Palmer, an author, and former pastor wrote this. When California's Milpitas High School orchestra attempts Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the result is rather appalling. He wrote, "I wouldn't be surprised if the performance made old Ludwig roll over in his grave . . . you might ask: 'Why bother? Why inflict on those poor kids and their parents the terrible burden of trying to render what the immortal Beethoven had in mind? Not even a great symphony orchestra can attain that perfection.' My answer is this: the Milpitas High School orchestra will give some people in the audience their only encounter with Beethoven's great Ninth Symphony. Far from perfection, it is nevertheless the only way they will ever hear Beethoven's message."^v

Frankly, I think the Thessalonians would be surprised 20 centuries later to discover that churches would be studying their performance. They would have thrown up their hands and said, "Oh, no . . . don't listen too closely . . . we're far from perfect . . . we miss all kinds of notes".

No Christian or church gets it perfectly right . . . but God effectively reminds us that He has chosen to use us to allow those in *our* audience – to have perhaps the only opportunity they will ever have to hear the music of the Bible's message.

Here's how we behave:

- We mimic faithful role-models;
- We model joyful responses;

And thirdly, Paul writes that we:

3. Motivate spiritual reformation.

In fact, he plays on this musical metaphor – notice *verse 8*. ***For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth.***

The words he uses – *to sound forth* – can be a reference to the playing of a trumpet. It has the idea of a trumpeter playing and the sound of it echoing all around.^{vi}

The message of the Thessalonians was echoing out . . . obviously through word of mouth . . . and in letters . . . but their ministry and their message was spreading outward.

It motivated the believers especially and it no doubt mystified the unbelievers – as Diognetus implies of these early Christians.

And here is what was incredibly motivating – notice *verse 9*, ***For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.***

You turned from dead gods to serve a live God; You turned from false gods to serve the true God.

Everybody's talking about it . . . and the word is spreading.

Listen, a church that motivates and encourages and facilitates the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing genuine reformation is a church that is spreading the message of the gospel of a true and living God; a body of believers who get excited about the spreading of the gospel, right?

By any means and by any method!

I called one of my staff pastors yesterday and asked him for some data on our new website. We have a way to sound the trumpet that Thessalonica didn't have – I wondered if we were taking advantage of it.

If you haven't seen the new website, go to colonial.org.

Over the past 30 days, our sermons that are now video live-streamed and archived on that website – in just the past 30 days, people have gone online and watched from every state except North Dakota. I'm not sure what's going on in North Dakota, but every other state was represented by several thousand visitors.

And get this – in the last 30 days, people have also watched from 66 different countries.

Countries – let me race through several of them:

- Canada
- India
- Thailand
- The Philippines
- South Africa
- Colombia
- Brazil
- Switzerland
- Australia
- Panama
- Chile
- Israel
- Kosovo
- Argentina

- Germany
- Ecuador
- Guam
- Liberia
- Romania
- Singapore
- Bolivia
- Costa Rica
- Indonesia
- Italy
- Kenya
- Cambodia
- Nigeria
- Russia
- Taiwan
- Austria
- Bangladesh
- Bermuda
- Denmark
- Ghana
- Honduras
- Iran
- Iceland
- Japan
- South Korea
- Latvia
- Morocco
- Malaysia
- Netherlands
- Norway
- New Zealand
- Peru
- Poland
- Puerto Rico
- El Salvador
- Turkey
- Trinidad
- Venezuela
- Zambia
- Spain
- France
- And China

So how are we doing?

We hope and pray that these people who encounter us find a clear testimony that we believe the gospel – that we have turned from the idols of our world to follow and serve the true and living God.

The believers will be motivated to press on . . . the unbelievers will be mystified at the change in us.

And listen, no matter where you are in the world, the number one idol in any culture and every language is the idol of self – the idol of this body.

Every idol is really nothing more than a reflection of our own self-worship.

Our bodies, our desires, our pleasures, our successes, our health, our anti-aging processes . . . these have taken the world by storm and the fallen men and women focus all their attention on themselves;

- how to dress the body;
- how to fulfill the pleasures of the body;
- how to improve the body;
- how to pamper your body.

Listen, compared to the world getting out its message of other gods – and idols of sexual pleasure and greed and entertainment and possessions, we’re not even in the same ballpark.

As excited as I am about the data from our new website and the new methods of live video sermons and sermon archives, it can’t compare to the juggernaut of the world’s communication and obsession with spreading their empty and futile and evil and dead-end and short-lived idolatries.

Let me give you one example of the world’s worship of the body.

I came across this article from the New York Times – it talked about the quote “missionaries” who are intent on changing the world. This is their language, by the way. Women gathered in Madrid for their biennial Cosmic Conference to promote the values of the best-selling magazine in America – Cosmopolitan. According to this article, these – quote – “cosmo missionaries” are intent on spreading the good news of Cosmo. They strive to offer advice to women around the world on matters of beauty, relationships, success and especially sex[ual pleasure]. Its cover rarely fails to feature at least one bold, all-caps rendering of the word – s-e-x. Even the New York Times admitted, and I quote, “the repetition can be a little numbing, but it may help explain how Cosmo has morphed into a global enterprise. Listen to this – Through 64 international editions, the magazine now spreads sex stories to 100 million teens and young women – about the size of what would be the world’s 12th largest country. The magazine sells in over 100 nations – even where any discussion of sexual pleasure is taboo. The

editor of the magazine recently admitted that people might object to Cosmo's obsession with sexual topics, but she's unashamedly proud of how that focus sets the magazine apart from her competitors. She said in an interview, "Every Cosmo reader expects to have herself and her pleasures taken care of . . . because that's what [they] deserve."^{vii}

And the church worthy of being imitated becomes a megaphone – a trumpet – calling out to the world, "You are following the wrong gods . . . you're worshipping a dead end; you're obsessed with a decaying body; you're bowing before idols that will betray you and leave you empty . . . oh, look at the Thessalonians . . . they've turned from the idols of self and worship the true and living God.

I'll never forget a few years ago walking into the side door of the church, just over by the bookstore. It was a normal weekday and as soon as I walked in, one of our support staff members walked toward me accompanied by a young gentleman. He said to me, "Stephen I met this man a few minutes ago . . . he'd like to talk to you." I said, "Sure . . . what can I do for you?" He looked at me with total sincerity and said, "I'm a little embarrassed to admit this, but I've never been inside a church building before. I've never attended a church service either. I don't know what you guys believe – I don't know if you're a pastor or a priest or what you are." And then he puts his hand over his heart and said to me, "I just thought I'd start looking around in places like these because . . . and he patted his chest . . . I'm just missing something in here . . . and I don't know what it is . . . and I'm wondering if you might know."

I said, "I'm pretty sure I know."

Before the morning was over, he had turned from his idols and had given his life to the true and living God.

A spiritual reformation was now underway.

The Thessalonians were obsessed too . . . they were equally passionate about getting out the message of the transforming, cleansing, gospel of Christ.

And by the way – would you notice that they were actually waiting for something – or Someone?

Notice *verse 9*. The latter part – ***how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.***

Waiting for His Son from heaven – in their past lives all they cared about was someone waiting on them – now they are serving and waiting on one another and ultimately waiting on Jesus Christ.

- Serving and waiting.
- Getting the message out and at the same time waiting for the appearing of our Messiah.

It's really not that complicated – here's how we behave:

- Mimic the right lifestyles;
- Model the right responses;
- Motivate in others a spiritual reformation – coming to Christ; living for Christ and waiting for Christ to return for His church.

It struck me as I studied this passage, we are effectively waiting for the sound of our trumpeting of the gospel, to be replaced with the sound of the trumpet signaling His return for the church.

And until we hear His trumpet, we keep playing ours.

And when we hear His, we'll gladly lay ours down – but in the meantime we serve and wait and long for that day to come.

In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians and at this same verse, Sam Gordon told the story of a tourist who was exploring the sites of Lake Como in northern Italy.

He arrived at the beautiful estate and castle of the Villa Asconiti. Even though it wasn't open for tourists at the time, he pushed open the ornamental iron gate and ventured inside. Everything was incredibly beautiful – flowers blooming in a rainbow of extravagant color; the flower beds and shrubbery green and manicured to precision.

He noticed over at one side of the castle, a gardener on his hands and knees, clipping by hand the blades of grass in one section of the lawn.

He walked over and said, "I hope you don't mind a visitor having a look at your gardens?" The gardener replied, "You're more than welcome . . . I'm glad to have a guest."

The visitor continued touring the expansive grounds and then returned to ask the gardener, "Is the owner here today?" "I'm afraid not," the gardener replied – "he's away."

"Well, when was the last time you saw him?" The gardener laughed and said, "Almost twelve years ago." "Twelve years? You mean this

enchanted place has been empty for twelve years?”
“That’s correct,” the gardener replied, matter of factly.

The inquisitive tourist asked, “Well, who tells you what to do?” The gardener explained that the owner had an agent in Milan who communicated with him.

“But do you ever see the owner personally?”

Still clipping, pruning and trimming every detail, the gardener answered, “Never . . . he just sends instructions through his agent.”

The tourist couldn’t believe his ears. “But . . . you have everything so pristinely beautiful . . . it’s beautiful . . . perfectly manicured . . . it looks like you’re expecting him tomorrow.”

The gardener straightened up and looked up at his guest and said with a smile, “Oh, no sir . . . not tomorrow . . . I expect him to come any time today.”^{viii}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/11/2015 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2015 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

i Sam Gordon, Hope and Glory: The Timeless Message of I & II Thessalonians (Ambassador International, 2005), p. 37

ii Ibid, p. 38

iii Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 587

iv Knute Larson, Holman New Testament Commentary: I & II Thessalonians; I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon (Holman, 2000), p. 9; Rienecker & Rogers, p. 587

v Rick Lawrence, Skin in the Game (Kregel, 2015), p. 135; citation: <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/july/7072715.html>

vi Rienecker & Rogers, p. 587

vii Edith Zimmerman, “99 Ways to be Naughty in Kazakhstan,” The New York Times (8-5-12)

viii Gordon, p. 56