

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
June 6, 2010

Visible to God

1 Thessalonians 1

Key verse: “You received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

Ravi Zacharias shares a story from a book by Marie Chapiro titled, *Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy*. The book chronicles the persecution and suffering of Yugoslavian Christians under a corrupt church hierarchy. This hypocrisy had left many Yugoslavians with a very negative view of Christianity:

“One day an evangelist by the name of Jakov arrived in a certain village. He commiserated with an elderly man named Cimmerman on the tragedies he had experienced and talked to him of the love of Christ. Cimmerman abruptly interrupted Jakov and told him that he wished to have nothing to do with Christianity. He reminded Jakov of the dreadful history of the church in his town, a history replete with plundering, exploiting, and indeed with killing innocent people.

“‘My own nephew was killed by them,’ he said and angrily rebuffed any effort on Jakov’s part to talk about Christ. ‘They wear those elaborate coats and crosses,’ he said, ‘signifying a heavenly commission, but their evil designs and lives I cannot ignore.’

“Jakov, looking for an occasion to get Cimmerman to change his line of thinking, said, ‘Cimmerman, can I ask you a question? Suppose I were to steal your coat, put it on, and break into a bank. Suppose further that the police sighted me running in the distance but could not catch up with me. One clue, however, put them onto your track: they recognize your coat. What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of breaking into the bank?

“‘I would deny it,’ said Cimmerman.

“‘Ah, but we saw your coat, they would say,’ retorted Jakov. This analogy quite annoyed Cimmerman, who ordered Jakov to leave his home.

“Jakov continued to return to the village periodically just to befriend Cimmerman, encourage him, and share the love of Christ with him. Finally one day Cimmerman asked, ‘How does one become a Christian?’ Jakov taught him the simple steps of repentance for sin and of trust in the work of Jesus Christ and gently pointed him to the Shepherd of his soul. Cimmerman bent his knee on the soil with his head bowed and surrendered his life to Christ. As he rose to his feet, wiping his tears, he

embraced Jakov and said, ‘Thank you for being in my life.’ And then he pointed to the heavens and whispered, ‘You wear His coat very well.’” (Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?*)

I don’t know about you, but that true story challenges me to ask of myself: *Are you wearing His coat well?* Of course, none of us live perfect lives. But it is fair to say that a watching world ought to be able to look at those of us who bear the name Christian and see something different, better, and more Christ-like.

The apostle Paul took the Gospel of Christ to Thessalonica in a short but fruitful mission. It ended abruptly when Paul and his co-workers were confronted by an angry mob (Acts 17:1-10). Short though it was, Paul’s mission to Thessalonica birthed a church that became a strong, vibrant fellowship of believers.

In 1 Thessalonians 1, Paul describes the Thessalonian Christians as people who, though imperfect, were known for their changed lives: “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and 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—Jesus, who rescues from the wrath that is coming” (vv. 6-10).

The Gospel of Christ has the power to change lives. That is exactly what happened in Thessalonica. The changed lives of those believers became a powerful witness to the watching world. Still today, the world is weary of nominal, hypocritical Christianity. But our world can be changed by the witness of *authentic* Christian living.

In this passage, one verse in particular sums up the authentic Christian witness of the Thessalonian believers. In verse 3, Paul speaks of their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.” You may recognize the three enduring Christian virtues of 1 Corinthians 13:13: *faith, hope, and love*.

Here Paul fleshes them out more fully. He recognizes in the Thessalonian believers these three components of an authentic Christian life:

1. Work that is inspired by faith. This is a powerful combo. As James tells us, “Faith without works is dead.” And Galatians makes the important point that our good works do not save us—faith in Christ alone does that.

But when a person’s life is transformed by the saving grace of Christ, that person’s faith is authenticated by the good works he does for Christ. Authentic faith is always demonstrated by our actions.

2. Labor that is motivated by love. These Thessalonian believers had fallen in love with the Lord Jesus Christ. So, the work they did for Him was not a heavy burden they had to carry. It was truly a “labor of love.”

3. Steadfastness (or endurance) that is inspired by hope. The Thessalonian believers, even though they were being persecuted for their faith, were faithful to Christ. Their faithful endurance came, in large part, from their conviction that this short earthly life is not all there is. They believed in the promised return of Christ, and this hope inspired them to faithful endurance.

William Barclay wrote of this Christian hope: “A man can endure anything so long as he has hope, for then he is walking, not to the night but to the dawn.” (*The Daily Study Bible Series*)

How about you? Your world is watching to see if your faith in Christ is more than just words. Your world is watching to see a faith that is real. *Are you wearing His coat well?*

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