

While I'm Waiting
(Week 1)
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a
"How Can I know if it's Real"

Introduction

There are lots of religious people out there, and amongst them, plenty of false teachers to go around. The doctrines we hear are as diverse as snowflakes, it seems. There are many who "claim" to be Christian, but their actions prove those claims to be false. So, just how can you tell if someone is "real" or not? This would seem to me to be an important question, as we live in these perilous times. After all, we are commanded in Scripture to avoid that which is false. So, wouldn't it be important to separate truth from falsehood in order to be able to avoid those who would lead us astray? I believe so. And so did the Apostles of Christ.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out in the world. **1 John 4:1**

And also:

Now I urge you brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who create divisions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned. Avoid them, because such people do not serve our LORD Christ but their own appetites. They deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting with smooth talk and flattering words.

Romans 16:17-18

We are to not only to be on guard against false doctrine, but also those who promote such doctrine. So, how are we to know, not only what is real, but WHO is real? *The Bible* gives us insight that will allow us to discern the genuine from the false. You can always spot a true believer. That is... if you know what to look for!

The Apostle Paul dearly loved the church at Thessalonica, even though he had only been able to stay with them for a very short while, before he was run out of town. You see, Paul had long desired to preach the gospel throughout the Asian province of Rome, but The Holy Spirit had forbade him to do so. Instead, Paul was directed to take the gospel to the province of Macedonia (**Acts 16**).

Being ever the obedient servant, Paul and his three close companions, Luke, Timothy, and Silas, immediately embarked upon their journey to Macedonia. The first stop was the city of Philippi, a rather large and influential city. But there was no large Jewish presence in Philippi, so Paul was unable to go and preach in the local synagogue as was his custom. He therefore took his message to the streets. His first convert there was a woman named Lydia, and she allowed Paul and his companions to set up shop in her home.

Over the course of time, there was a young woman, who was demon possessed, that began to follow Paul around the city. She was a slave girl, and her owners used her to make money by marketing her as a psychic of sorts. When Paul cast out her demons, her handlers were furious, because she became worthless to them in their cruel manipulation of her bondage for their own personal gain. These wicked men stirred up a riot against Paul, resulting in both Silas and Paul being beaten and thrown into prison.

God miraculously rescued Paul and Silas by a mighty earthquake as the two men sang praises in their cell! The working of God there was so powerful that the jailer who had charge over them, converted to Christianity and was saved, along with his entire household. Thus the church Philippi was begun. The city officials asked Paul to leave their city, and Paul, Timothy, and Silas (possibly leaving Luke behind in Philippi) all journeyed some 100 miles to the capital city of the province, Thessalonica.

Upon their arrival, Paul went to the synagogue there and began to teach. After teaching in the synagogue for three weeks, people began surrendering their lives to Christ as a result. As more and more prominent citizens of means, mainly God-fearing Greeks, began to respond to Paul's message of grace and the Messiah crucified for sin, the Jews became jealous and stirred up a mob against Paul.

Jason, a Jewish man and possibly a relative of Paul who lived there, was arrested, because he had welcomed Paul's company into his home. The city officials made Jason put up security that Paul and his companions would not cause any more trouble in the city. Knowing that Jason would be held personally liable, if another mob rose up against them, Paul and his friends left the city, and yet another fledgling church was begun.

Shortly after his departure, Paul, concerned for the welfare of this small church, wrote them two letters. We know these epistles today as *1 & 2 Thessalonians*. Paul wanted to be sure that this church would endure, as it anxiously awaited the second coming of Jesus Christ amid the intense persecution by the Jews. He did not want them to lose heart. So, he wrote to encourage them to stand fast in the hope that they shared in the promises of God. He wanted them to continue to serve, while they were patiently waiting for The LORD'S coming. As a result of these writings, the two Thessalonian letters are an incredible resource for the new Christian, for they were originally composed for the instruction of a group of new Believers!

In the first few lines of Paul's greeting to the young church, he tells them of his assurance that they are a genuinely saved people. He uses a description for them that is not one of his usual sayings. He tells them that he and his companions, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, know that the church of Thessalonica is "in God The Father and in The LORD Jesus Christ" (God and The LORD Jesus Christ are one, so to be in Christ is to also be in The God The Father). In short, he and his companions are fully convinced that the converts in Thessalonica are the genuine article. And, as such, he begins to list how he can tell their salvation is assured. He starts by giving three things that all true believers have in common. These are Faith, Hope, and Love. We would do well to learn to recognize these attributes as well, when we are trying to discern if someone truly is a follower of Jesus Christ.

Faith (vs. 3a)

We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith...

1 Thessalonians 1:3a

Now, if I didn't know better, I would think that this was James writing this instead of Paul! After all, Paul was the one who usually got falsely accused of preaching faith alone without works.

For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift — not from works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Exactly what does Paul mean, when he tells the Thessalonian church that he can tell that they are genuine believers because of their "work produced by faith"? Simply this; You are not **saved** by works, but by faith, but if you truly have saving faith, then your faith causes you to work! Confusing? It really shouldn't be. You see, later on in this chapter Paul will describe how the church at Thessalonica had turned away from serving idols and had served the One True God instead (vs. 9). Therefore, because they had believed, they had changed the way that they lived. This is an example of true faith.

Many people these days claim that they believe in Christ, but they still continue in their old, worldly ways. This is NOT saving faith. To believe in Christ is to follow Christ. This is what had happened in Thessalonica. They didn't just offer 14 carat gold lip-service to Christ, they put their "money where their mouth is". They served Christ. Do you want to know how to tell if someone has truly been born again? Just look and see if they have turned away from their old way of life to follow Jesus. If a person hasn't been changed, then they haven't been born again by The Spirit of God. Paul could tell that God had chosen the Thessalonian believers, and that The Spirit of God had come to Thessalonica in power (**vs. 4-5**), because he could see the evidence in the lives of those within the church. Their faith had changed them. It was a faith that produced works.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, stay warm, and well fed,' but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it? In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without works and I will show you faith by my works. You believe that God is One. Good! Even the demons believe — and they shudder. Senseless person! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless? **James 2:14-20**

Pretty much says it all does it not? If you want to be able to recognize a true believer, just see if their professed faith has changed the way that they live. Then you'll be able to see whether or not they are truly in God The Father and The LORD Jesus Christ.

Hope (vs. 3c)

...your endurance inspired by hope in our LORD Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 1:3c

I am taking these out of order here for a reason (trust me there is a method to the madness). The third thing that Paul lists that proves that The Spirit of God had come to the Thessalonian Church in power, was their "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ". You see, even after Paul had left the city, the Jews there continued to harass the new believers. They would point out to them that those who had stirred them up had abandoned them, so why continue in this doctrine and face hardship. Why not turn their backs on this new found faith and be once more accepted within the community?

The Church of Thessalonica had no intentions of abandoning their faith. They would face whatever persecution came their way, but they would not turn away from The Savior Who died to save them. Why? Because genuine faith produces genuine hope, that's why. As we have discussed many times in this church, the Greek word for "hope" in *The New Testament* is "elpis". And it doesn't really speak of what we, in our culture, define as hope. Hope to us means more about taking a chance on something, than being assured of it. We roll the dice and "hope" that they come up in our favor. But Biblical "elpis" hope speaks of the confident assurance that every believer has when it comes to the promises of God.

The Church at Thessalonica was enduring persecution, because they were thoroughly convinced that God would do exactly what He had promised to do. Christ will one day return, and He will in fact bring His reward to those who remain faithful to Him. As Jesus said when speaking of the end times:

Because lawlessness will multiply, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. **Matthew 24:12-13**

You see, true hope, the "elpis hope" that comes by the power of The Spirit of God, produces endurance among the believer. We don't quit on Jesus when hard times come. We endure to the end, which is proof that we have been truly saved. All throughout the Scriptures, God would lead those whom He had chosen into the wilderness to be tested, in order to prove whether their faith was genuine. Some passed the test, while others did not. But one thing is for certain. Those who have been truly chosen will endure.

Paul faced persecution everywhere he preached, but nothing could stop him from preaching. The church at Thessalonica had faced persecution as well, but the members there proved themselves to be faithful, with an enduring hope in the promises of God. The *elpis* of the believer allows him to remain faithful while they await the promises of God to be fulfilled. Do you want to know how to tell if someone's faith is genuine or not? Look to see if they continue to follow Christ in good times and in bad, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. That kind of sounded like marriage vows didn't it? Now you know why we are called "The Bride of Christ". Look to the endurance of the believer, then you will know for certain whether they be genuine or not.

Love (vs. 3b)

...your labor motivated by love...

1 Thessalonians 1:3b

Now, the reason I chose to cover this one last is because in **1 Corinthians 13**, Paul says that this one is the greatest.

Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love — but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

Paul and his traveling companions knew that the Holy Spirit of God had indeed come to the Thessalonian church in power, because they had love (agape). And just as true faith produces good works, so does agape. The Thessalonians didn't just claim to love, they loved in action. There are three "loves" that every believer must possess in order to be genuine. A love for Christ, love for other Believers, and a love for the lost. To love God is to long for others to know Him, and also, to love those whom God has chosen. There is no such thing as a "hermit Christian". If someone doesn't love those whom God loves, then they do not truly love God. And he who does not love God, doesn't belong to God.

Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old command that you have had from the beginning. The old command is the word you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. The one who says he is in the light but hates his brother or sister is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother or sister remains in light, and there is no cause for stumbling with him. But the one who hates his brother or sister is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and doesn't know where he's going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

1 John 2:7-11

So how can we know if someone has truly been born again by The Spirit of God? You will be able to tell by the way that they love. And just as faith without works is dead, love without action is equally dead. To love means to serve. To serve God and to serve one another. And that was exactly what was happening in Thessalonica, and Paul recognized it as coming from the power of The Holy Spirit.

How do you love today? Do the needs of those around you stir your heart to action? Or do you dismiss them as someone else's problem? The love of Christ compels us to act. And that is how you will know who is genuine in the faith.

So these three remain, faith hope and love — but the greatest of these... is love!

By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:35

If someone were to examine your life closely this morning, would they know for certain that the Holy Spirit had come upon you in power? Would they know that you were a true believer? I pray that this be the case for us all.

And let ALL of God's chosen people say... **TRUTH!!!**