

## 1 Thessalonians 2:10-16 – Lives worthy of God 14 Feb 21 KATE WALL

One of my proudest days in primary school came in grade two, and it was the day I finally got an award at the school assembly. Now my primary school was mad about awards; they loved to celebrate achievement - any achievement - probably because the school so remote that we were considered a little behind everyone else. But getting an award at assembly was what we kids lived for; it was the highest honour. To know that we were worthy of our teachers' praise for our underwater dioramas, or our amazing kazoo skills, or ability to spell something - anything - correctly. We lived for those awards. To know that we were worthy.

By the time grade two hit, I'd gone my whole school career without one award. And as the year dragged on, I watched my classmates get awards - some of them more than once - at assembly after assembly. Then right at the end of term four, just when I'd given up hope, my turn came. My name was called and I went to the front, bursting with pride, finally worthy of my teacher's praise and my classmates' adoration. Standing in front of the school, clutching that flimsy bit of red paper, it felt like the greatest moment of my life. Until I read what the award was for. Cutting grass for the class guinea pig. I kid you not. It was the one job everyone had to do anyway!

Now I doubt I had an existential crisis over that award - but it's interesting isn't that we all want to be worthy. No matter who we are, how old we are, no matter how tough we portray ourselves, we want to be worthy, to know we're enough. It's just that as we grow, whose eyes we want to be seen as worthy in, changes.

As Christians, if we're serious about our faith, we want to live lives worthy of God. Not because we're inherently praiseworthy or good, but because he's been so, so good to us. We owe everything to him. But what does a life worthy of God look like? It's a concept that crops up a few times in the New Testament, and here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul urges believers to do just that- to live lives worthy of God. But what does that mean?

Three themes come up in our passage this morning that help give us an idea of what a life worthy of God might look like. Firstly...

### **A life worthy of God is a life of example**

Paul's time with the Thessalonians was brief – in fact, if we look back to Acts 17, he was only in the city for three weeks before riots and false charges forced him & his companions to leave. His time with the new believers was only very short, yet it was a time of sharing not just the gospel but their lives as well (v8).

Now, there's nowhere to hide when you live day to day with people. Share-houses are great examples of this. The first few days you're together, you tip toe around each other, doing all your chores and being painfully polite. But as time goes on, mess starts to cascade out of people's rooms, dirty dishes pile up on every surface in the kitchen - and beyond, and irritations with one another build as true personalities come out. See, we can only put on a front for so long when we live day to day with people; true colours come out sooner or later. And the Thessalonian believers would have seen who Paul, Silas and Timothy truly were, what made them tick, as they shared lives for three weeks.

Now, it was quite common in Paul's day for religious charlatans to go from town to town, delivering their slick messages to the crowds, with the intention only of lining their pockets, boosting their egos and living the high life along the way. In Paul's absence, his opposition in Thessalonica had started attacking him and his companions, accusing him of being just like all the other frauds who talked a big talk but were motivated purely by greed and self-interest.

And it's very shrewd really. One of the best ways of undermining someone's message is to undermine their character; to cast doubts on their motives or behaviour. One of the best ways of undermining our own message is via our character or behaviour. We've all seen examples of the fall-out when Christian leaders are found guilty of serious sins. There's been another high-profile case of that overseas just this week. Serious damage is done, not just to the individuals affected, but to the faith as well, when Christians fall. It applies no matter who we are, famous or not.

After all, if people don't practice what they preach, why would you believe them? If we proclaim the gospel but are intent on living like the world, how true, how believable, how powerful could that gospel really be?

And so Paul's opponents have set about throwing mud at Paul, hoping some would stick.

Much of the chapter to this point is Paul's defence against this slander and he continues in v10, "you are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the absolute integrity with which he and his companions behaved amongst them.

- Their conduct was holy – it was devout and pleasing to God.
- Their conduct was righteous – it was moral and just. The way they behaved toward the Thessalonians was above reproach.
- Their behaviour was blameless – nothing they did could tarnish their reputation.

The accusations against them were baseless. And the Thessalonian church knew it – *you are witnesses*, Paul says. You saw how we behaved, day in, day out; you saw the absolute integrity of our lives. He appeals to their witness, but also appeals to God as witness, for the second time in the chapter.

There's no higher appeal, is there? God alone can test the heart (v4). Paul didn't operate for the approval of men, but lived to please God, as we saw in v4. He strived to live a life worthy of God, to gain God's approval, to do and say nothing that would bring dishonour to God or discredit the gospel.

- And the example he set was no act. He himself was a man who had been transformed by the gospel, from someone persecuting the church to now being persecuted for the sake of the gospel. A man who could honestly profess, "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...that I may gain Christ and be found in him." Paul was a man transformed by the gospel; his life and example were genuine.
- Yet he also knew how important his example was for the credibility of the gospel he proclaimed. He wanted nothing he did to hinder the gospel [1 Cor 9:12]. So when his opponents at Thessalonica threw mud, none stuck. One commentator notes: "The lives of the messengers had demonstrated that they not only believed the gospel but also lived it. They were deeply aware of the importance of living lives that commended the gospel if their preaching was to have abiding results... *Paul and his evangelistic party were scrutinized, examined, and cross-examined, and their testimony held good.*"
- And Paul knew how important his example was for the discipling of the brand-new believers at Thessalonica – and for believers everywhere. In chapter 1, he says you know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord... and just as Paul strived to live a life worthy of God, he encouraged and urged the Thessalonians to do the same. And as they did just that, they *became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia*.

See, the Christian life is a communal life, and it's a life of imitation. It's a life of following examples and being examples, on so many different levels.

- The ultimate example we are to follow is our Lord's: Ephesians 5:1 *follow God's example...and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.*
- But we follow the example of mature believers also: in 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says, *follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*
- We're to set an example for other believers: 1 Timothy 4:12 *don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.* What a challenge!
- We're to set an example for non-believers: 1 Peter 2:12 *live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

A life worthy of God is a life of example. We're to be as Paul, examples of lives transformed by the gospel, examples that uphold the credibility of the gospel, and living lives that set an example for those around us, both within the church and outside it.

>> What kind of example do we set for others, not just on Sunday morning but in every sphere of our lives? >> Does our example promote the gospel, or hinder it? >> Does our example build up the faith of others, or is it a stumbling block? >> And if the things that we do in private – those things that only God sees – were made known, would our public example still be credible?

### **A life worthy of God is a life transformed by the Word**

*V13: We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*

In Acts 17, we read how Paul had preached to the crowds in the synagogue, explaining how Scripture pointed to a Messiah who would suffer, die and rise again, and how this was fulfilled in Jesus. And a number of Jews and Gentiles believed.

And it's remarkable, isn't it, that in an age of slick religious charlatans, in a culture which valued clever philosophes and fancy rhetoric, that the message of a crucified Messiah, presented in Paul's humble manner, gained any traction with anyone at all.

Yet the believers recognised Paul's words as something far greater than a man's concoction; they were God's words. It was gospel, the power of God unto salvation, which as we saw in ch. 1, came to them "not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction".

And, Paul says, this same Word is *now at work in you who believe*. God's Word is living and active.

God's Word transforms. It changes lives in a way no human message possibly can.

And indeed, the Thessalonian believers' lives had been transformed. They not only heard and understood the Word on an intellectual level, but had welcomed it into their lives, allowing it to filter down into their hearts and transform them. They'd gone from trusting in idols to trusting in the true and living God. They'd become a people shaped by faith, love and hope in Jesus Christ [1:3]. They'd become people who were examples to believers throughout the region [1:7]. The Word was transforming them, enabling them to live lives worthy of God.

John Piper writes, "God calls us to study and memorise and soak in his word until it saturates to the centre of our being." Being transformed by the Word is a lifelong process, but it's a process that requires our participation. To open the Word, study it, soak in it.

How can we expect to live lives worthy of God if our souls are parched of his Word?

### **A life worthy of God is a life laid down**

The Word at work in the Thessalonians was evidenced not only in transformed lives, but in their willingness to suffer for it.

*V14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.*

There are a few things to take note of here.

- Firstly, a life worthy of God is a life laid down to suffer. Just as the Judean churches suffered significant persecution, so too the Thessalonians, though so young in the faith, suffered similar opposition. And they imitated the Judean churches in the way they bore up under it. Though he doesn't say it here, in chapter 3, we see Paul's concern that these trials would unsettle the Thessalonians, that the tempter – Satan, who Paul sees as ultimately behind the persecution – would be successful in tempting them away from the faith. And in chapter 3, we can sense Paul's relief, having heard from Timothy that they stand firm.

A life worthy of God is not just one that bears up in the good times, but in the difficult times also. Suffering shouldn't surprise us. In fact, Jesus said we would suffer.

And the way we bear up under suffering is an incredible witness to our God and the gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It bears witness to our Saviour, who first suffered for us.

- Secondly, a life worthy of God is a life laid down for others. Specifically, that others may hear the good news of Jesus and be saved. Those who persecuted the churches, in v16, did so to keep the gospel from spreading; Paul says, "to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they might be saved." In the face of persecution, Paul's primary concern, the churches' primary concern, was not for their own wellbeing but to lead people to Jesus, that they might be saved.

Now, we can't move on before addressing the issue of the Jews at Paul raises here in v14-16. We know, of course, that both Jews and Gentiles persecuted the early church. Yet here, Paul focuses on the Jews and accuses them of five things: they killed Jesus, they killed the prophets, they drove us out – that is, Paul and his companions, they displease God, and they are hostile to all people.

With what appears to be quite a forceful attack, the question has to be raised – is Paul anti-Semitic? Is he hostile toward Jews? The answer is no.

Paul himself knew what it was to be fiercely Jewish and he knew what it was to persecute the church. But he also knew what it was to turn and receive the gospel. To come to saving faith in Jesus. To find true life and freedom in him.

We see in Romans that Paul has a deep love for the Jews and a desire for them also to turn and be saved. And I think what we see here is Paul's deep grief that some Jews – both his contemporaries and some in the past – have rejected God's word and rejected those who bore it, and in doing so, have brought judgement upon themselves.

The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, both Jew and Gentile (Rom 1:16). But as John 3 reminds us, whoever does not believe stands condemned already (3:18). We see Paul's grief for his countrymen who reject the gospel, persecute believers and stand under God's wrath.

- Thirdly, a life worthy is a life laid down for the God who calls us. Back up in v12, Paul writes, "live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." The reward for those who stand firm until the end is magnificent beyond our understanding: to live eternally in the presence of our God and King, where we shall share forever in his glory and the splendour of his reign.

This is our great hope, to which God has called us, sinners though we are. This is the hope that spurs us on. He has called us into his kingdom and glory, and in response to this incredible call, to the amazing grace and mercy of our God, we lay down claim to our own lives and instead seek to live lives worthy of him.

A life worthy of God is a life of example. A life transformed by God's Word. And a life laid down. May it be that we are people who live lives worthy of our great God, who has called us into his kingdom and glory.