

Evidence of Grace
Thessalonians 1:4-7

Our sermon text this morning will be First Thessalonians chapter 1, and we're looking this morning particularly at verses 4 to 7. First Thessalonians 1, verses 4 to 7. We'll read from the start of the chapter again, from verse 1 down to verse 7, just to get the context. Before the reading we'll pray. Please join me in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we pray that you would bless your word to us this morning. We pray that we would be given ears that hear, and eyes that see, and hearts that understand and obey your word. I ask that you would help me as I speak. I ask that you would help us all as we listen, that you may be glorified, that your word may be spoken clearly here this morning. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

First Thessalonians, chapter 1. As I said, the sermon text is verses 4 to 7. We'll read from verse 1. So First Thessalonians chapter 1, starting our reading at verse 1.

“¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

“² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Verse 4: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” Amen. May God bless His word.

It's very common for people who are in some way religious—and by “religious” I mean “Christian” religious, raised in a church, but not necessarily, let's say, regenerate, not necessarily born of the Spirit; they've been raised in a church, they attend a church, they may not necessarily disagree with anything they've heard or they've been taught—but it's not uncommon for people in that situation to say something along the lines of, “I *hope* that I'm saved. I hope that I'm looking forward to heaven. I hope that in the end, I'm found to be good enough”—I hope, I want, I wish.

And you might ask the question, “Do you think there is a way a person could know?” And you'll often get the reply, “No. How would a person know? How would a person know that God has saved them? How would a person know that they have the certainty of heaven? How would a person know any of these things?”

Well, look at what the Apostle Paul says there at verse 4. “For we know, brothers loved by God.” For we *know*, brothers loved by God. Or look at what he says to them concerning their reception of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy in the second half of verse 5: “You know—you *know* what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”

Paul is saying that he knows them, and he knows that they are the people of God. And he’s saying that they know him. They know him, himself, and Silvanus and Timothy. They know that those three men who brought the gospel to them are also the people of God.

The text before us says in two different places that it’s possible to know. It’s possible to know about the people whom you are preaching to, that they are the children of God; and it’s possible for the people who are being preached to to know that the person teaching them has been sent from God. You can actually know these things.

So it’s a good question to ask, Well, how do you get to the point that you know? How do you get to the point that you know? Is it simply knowledge? We know the times table. We know the alphabet. Depending on what our studies and qualifications are, we know a whole lot of different things. My qualifications are in dairy farming. I know a lot about cows. Whatever your qualification might be in, you might know quite a bit about the things in which you have studied. But I don’t think that’s how a person knows spiritual truth.

You can have the information. You can have the knowledge. Those children who have been raised in Christian families and in a church-going context do have a lot of knowledge. They’re familiar with the narrative of Scripture. They’re familiar with many of what you might call the high points of Scripture. They could basically lay out for you the history that Scripture gives us—God’s redeeming history. They know a lot of stuff, they have a lot of knowledge. But it’s not just having the simple knowledge, is it? There’s something that is lacking in many, many people who like to claim that they are Christians.

Our text this morning, looking at verses 4 to 7, I should tell you, in the original Greek, it’s basically right in the middle of a long and complicated sentence, which in our Bibles, if it were set out as one big sentence, would run from verse 2 down to verse 10. So what that immediately tells you is that, as it’s part of a long and complicated sentence, it should not be interpreted out of, or away from, the context in which it comes. Everything in it is a continuation of the thoughts that came before.

So, looking at verse 2—remember, verse 2 starts with the Apostle Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy giving thanks to God “always for all of you, constantly.” He’s thankful. He’s giving thanks. Paul I assume is the author of the letter—I mean, the title of it is, “The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.” Paul I assume is the author of the letter, but always remember, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy” are the names at the head of the letter. “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly.”

So verse 4 is continuing the theme of thanksgiving. He's thankful to God for them, remembering them in their prayers. He's thankful to God concerning their faith, their love, and their hope. And he's thankful to God that he *knows* that they are his brothers in Christ, that they are loved by God, and they are chosen. These are things that he is giving thanks for. He's continuing to thank. This knowing is a remembering before God. For we know, for we remember before God. We know.

Then he goes on to speak of how he knows what he knows. He knows that they are brothers—"brothers loved by God." Brothers loved by God. I can tell you that according to all the evidence that we have from the literature of the day outside of Scripture, in the Roman Empire at that time, you didn't call someone a brother unless they were a brother. You didn't call someone family unless they were family.

One of the things that revolted many Romans, especially the wealthy or more influential and powerful Romans, one of the things that revolted them about this new Christian religion that was, in their minds, invading their empire, is that the Christians did not make the class distinctions that they expected them to make. They expected people to separate according to nation, according to rank, according to wealth.

To the Roman, to hear that both a slave owner and that owner's slave could be Christians, and when in church and in worship they called one another "brother," to the Roman, that's revolting. Remember we read a few weeks back in Acts chapter 17, that the complaint of the people concerning the preaching of the gospel is that they were turning the world upside down. Well, that's one of the ways in which they were turning the world upside down—in saying that when people walk into a church, those people whose lives are in Christ are brothers, exclusive of class, exclusive of race, exclusive even of their actual gender.

Ladies, you fit in the overall term of brothers—"brethren." The importance of that is that, as sons of God, you have an inheritance from God. Daughters were married off to another family, often to the advantage of their father who was giving them away. He was confirming a business deal. He was confirming his claim on land. There were many reasons for handing a daughter off in marriage in the ancient times, and they were usually quite practical. And once you were gone, you didn't have a claim on your father's property. But to be a son of God is to be one for whom God has made provision. So though you are ladies, Paul calls all Christians "brothers."

In Romans chapter 8 and verse 29, which I read to us at the very start of the service, it says that Jesus is to be the firstborn among many brothers—many brothers. Both men, women, boy, girl, they become brothers. Christ is our Lord. We are slaves of Christ. Christ is also our friend. He is a holder of us. We are His purchased property. Okay, we are His purchased property. But He is our friend—we found that one in the book of John—and He is our brother. So Paul writes to these Thessalonians and calls them brothers.

“We know, brothers, that you are loved by God.” The next part of verse 4. “We know, brothers loved by God.” Once again, we look at this concept of being loved by God. It’s very popular in many Christian circles to talk about God’s universal love for all of humanity. I’ve heard it said, “God loves everyone just exactly the same. God’s love for everybody is universal and indiscriminate.” Is that true? Let’s look at some Scripture. I think that’s not true.

I want you to turn to the book of Ephesians chapter 5. We’ll read verses 1 and 2, and then we’ll drop down to verse 25. Ephesians 5, verse 1: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love,”—now hear this—“as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Paul then goes on to speak of human relationships concerning sexuality, relationships concerning our relationship to the world, relationships concerning wives and husbands. Drop down to verse 22—Ephesians 5:22. “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

Hear this—here’s what I want us to hear: “²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” Whom did Christ give Himself up for? The church. There was someone, or some people, in His mind as He gave Himself up, or gave Himself over to crucifixion.

Let me sort of turn it around and try and explain to you what I’m meaning. You young fellows, young blokes, here’s what your wife does not want you to hear—your wife or your prospective future wife—here’s what she does not want to hear: “Darling, I want you to know that I love you just as much as I love every other single person in the world, that you are precious to me because every other single person in the world is precious to me. And there is absolutely nothing that I do for you that I would not do for any other single person in the world.”

That’s not romantic. That’s not what she wants to hear. She wants to know that she is your one true love. She wants to know that the things that you want to do for her and the things that you want to do with her, you don’t want to do with every other person in the world. When you get married, you don’t marry every woman in the world, you marry one. You don’t make promises to every person in the world, you make promises to one. It’s a specific thing. It’s a particular thing.

Drop down to verse 32 of Ephesians 5—Paul, having spoken more about the concept of husbands loving their wives: “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” “I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” What mystery? That mystery of marriage, that mystery of the human relationship.

What's Paul saying? A marriage that is properly carried out in the presence of God, a marriage that is properly formed, celebrated, and lived—that marriage is revealing the mystery of Christ's love for His church. A marriage is exclusive.

Even within the marriage household, there is a marriage love that is exclusive. If the Lord blesses you with children, there are still things between the husband and his wife that the children are excluded from. A husband and a wife have a mutually exclusive love, one for another. And the Apostle Paul says this illustrates Christ's love for the church.

Turn back into the book of First Thessalonians chapter 1. You see what Paul's been saying when he says, "For we know, brothers loved by God"? I'm not actually denying that there is not a way in which we could say that God does have a general, benevolent love for all of humanity. Why else would He command us as Christians to do good works for all, that even our enemy is to be loved? We're to love our neighbor, we're to love our enemy. We're to do good wherever we find opportunity to do good. Obviously, God has a general and benevolent care for all of humanity. But that's not the same as giving up your only son for somebody's eternal life. That's an exclusive love. That's a particular love. That's a love that actually means something and makes a difference. God has a certain particular love for His church, for those whom He calls His sons, the sons of God.

Moving on now, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you." That He has chosen *you*. Okay, how does Paul know that God has chosen them? Well, he knows it—I mean, just remember this comes in the context of one long sentence—he knows that they do the work of faith. He knows that they are familiar with the labor of love. He knows that he sees in them steadfast hope. He therefore knows that they are brothers loved by God, and he knows that God has chosen them. He doesn't find these things out there in the general world. He doesn't find these things in the general population. He doesn't find faith, love, and hope everywhere he goes. He knows where he finds it. He finds it in the church. He finds it in the fellowship of Christians.

So because Paul sees these things, these fruits, evident in the life of the Thessalonians, he knows that they are his brothers, and he knows that they have been chosen. He knows that God chose them. Therefore, they have come to Christ in faith. They have come into the church. They have been transformed and they have been changed.

It's none of our business to go looking, as it were, for the elect. We don't. I don't consider anyone I meet, "is this person elect or not?" It's not a category I use in anyone I meet. It's not my business. I don't know. God doesn't tell me that. It's the wrong question to ask. Everyone I meet, as far as I'm concerned, is a potential convert. Therefore, I am under obligation to bring the word of God everyone I meet. God knows who His elect are. God knows whom He has chosen. God knows to whom that word will be effective and powerful. It's all God's business.

How would you know someone's chosen? You would know someone is chosen because you see the evidence of the fruit of the life of God in their lives. That's how you know. Don't worry about whom God chooses; let God do the choosing. You actually simply sow the seed. Speak. Preach the gospel, my friends. Pray the gospel.

We know that God has chosen them. Paul is thankful that God has chosen them. I can understand that. I can understand that, because after a while, when you're preaching, you come to realize something. Though you labor, though you do the best that you can, though you lay your heart on the table every Sunday, so to speak—you yourself don't do anything. I'm not changing you. I'm not doing anything to you. I'm only a means which God may use according to His will. And when it works, it doesn't work because I'm special. It doesn't work because there's something about me that makes it work. It works because God makes it work. Preaching has its fruits and its harvest because God blesses the preaching.

So Paul's thankful that he got to preach to chosen people, because if he wasn't preaching to chosen people, his preaching would've been fruitless, without effect, without any obvious impact. He would have felt that he was just casting words into the air, wasting his breath and wasting his time. But they're chosen, so the word means something to them. They're chosen.

Let's move on into verse 5. We hear more about this: "because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Okay, what's happening here? Paul is going to give four things about the effect of the Holy Spirit's ministry to those who hear his preaching. But first of all, he lets them know of four evidences of the work of the Holy Spirit in the preachers themselves.

The first part of verse 5 is not actually talking so much about the people to whom Paul was preaching, but it's talking about the preachers who were doing the preaching. It does mention the effect of this preaching, but it's speaking more about the work of the Holy Spirit in the preachers. Verse 6 then goes on to speak about the work of the Holy Spirit in the listeners. So you see, Paul is giving glory to God both for the work of the preacher, and the work of the hearer. Both things are according to the work of God's Holy Spirit.

Let's have a look at this. Verse 5: "Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." It came to you "in word." At the very least, the very first foundation that Paul speaks here of his own, or Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy's ministry as preachers, is that there were words. There has to be words. There has to be content.

I've mentioned it before, there's an old saying from one of the church fathers, "Preach the gospel everywhere you go, and if you have to, use words." Now, I understand what he's saying. He's saying that our lives should be so exemplary that people find that even our lives in their midst are, in their own way, a testimony and a preaching of the gospel. But the gospel comes in words. It's communicated in words. There has to be content. We have to be telling people who Jesus is. We have to be telling people what Jesus did.

We have to be telling people what God's judgment on their own supposed self-righteousness is—that God actually rejects their self-righteousness. We have to be telling people that forgiveness is to be found in Jesus Christ. We have to be telling people that Jesus died on behalf of all who would believe, that their sins will not be counted against them, and that the proof of this is that He was resurrected on the third day, that He rose from the dead.

All of these things have to be communicated in words, and no matter how exemplary our lives are, we're not communicating the gospel without the words that communicated those things. They're the basic facts of Christian life. So it has to come in words, and those words have to be the words that come from the Holy Spirit, according to the will of God.

Paul came preaching the gospel, the gospel as revealed to and through the apostles. Paul came preaching according to the Scriptures. Paul often preached from the Old Testament. He preached the gospel from the Old Testament, interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the works and the words of Jesus. So it comes with words, and those words themselves come from God.

The gospel comes also in power. Power. Not only in word, but also in power. What Paul is saying is, You yourselves were witness to our preaching, and you yourselves both heard our words, and you saw the power that came with the words.

I've just got a little quote here from John Stott, as he comments on this verse. He writes, "The Word of God is the Spirit's sword. The Spirit without the Word is weaponless. The Word without the Spirit is powerless." I'll read it again: "The Word of God is the Spirit's sword. The Spirit without the Word is weaponless. The Word without the Spirit is powerless."

So not only were the apostles speaking the truth. Not only were Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy conveying the truth, the bare facts of the gospel, but they were being conveyed with power. There was something going on. It wasn't just one person talking to another person, it was the Holy Spirit speaking from one person to other people. Power was there.

Not only in power, "but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Now the word there that's translated "conviction" probably could be better translated, "full assurance." Full assurance. It's not the same word that's used, for example, in John chapter 16, verse 8, where Jesus speaks of the fact that when the Spirit comes, He will convict the world of sin. It's not that same word that speaks of exposing sin to public view. The word here is "assurance." The effect of the right words being spoken in power in the Holy Spirit is that they bring the full assurance of the very fact that these indeed are the words of God, the word of God, and the salvation that comes from God.

What is it? Think about it. When the gospel is preached, what is it that takes a person from not believing it to believing it? What is it? You can lay out the facts. You can argue for the facts.

You can, as an apologist for Christianity, argue the factuality of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You can speak of the fact that there were witnesses, and that those eye witnesses wrote things down. You can speak of the fact that the apostles were fearless, that upon understanding what had happened, upon receiving the power of the Holy Spirit and an understanding of what had happened, they became fearless preachers all over the then-known world, and were perfectly happy to die, faithfully proclaiming the gospel of God. We can argue in that way.

Yet, though we can argue reasonably, and though we can argue the facts and we can argue the historicity of those facts, just because you can prove your point, it doesn't mean someone actually comes to any kind of assurance, does it? How many people have heard the truth? How many people have heard the truth again and again? I asked earlier, How many people have been raised in a church? There are many people raised in good, solid, gospel-preaching churches. I was not necessarily speaking of people being raised in lightweight, you know, crazy churches. There are many people raised in good, solid, gospel-preaching churches that have heard the facts all of their life, and never, ever received them with full assurance.

Well, the difference must be, mustn't it, the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a person. The Holy Spirit is sovereign. The Holy Spirit works as He will. He is God. Just as much as the Father is God, just as much as the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Some, He convicts. Some, He leads to conversion. Some, He does not, according to the will of God. If they have not been chosen by the Father, it would appear that they are therefore not enlivened by the Spirit. There are people who have the facts, and yet have never had life. They've never come to faith and repentance.

But concerning the Thessalonians, Paul knows that the Spirit was present as he preached. He knows that there was a power that was not his own at work amongst the people. He knows that they were brought forward, or brought into full conviction, full assurance. In verse 6, the subject sort of starts to change. In verse 6, the subject starts to become the work of the Spirit among the people. But the last thing that Paul says concerning the work of the Spirit among the preachers, he says, "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."

Okay, so this is still the work of the Holy Spirit in those who were preaching. You know what kind of men *we* proved to be among you for your sake. "The Holy Spirit in us made our lives to be conformed to the doctrine that we are preaching. What we are preaching, you see backed up in what we are doing. What we are preaching is not at all apart from what we do. We preached gospel words, we lived gospel lives. We preach of faith and repentance, and we are faithful and repentant Christians." That's what Paul is saying. And he says, "And you know it! You know it. You saw the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in *us*. You know it."

So the effect of the Holy Spirit's work in the preachers was that they spoke the words, they spoke rightly, they spoke with power, that their hearers came to full assurance, and the people could see that the conduct of the preachers was in accordance with the doctrine of the preachers. They

weren't false, they weren't hypocrites, they weren't shallow. What they were preaching, they themselves were living.

In verse 6, as I said, it changes. We're still speaking of the work and the power of the Holy Spirit, but now we're speaking of the work and the power of the Holy Spirit in those who hear the preaching. What's the first thing that happens? "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord." You became imitators of us and of the Lord. This work of the Holy Spirit caused the people who were hearing the preaching to imitate the one who was preaching.

And there's a scary thought. Honestly, there's a scary thought. When a preacher stands before you and looks at what Paul says here, and then looks at himself, okay—this is getting serious. God might not be meddling with you at this moment, but I'm telling you, He's meddling with me. "Imitators of us and of the Lord." Notice Paul's confidence. His life is so godly that if someone follows him, they're following Jesus. His life is so consistent with his doctrine that if someone imitates him, they are doing things that are pleasing to God. "Imitate," mimic, copy. The pattern of Christian life they saw in the Apostle Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, they imitated.

And in imitating Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, they were imitating the Lord Himself, the Lord Jesus. They imitated them, obviously, in their prayer. We'll see that they imitate them in sharing the word of God. We'll see that they must, therefore, imitate them in their very way of life—their morality, their holiness, their sanctification.

A good question to ask anyone, ask ourselves—I've been asking it of myself: If someone imitated me, if someone were to be imitating me, would they be, by association, imitating the Lord? Would they be, by association, imitating the Lord? There's a tough question. That's the kind of question that breaks a person, I'm telling you now. "You became imitators of us and of the Lord."

The next thing—the work of the Holy Spirit in them. "For you received the word in much affliction." The work of the Holy Spirit in those who hear is that they receive the word. They receive the word. Their hearts are open, their ears are open. They're hearing the word of God. They're receiving the word of God.

Just stay in the book of First Thessalonians and jump forward to chapter 2, verse 13. Just cheat a little and jump forward and notice something. Paul is still thankful. "13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers." You received the word of God, and "accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God."

Are you hearing the word of God? As the Scriptures are read, as the Scriptures are explained, are you hearing the word of God? Are you receiving the word of God? If you are, it's because of the work of the Holy Spirit. If you have that assurance, it's because of the work of the Holy

Spirit. If God is using me in that way, it's God that you are hearing from. If I'm doing what I should be doing as a preacher, I'm a mouthpiece. I'm a postman delivering the mail. I'm not the person who wrote the letter.

“You received the word in much affliction.” What does he mean there? Well let's just turn very quickly to Acts and chapter 17. Paul has turned up at Thessalonica and he's started to preach the gospel to the synagogue of the Jews. For three continuous weeks on Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, verse 3, “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’”

“⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.’ ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”

Three weeks of preaching. You've been a Christian—let's say you were converted the first time you heard Paul preach. You've been a Christian three weeks. And suddenly, there's a mob of wicked men, and they're dragging you out of a house and bringing you on charges before the city authorities. I'm quite certain they weren't dragged gently. I'm pretty sure by the time they got to the presence of the city authorities, they were bruised, they were scraped, they were scratched, they were damaged, as far as that mob could go without themselves arousing the anger of their governors.

You've been a Christian three weeks, and suddenly, you're suffering for the name of Christ. You've received the word, and the Apostle Paul says, “You received it in much affliction.” What's he saying? “Even though the world's set itself against you, you were faithful. You received the word. You did not back down. You did not deny the faith that you had. You did not turn from our teaching. You did not turn from our doctrine.” “In much affliction, you received the word.”

It appears, indeed, that nothing could restrain their Christian faith. Paul's rejoicing. Remember, Paul is still thanking God. He's thanking God that even in affliction, they received the word. You can't deny the work and the power of the Holy Spirit. When He's going to save someone, He saves them. When He's giving life, He gives life.

Let the world do what it will, for I'm telling you that the Spirit is also doing what He wills, and His power is so much greater than the power of the world. His power is so much greater than the

words of wicked men and the intimidation of the rabble. These people received the word in much affliction.

And the second to the last thing I want us to see concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives—with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The last part of verse 6: “with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” With joy. With joy. To be truly saved is to know joy. It’s to know happiness. It’s to know that you’ve been released from a burden. It’s to know that you’ve been finally put into a right relationship with the God of all creation, the God of the universe. It’s to know that this life, which previously seemed to be pointless and meaningless, actually has a point and a meaning. It has a fulfillment. These things bring great joy.

I’ll never forget. I was converted on a Saturday night and I woke up on a Sunday morning. I’d fallen asleep praying, I woke up praying. And then I realized, “Why are you so happy? What are you so happy about?” Then I thought to myself, “Well it can only be God.” I’d never known such happiness. I’d never known such joy. I didn’t have any particular reason. I didn’t have more money Sunday than I had Saturday. I didn’t have less work to do Monday than I had to do Friday. The things which had seemed like a burden in my life—it’s funny, in a way they were still there, but I was happy. I was filled with joy.

One burden I didn’t have was the burden of sin. I knew that. I knew that I was in a relationship with God. I knew that there was actually a purpose for living. And that was the experience of these Thessalonians.

We’re told later on in chapter 1 that the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living and the true God. They turned from false and empty religion. They turned from superstition. Idol worship, in some ways, gave them what the world today calls freedom. They were free to sin as they pleased. In ancient Greek worship, I’m telling you, they certainly did sin as they pleased.

But when the Holy Spirit gets to work in your life, you realize that this sinning-as-your-pleasing is actually a burden and a slavery, and that this superstition that runs your life, where you’re trying to do things for the purpose of having good luck and good fortune, is actually a burden and a form of slavery. They were joyful.

And now the final work of the Holy Spirit in their lives is in verse 7: “so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” So let’s just refresh, and then I’ll get stuck into that.

There were four ways in which the Holy Spirit was working in the preachers. They spoke the right words, they spoke with power, their hearers were brought through to full assurance, and the preachers themselves were models of their doctrine.

And Paul has now told us of four ways in which the Holy Spirit was working in the hearers. The hearers became imitators of the preachers—they followed the preachers, and so they followed

the Lord who sent them. The hearers received the word—they received that preached word for what it was, a word from God, the word of God. The hearers received the word with joy, even though they were being afflicted. And finally, in verse 7, the fourth thing that happens due to the work of the Holy Spirit, is that the hearers themselves become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

Let's look at it, just reading the last part of verse 6 and on into verse 7: “with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” So that you became an example.

Paul is saying, “You imitated us, you copied us, and you have become the kind of people that other Christians ought to copy. You've become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. They ought now to be copying you.” Paul is saying, “I see so much of the work of the Holy Spirit in your lives that people can now copy you as examples of how a Christian should live. You, yourself, are an example.”

Here's the thing. If we have received the word with power and conviction, been brought to full assurance, and we have seen the conduct of those who are true preachers of the word, has the word done its work in our lives so that we, ourselves, are now examples to other believers? And I told you that a question that breaks a preacher's heart is, “If people imitate me, are they imitating the Lord?” Looking at verse 6, “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.” If people imitate me, are they imitating the Lord? I told you how, as a preacher, it's a question that breaks your heart. But here's the thing—that question comes from me to you. Because Paul is saying that the ministry of the Holy Spirit ought to have made people, or has made these Thessalonians, the kind of people whom themselves are examples to all the believers.

So now, my friends, consider the question, and let it break your heart: Has the work of God's Holy Spirit, through the word of God, had such an effect in your life that you are an example to all the believers? Are you what you ought to be as a Christian? If someone followed your pattern of Christian life, would they be on the right path? Would they be doing what is right? Would they be on a path that leads to growth? Would they be partaking of what we often call the regular means of grace? Would they be growing in faith and obedience? Would they be growing in Christlikeness and sanctification? If you've received the word, are you an example to all other believers? Because that's what Paul has said of the Thessalonians. The question comes to me. The question comes to you.

Jesus spoke of the burden being light, in Matthew chapter 11: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” He didn't say there was no yoke, and He didn't say there was no burden. He was speaking comparatively. He was comparing the burden and the yoke of sin, the wages of which are death, to the burden and the yoke of obedience, the wages of which are eternal life.

Jesus wasn't saying there was no burden, and He wasn't saying there's no yoke. He was saying that the yoke of righteousness is comparatively light. The yoke of faithfulness is comparatively easy. Why? Well, think about what Paul has said. There's joy, even though you're under affliction. There's assurance, even though you know that you're a sinner—full assurance, deep assurance. There's certainty. You know! You can know these things. You can have certainty.

But, my friends, if these things are having their full impact in our lives, we should be examples. If someone copies us, they should be on the right path. If someone puts their foot where my foot falls, they should be standing on firm ground. If someone puts their foot where your foot falls, they should be standing on firm ground. If someone trusts your discernment, they should be in the right. That's what it means to be an example.

How's your heart feel now? You're feeling the weight of the word of God? Is it coming to you now with some power? My friends, pride has no place in the life of a Christian. We've never made it. We've never gotten there. You should be able to look at your life, even your life as a Christian from the time you were converted to this day, and you should be able to see that God has done a work in your life, and that God is changing you, that what you are now is not what you once were, that the maturity you had as a Christian years ago, in some ways, you feel that it's kind of laughable, compared to the maturity that you have as a Christian today. But you should always be aware of the fact that you're not there.

Here's the way it works: The closer we draw to God, the more convicted we are of our sins. The more convicted we are of our sins, the more humble and repentant we are. And the more we seek the righteousness that comes from God alone, the more we seek the glory that comes from God alone.

When you seek the righteousness and the glory that comes from God alone, you draw closer to God. And the closer you draw to God, the more you become convicted of your sin. And the more you become convicted of your sin, the more you are humbled and repentant in the presence of God. And the more that you are humbled and repentant in the presence of God, the more you seek the glory and the righteousness that can come from God alone. And as you seek the glory and the righteousness that can come from God alone, you're drawn into the presence of God even further. And the closer you get to God, the more you're convicted of your sins.

Do you get the picture? This Christian life, it's a constant life of being drawn into the very presence of God, being humbled and convicted of sins, causing us to seek the righteousness and the glory that comes only from God, which draws us ever closer to the presence of God, which causes us to be ever more convicted of sin. On and on and on it goes, in this life, as we walk in this world. That's the Christian life.

We can never be proud. The proud Christian is no Christian. The boastful Christian is no Christian. Though we know things, though we can know things with full assurance, we don't boast about ourselves, we boast of the Lord who has given us the gift of salvation. We don't

boast of our strength. We don't boast of our righteousness. We boast of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. He's our boast. And in this life of constant humility, repentance, and being drawn ever closer to God, my friends, you do become an example to those around you. They do learn from you from what they see in your lives.

But each and every one of us should always remember, as we claim the benefits of Christianity, as we speak of the fact that we are in Christ, always remember. Paul speaking to the Thessalonians, spoke of Macedonia and Achaia. What our text this morning is telling us is, therefore, you should be examples to all the believers.

Well, my friends, we should be examples to all the believers with whom we have in Cooma, in Canberra, and via the Internet. You've got Facebook. Better be an example. You got Twitter. You better be an example in any of the other plethora of social media that's out there today. In all these things, we should be examples to all the believers. Let's close in prayer.

Father in heaven, we do come before you, humbly asking that you would forgive us of our sins, that your word would have its full work in our lives, that we indeed would know full assurance by the power of your Holy Spirit, and that we, through the transforming power of your Spirit and your sanctifying grace to us, would indeed be the kind of Christians that are examples to all the believers around about us.

Father, may we walk in ways that please you. May we be faithful and obedient to you in all that we do. May we never forget that Christians look at other Christians, and so every Christian influences every Christian around about us. We're either lifting each other up, or we're tearing each other down. Father, may we by your grace, through the power of your Spirit, be those who are lifting each other up. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.