

1 Thessalonians 1 (6) – Follow the Footsteps of Jesus

Everyone is original; no one is exactly like anyone else. But every person imitates other people. Everybody learns things from other people. And even innovators are still imitators. Even people who break from the norm, who go against the grain, who blaze new trails, they hang out in groups. Even misfits resonate with misfits. Even the isolated have thoughts of others. No one thinks only of themselves or for themselves. And down through the centuries, children imitate parents, and people imitate people.

Everyone is an imitator, but who will you imitate? And I want you to think about this: In each moment, with each thought, with each action, you are either imitating those who are being saved, or those who are not.

As Christians, after we are saved, we keep our individuality. We see this in the fact that in his vision of Heaven, the Apostle John saw people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. There is great diversity in the body of Christ. But there is one core identity in all Christians, and that *is* Christ. You are your own person, but you are also God's person. And you live out your life in your own way, but it must be along God's way.

It is a sad reality that many who call themselves Christian will abandon the faith. Others won't leave the label of Christian, but they leave the life of a Christian. They think they can follow their own path. But our passage today tells a different story. Christians follow the same path. Others, feeling the pressure, will abandon uncomfortable truths for comfortable lies. Paul was telling the Thessalonians that they weren't compromisers. They saw the trouble that Paul suffered by staying faithful. And when they suffered, the Thessalonians didn't abandon ship; they stayed the course. And Paul was saying that he was proud of them. They saw the way and stayed the course and found joy in Jesus even while suffering for it. They had proven themselves to be truly saved. They were living out the pattern of the redeemed. They were following along the same path as Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They were following the footsteps of Jesus.

Paul was convinced that the Thessalonians had been converted. And he wanted them to have an assurance of their salvation as well. So, he tells them why he knew that God had chosen them (vs.4), and how it was obvious that they had received the word with full conviction (vs.5).

In vs.6-10, Paul gives several lines of evidence that he saw and heard about in the Thessalonians. He said these were proofs of God's saving work in their lives. But Paul wasn't telling them that his acknowledgement was all they needed to know they were saved. He was giving them evidences that others could see that would help them to see as well.

However, Paul wasn't telling them that those works that they did were all they needed to know they were saved. Assurance is about faith in God's word about Christ and salvation. So, Paul was not teaching them that works are the ground of our assurance, but that works are the evidence of our assurance. Paul is speaking about what he saw, and what he perceives as a result of what he saw. And how it reminded him of his own journey, and the journey of others, like Silas and Timothy.

The first line of evidence is that the Thessalonians followed the example of Paul (1:5b-6a) – *You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.* Paul was a witness to the worth of Christ, an example of how believers in Jesus should live. And Paul was saying, "Your lives became like our lives." They saw Paul stay the course, even under affliction. He didn't give up, and he still had joy, and strong faith, despite the affliction, and in some sense, because of the affliction. They saw how Paul was, and they went and did likewise.

Disciples live in differing contexts, we have different stories, but the same path of plot. We will all have trials and troubles to deal with. And true disciples will have similar demonstrations and expressions and experiences of faith under fire. Our lives should honestly say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." 1 Corinthians 4:16 – *I urge you, then, be imitators of me.* 1 Corinthians 11:1 – *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.* Ephesians 5:1 – *Therefore be imitators*

of God, as beloved children. 1 Thessalonians 2:14 – For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews. Hebrews 6:12 – so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Philippians 3:17 – Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. 1 Peter 2:20-21 – ... But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

The Thessalonians were imitators; they weren't doing it their own way. They weren't lone wolves, thinking they didn't need the fellowship of other Christians. Yes, Christians have a personal relationship with Jesus, but it isn't a private relationship with Jesus. Jesus is the one who created the Universal Church, and created the idea of local expressions of the Universal Church in local churches. Jesus is the one who instills a desire to involve yourself in community with other Christians. Jesus is the one who gives you examples to follow. Jesus is the one who designed the chain link we call discipleship.

Yes, we're all different, but Christians walk the same direction, the same path, not our own path. And with mercy and grace, we help each other in the direction of Christlikeness. One evidence of salvation is community: walking with Jesus means walking with others who walk with Jesus.

You see a second line of evidence in the second part of vs.6 – *for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.* They received the word joyfully, despite affliction. This isn't talking about a fake joy. And this isn't talking about denying reality. This goes both ways. This isn't denying the reality of the pain, or problems. But it is also not denying the reality of God's power to prove himself to you in tough times. Not always by getting you out of a situation, but by getting to know him in the situation.

Have you ever had that, where you knew God more closely and deeply in a hard situation? That is what will bring you joy. This is evidence of God.

Sometimes, people want to stay away from God, his word, and his people when the going gets tough. I know the feeling. But know this; the Holy Spirit can make God more real than ever in your life in those afflictions. Faith is like a muscle; it can be built up. And afflictions are like what we call resistance training, it makes you exercise your faith, which makes it grow stronger. Perseverance, clinging to God in faith, and the power of God to give you joy in Jesus in hard situations, this is another evidence of salvation.

Perseverance in affliction is a vitally important topic. And you see in the New Testament that even strong, mature believers need to be reminded, encouraged, and exhorted to endure.

Consider the case of Timothy. Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy about fifteen years after this letter of 1 Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul told those believers how he, Silas, and Timothy had seen them persevere and grow and witness in affliction. And the Thessalonians had seen how Timothy had persevered, being Paul's companion, and coming into Thessalonica after Paul and Silas had been kicked out. So, Timothy was someone who knew what living with affliction was like. He was an example to others of how to persevere through affliction.

Yet, some fifteen years later, Paul makes sure to address this subject once again, to Timothy, his trusted and tested disciple and fellow minister of the gospel (cf. Philippians 2:19-22). Timothy was seasoned, and proven. But turn in your Bibles and look at what Paul says to him in 2 Timothy 1:5-14.

Paul wasn't writing this because Timothy was weak, or because he had started to falter. Paul wrote this because Paul was about to die for the faith, and perseverance in affliction is an important thing to remind people of. Christians must be continually encouraged and exhorted to persevere in the faith, because afflictions are part of the gospel package.

The second part of 2 Timothy 1:8 in the KJV reads...*but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God.* This is not an exception; it

is the rule, for all Christians, not just pastors and preachers. Living the truth of the gospel brings afflictions.

The bottom line about spiritual power is the faith to endure. Not only the persecutions that come about because of being a witness for Christ by sharing the Good News vocally, but also by just being a member of the household of faith. We will suffer not only persecution, but also afflictions. And afflictions are not just persecution, but also going through physical difficulty, mental anguish, crucifying the flesh, and other trials. Suffering aligns us with Christ, and keeps us humble. Partaking of suffering helps us learn God's word, will, and way. Psalm 119:71 says – *It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.* Thinking about this verse, Martin Luther said that afflictions are the touchstone of biblical interpretation.

Paul suffers because of the grace of God, the affliction of the gospel! He is not ashamed. Many preachers are only telling fleshly people what they want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3), presenting a victorious life by applying so-called Christian principles rather than presenting Jesus Christ, life through death, and the way of repentance and faith, which Paul calls the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:20,27). People who teach that you won't have affliction if you have enough faith are teaching falsely about faith, giving false hopes to lost people, and leading saved people in the wrong direction.

Yes, God will prosper you, but what that looks like is what God decides. And part of the process involves pain, so your comfort happens as you are conformed, and so you can comfort others who are also being conformed (2 Corinthians 1:3-9). Paul tells the Thessalonians he knew they were saved, not because everything was working out well for them, but because they had joy in Jesus even though things weren't working out so well for them. They were sticking with Jesus, not for the benefits or blessings or byproducts that Jesus could bring, but for Jesus himself. That is godly joy.

You need to stir up the gift of God, and the gift is the Holy Spirit, who gives you power, love, and a sound mind (self-control). Because of the gift of the

Holy Spirit, you can partake of the affliction of the gospel, and have joy in Jesus! Paul knew this. The Thessalonians knew this. And you can know this. Everyone suffers, but you can have joy in Jesus even in affliction. Paul called it the power of Jesus' resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings.

You were saved and called with a holy calling, not according to your big goings on, like personal mountain moving, but his own purpose. His purpose is to make you like Jesus, not just to fulfill the Great Commission. The great grace of God may seem more manifest when a mountain is moved by faith, but truly, it is the mundane, the everyday, dear old saint who faithfully comes to church, and who prays for lost ones every day without fail, and who suffers through ill health, yet keeps a loving heart toward people, and an unyielding devotion to Christ that showcases the power of God most clearly for his glory. The people who know God know this.

The calling is not just to "do stuff," it is to suffer, to take up your cross and follow Christ. You do this, not with a stoic "grit your teeth and bear it" mentality, but with joy that you are partaking in the fellowship of Christ. You show your world the grace that brings steadfast faith, the power to endure no matter what life throws at you, thereby defeating the works of the Devil. This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith!

The victory you have in Christ is not being able to avoid all affliction. It is having the power of the Holy Spirit, so that you can persevere, and have the peace to endure, and have joy in Jesus. Yes, God mercifully delivers people from some of their pains. But you should praise God even when he lets you feel the pain. Thank God, he forgives you even when you don't.

Paul was proud of the Thessalonians. And I'm proud of you. Because I see people who aren't perfect, but their purpose is to follow the footsteps of Jesus. And remember, when you see the whip in Jesus' hand, it was on his back first. You follow the footsteps of Jesus, who allows you to feel the stripes of sanctification, because he bore them all for your salvation. By his stripes, you are healed. And by your stripes, he is revealed.

Now, that was going to be the end of this message. Instead, I am about to give you something you need right now. Let's read our verse again. 1 Thessalonians 1:6 says – *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.* Paul said the Thessalonians were imitating him by receiving the word of God with joy, even though they had to deal with a lot of problems because of it. Of course, we have been making that point for this whole message. But there is something in this verse that you may not realize. And it is about how to receive joy from God in all of life, the good and the bad.

The Thessalonians received the word with joy. When you really need something, but you know that you don't really deserve it, and yet you receive it, what is your response? Well, you are full of joy, and you say "Thank You," from your heart. The Thessalonians received the word of God from Paul in the context of affliction. And yet they received it, and the Holy Spirit filled them with joy. Why? They had joy because they were thankful. And they were imitating Paul in this way. You see it in 1 Thessalonians 1:2.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:2, Paul says – *We give thanks to God always for all of you.* The Greek word for "thanks" in vs.2 is where we get our English word Eucharist, which is another name for the Lord's Supper, the giving of thanks. And within the Greek word for Eucharist is another Greek word you may have heard of, *charis*, which means a gift of grace. The Thessalonians were imitating Paul by being thankful for the word of God. And so, just like Paul, they received joy by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thankfulness leads to joy. But you aren't really thankful for what you think you deserve. To you, it isn't a gift. It isn't grace. It isn't God. And so you miss out on God's joy.

You lose your joy, because you lose your thanks, because you feel like you're just getting what you deserve, or not getting what you deserve. And so, you aren't receiving grace by faith, you are feeling entitled, and not giving thanks, and losing your joy. The cure for your life is to stay rooted in thankfulness, gratitude, and praise. You don't deserve, you receive. That is when you have joy despite affliction. That is when faith overcomes life.