

It Is Written

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The Church of—Less

By Steven Harper

The church at Thessalonica is one of the few we read about in the New Testament who were described in mostly, if not entirely, positive terms. Though they had faced trials of their faith from the very beginning (cf. Acts 17:1-10), they had apparently stood firm and did not allow such hardships to dissuade them or cause them to compromise truth. In fact, Paul praised them for their “work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope” (1 Thess. 1:3), the fact they had received the word in such circumstance, yet with joy (1 Thess. 1:6), their work of teaching “the word of the Lord...in every place” (1 Thess. 1:8), the fact everyone had seen that they had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9), and for how they were faithfully and patiently waiting for Christ’s return (1 Thess. 1:10).

But even as the brethren of Thessalonica were living exactly as they had been instructed by Paul (1 Thess. 4:1), he urged them to “excel still more.” Even as these brethren were loving one another just as they should, Paul urged them to “excel still more” (1 Thess. 4:9, 10). What we should learn from their example, and Paul’s instruction to them, is that God’s expectation was that these disciples [and all disciples] continually do and be more than what they had done and been. Every individual disciple and every local church should be continually striving to do and be more than what they have done and been in the past, or even at the present time. It is, simply put, the expectation of spiritual maturity and growth. We should all be doing and becoming more, and at no time should we even consider doing or becoming less.

Unfortunately, these disciples, and the local church as a whole, at Thessalonica stand as an example that is too often not the pattern that is followed. Too often, disciples reach a plateau of spiritual growth and they either become stagnant or, worse, become something and someone less than their best, and even start doing less than their best. Before long, the church of which they are a part becomes a church of -less. What do I mean by that?

Joyless. As noted already, the church at Thessalonica was praised for having received the word in much affliction, yet with joy; sadly, some disciples may receive the word with joy but “believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away” (Luke 8:13; ESV). Their falling away is preceded by a period of unhappiness, disappointment, and complaining about their circumstance. Sometimes, they may not even experience hardships or tests of their faith, but simply lose or forget the joy they once had.

Obviously, disciples can find a way to have joy in even the most difficult circumstance; the brethren at Thessalonica demonstrate this truth. But it has to be a conscious, purposeful decision to be so. Consider the fact that the apostle Paul — writing from prison, no less — was thankful for the brethren there and prayed “with joy” for them (Phil. 1:3), rejoiced even in chains because the gospel was continuing to be preached (Phil. 1:18), rejoiced at their continued care for him (Phil. 4:10), and then exhorted them, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).

The brethren at Thessalonica had joy not because of their circumstances, but in spite of those circumstances. The joyless church is one that allows their circumstances to dictate their mood and influence their attitude, but it need not be so; it should not be so. We can have joy today if we set our minds on our eternal home, rather than on the present one and all the difficulties of life. We can rejoice by thinking of what God and Christ have done for us, by thinking of our faithful brethren, and by looking

forward to the return of the Lord and recalling what awaits the faithful. That is a cause for joy!

Loveless. As noted, too, the brethren at Thessalonica had a love for one another — so much so that Paul said that he had “no need that I should write to you” regarding the matter (Phil. 4:9). Again, despite their circumstance, the church at Thessalonica found a way to love one another just as they should, and not just their brethren within the church there in Thessalonica; they loved “all the brethren who are in all Macedonia” (Phil. 4:10). Clearly, their love was for any and all who had “obtained like precious faith” (2 Pet. 1:1). They loved all fellow believers!

How sad it is when churches lack this love! Though Jesus has clearly instructed us that we should love one another as He loved us (John 13:34; John 15:12), and though the apostle Paul has instructed us to “walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us” (Eph. 5:2), the sad reality is that we don’t always do that; we do not always love one another as He loved us. Sometimes, we do not love one another at all. When a church is comprised of disciples who fail to do this, it will quickly become a loveless church.

The church at Corinth was guilty of this, for the disciples there were divided over just about anything and everything they could imagine. They did not consider their brethren in the matter of eating meats offered to idols, were taking one another to the public courts, were arbitrarily classifying the spiritual gifts and valuating their brethren based on which gift they had, were making a mockery of the Lord’s Supper while excluding the brethren who had nothing, and on and on. There is a reason Paul had to define what true love is (1 Cor. 13:4-8); there is a reason Paul had to remind them, “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies” (1 Cor. 8:1); and there is a reason Paul had to remind them, “Let all that you do be done with love” (1 Cor. 16:14). They lacked this love!

Fruitless. And, finally, as previously noted, the church at Thessalonica was praised by Paul because “the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place” (1 Thess. 1:8), and for their “labor of love” (1 Thess. 1:3). The church at Thessalonica was working!

Unfortunately, such churches are not found as often as they should be, and it is because we disciples are not working as diligently as we should be. The simple fact is, no church will be known for its work if the disciples who make up that church are not workers! If a church’s work is done mostly by a few — or even just by the preacher — then not much will be accomplished. But more importantly, neither the church nor the individual disciples will be pleasing to the Lord! Isn’t that important?

Well, it is, and we should recognize this fact. Jesus once said, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away” (John 15:2), and, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit” (John 15:5). If we, as disciples, are not bearing fruit, we will be ‘taken away’! He expects us to “bear fruit” as His disciples!

Sadly, some churches are relying on their past history as a measure of their fruitfulness; they look longingly back to the time when they were working and growing, but are presently doing nothing, or at least very little. They are like the church at Sardis, to who Jesus said, “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1). Let us be careful when we make self-examinations (cf. 2 Cor. 13:5), that we are judging our condition not by who we once were or by what we did long ago, but who we are now and what we are doing now.

Let us be disciples, and a church, of more and more.