

Model your faith  
I. Showing your joy  
II. Showing your service

Grace and peace is yours through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior who is coming to take us to live with him in heaven forever. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10, "You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia-- your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Paul wrote these words around 51 A.D. Nearly 2000 years ago he encouraged a struggling congregation who was familiar with persecution and ridicule because of the faith that they had in their hearts. Paul himself was forced to leave the city of Thessalonica because some religious fanatics did not like the message that he preached. These passages comforted the Thessalonian believers during times of intense struggles and it is my prayer that they bring each of us peace as well.

It is not the norm to have individuals threaten our lives because of our trust in God. We may even say that we do not endure persecution but I don't think that is necessarily true. We may not have angry mobs beating us or throwing us out of the Billings city limits but that does not mean that we don't face severe suffering from the outward influences of the world and society in general. Satan tries very hard to throw us out of the kingdom of God. In our first lesson the Lord commanded us to be holy because he is holy. But how often do we find that forbidden fruit is sweet and our sinful natures actually crave what destroys faith. Almost any magazine or paper in which you look you can find an article describing the persecutions that are facing us. For instance, U.S. News and World Report discusses premarital sex and the sexual intimacy that many teenagers indulge in. Lately the ads on TV, the billboards on Sixth Avenue by the Metra, and the commercials on the radio have very graphic images about the devastating drug, meth, which is plaguing so many families. One gal even called it "Satan's drug." There are many pressures facing people. God says be holy and then lists a number of sins that we need to avoid. However, instead of avoiding them it is not uncommon in our world to see anger, hear of hatred, experience grudges and be burdened by guilt. Persecutions come in many forms and severe suffering was not reserved only for the Thessalonians who lived 2000 years ago. When enumerating sins we need to be careful that we do not have the attitude that they just occur in the world around us. Many of the actions and thoughts that we just listed can be found right here in your heart and mine. We need to be on spiritual guard because Satan is threatening to steal our faith every day.

But even in the face of severe trials and temptations Paul does not write his letter with a pessimistic attitude of doom and fear. Nor are we here this morning to dwell on our sins and become entrenched in hopelessness. Instead we are here to rejoice with the apostle Paul and the Thessalonian believers who found joy in the message of Jesus Christ. Moved by the good news of salvation the church in Thessalonica joyfully endured suffering and actively showed their faith through acts of service.

God encourages you through their example to model your faith by allowing your joy to be seen and putting your faith into action.

Last week the big news was the jackpot that was over 300 million dollars. What was your answer to the question that was frequently asked? If you won what is the first thing that you would do? I am not necessarily asking what you would buy but what would you do? Maybe we would get our picture taken with that big cardboard check with a big smile plastered to our face. After reading the numbers once, maybe we would read it again and then one more time to make sure before we jumped up and down and called every person that we knew. To say that those folks in Oregon are filled with joy is probably a gross

understatement.

But even winning 300 million does not compare to the joy that the Thessalonians possessed. Their joy came from having the priceless treasure of Jesus Christ. Through the work of the Spirit that struggling church rejoiced in the forgiveness of sins and the certainty of eternal life in paradise. Their joy could not be overshadowed by severe suffering! They recognized that they possessed the treasure of the Savior and their faith shown throughout the dark world of sin and became evident. They became models of faith to the Southern regions of Macedonia and Achaia which were located nearly 200 miles away. Their persistent attitude of joy was contagious.

Is your attitude worth catching? Are we as individuals and as a congregation modeling our faith in a God-pleasing way, especially when we are faced with hardship or challenges? Or are we quick to become complainers wondering why we have it so bad instead of remembering that in Jesus Christ we have it so good no matter what the situation is? Instead of celebrating the joy of intimately knowing the Lord have we become all too familiar with throwing ourselves self pity parties hoping that others will feel sorry for us as well? If anyone needed pity it would have been the Thessalonians but they did not seek to be pitied at all because they relied on their Lord and in him found hope in the midst of hopelessness. When you walk through this life of challenges do not fail to bring with you the gift of joy that Jesus gives you. Model your faith for others and do not model your sinful attitudes. With our faith focused on Christ and his promises we never need to be people who mutter, "Life sucks." There will be tribulations and pressures from without and within, but with God their will always be reason to rejoice.

I guarantee you that the person who won the lottery was smiling ear to ear and did not have a ho-hum attitude when they found out that they were the winner. I pray that we do not have ho-hum attitudes over the treasure of the forgiveness of sins that was won for us on the cross. All of us here are sinners who do deserve to be left in despair and sorrow. Our sins of being poor models of faith earned for us eternal misery in the fires of hell. Think about that. Every one of us was completely lost! But in Jesus the gates of Hell have been closed and heaven has been opened to all who believe in their Lord. You can have the confidence that you are saved and loved by your Father in heaven! That is the message that dispels ho-hum attitudes and motivates us to model our faith by showing the joy that Jesus gives to us. Show your joy in the Lord by putting your faith into action.

The Thessalonians imitated the faith of the Apostles but more importantly they imitated their Savior. Isn't it an overwhelming feeling that you and I can pattern our life after our perfect Lord? We have the opportunity and blessing of modeling our faith through what we do.

Actions speak louder than words and through our actions we make Jesus' love visible. The Thessalonians followed Jesus' command by turning from idols and giving God their hearts. They welcomed the message along with the messengers. That congregation put their faith into action by spreading the message of what Jesus has done to the surrounding area and beyond. It would have been so easy for them to just give up and stop speaking about what they were being persecuted for. However, their faith and concern for lost souls became known everywhere! Just think, 2000 years later and thousands of miles across the ocean their incredible faith has been made known to you and me.

May their example move all of us to let the Gospel ring out from our own lips and from this congregation. Being equipped with the message of peace and forgiveness you and I should stand out like a sore thumb in a world that is so burdened with guilt and lost in despair. Be models of faith as you express joy in private and public settings. Even if we are struggling and we think that life stinks our faiths should still be active and evident. First, all of us need to be models to those in our family. How many times in one day do we have the opportunity to express our love to a wife, husband or child through what we say and what we do? Do not let those opportunities slip away. Be models of faith in your work place as you refrain from the crass way of life that many live and simply show the love that lives in your heart. At school it may be one of the toughest places to show your faith, but let it be seen that Jesus loves you and you love him. I do not care whether you are in a doctor's office, eating in McDonald's or walking through the mall, all of us need to look for opportunities to model our faith through attitude and action before our Savior returns.

Model your faith with a sense of urgency waiting for the Son of God to return from heaven. You see, as a Christian we cannot have a "I'll get to it later attitude" when it comes to faith. Your risen Savior encourages you and empowers you to have a living faith now which is eager for his return. Last week I was talking with my wife and she said, "I can't wait for Jesus to come." I responded with, "Isn't that the truth." Think about it, he is coming soon. He is coming to take us to glory and we do not need to be afraid of that day at all because the faith that we model is confident that Jesus rescued us from the punishment of sin. When we are feeling weak ready to throw in the towel, when life has got us down and temptation is pounding at the door, when severe sufferings plague our lives, the risen Lord gives us living hope in the life that is to come. That truth is what will keep your heart filled with joy and the good news of Jesus Christ will motivate every one of us to model our faith by serving him. Amen.

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