

1 Thessalonians 1

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] It is God's purpose, indeed it's been God's purpose from all eternity, that His people, you and me, should be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that we should become like Jesus.

And there we're simply using the language of the Bible, the language that Paul employs as he writes to the Romans in chapter 8 and verse 29. We read, for those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.

So this is God's eternal purpose for all of His people. And the Bible is also clear that this work of transformation is God's work in us.

Again, we can listen to what Paul has to say as he not only teaches the believers in Philippi, but really seeks to encourage them. Chapter 1, as he opens what he has to say, he declares this confidence that he has, being confident in us that he who began a good work in you will be gone to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

And he is speaking, of course, of this very work of conforming us to the likeness of His Son. And Paul is saying, I am confident. I am assured. There is no doubt in my mind that the work that God has begun will be completed.

[1 : 33] And his confidence, of course, is grounded in the fact that it is God's work. If it was dependent on those he was writing to, if it was dependent on us, then I am sure there would have been a lot of hope.

It makes clear that this is God's work in us. And for that reason, it can only be completed. There can be another outcome. Now, this is a wonderful truth.

I think it is also a familiar truth, where the focus is very much on God's initiative. And not only God's initiative, but God's action that will, in His time, secure the stated purpose that we've identified.

We will become, like Jesus, end of. But having said this, the Bible also presents what we might call the same purpose, the same end goal, as one in which we are to be active participants.

And I'm thinking especially of the language and call to imitation that is quite common. You might even call it a recurring theme through the Bible.

[2 : 46] This call to God's people to be like God, to imitate God, to follow the example of God. And there very much the call is to us, to act.

It's for us to imitate. It's for us to follow that example. Again, we could maybe just remind ourselves of one very explicit call of that nature.

Again, it's Paul who's writing on this occasion to the believers in Ephesus. And he says this at the beginning of chapter 5, Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.

And the challenge is clearly directed to the believers reading that letter. He's saying this is something you have to do. It's in harmony with God's eternal purpose.

It's in harmony with the work that God has guaranteed to complete. It's in harmony with the purpose of God. Where we have a task to perform.

[3 : 48] We have to respond to the challenge. In this case, to be imitators of God. And in our passage there in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, let's focus now on that chapter that we read.

We notice how Paul isn't really challenging the believers. He's actually describing the believers and how they had behaved in this matter.

There in verse 6 he says, You became imitators of us. That was my experience. That's what I witnessed.

You imitated us and the Lord. The believers there were to imitate Jesus. They did so. And it stands to reason that as a result they became more like Jesus.

And that's what we discover in what follows. Though we're not going to be focusing on what follows. And in this matter, I suppose, of imitation, Paul presents what we could call quite an instructive

process.

[4 : 52] You might even call it a model for discipleship. You know, we often hear models of discipleship or of growth or of one kind or another.

Here we have what you could call a model for discipleship. Whereby believers are enabled to become more and more like Jesus. And the process involves the practice of imitation.

Now we can organize what we want to say, or draw from what Paul teaches on this matter, under three headings. We can think about the imitated.

So who are those to be imitated? And then we can also think about those who are to do the imitating. And then also note how there's a development in this whereby the imitators become the imitated.

And that's really just kind of the process that Paul outlines. And we can just look at it in those steps. So let's first of all think about those who are to be imitated. Now, if we're going to use maybe language that's more commonly used, not only within the context of the church, but in society at large, perhaps in the realm of youth work or social work, perhaps also even in the realm of the work environment or business, we often hear the language of mentors or role models.

[6 : 13] And when we're speaking about those who are to be imitated, that's the kind of language we could use. Paul is speaking of those who will serve as role models or as mentors to others.

So the idea that we hear of maybe quite often just in modern day life is not a new one. And it's really what Paul is talking about here.

So when we're thinking about those who are to be imitated, those who are to be role models or mentors, let's pose three questions and see what answers we find. The first question is this. Who are those who are to be imitated? Who are the role models or the mentors of Paul's scheme of things? Well, what does Paul say there in verse 6? He says this. You became imitators of us and of the Lord.

Particularly interested in the first part. You became imitators of us. So who are the us that Paul is speaking about?

[7 : 14] Undoubtedly, Paul is one of them. But it's plural. There's more than one. It seems reasonable to look at those who are authoring the letter, which we find there at the very beginning.

Paul, Samuel, and Timothy. They had been involved in the establishment of the church in Thessalonica. They had been there with the new believers, as we'll discover in a moment. And they're the ones that the new believers imitated. They were the role models. They were the mentors. They were the ones who others looked to and sought to follow their example. But how did they, Paul, Silas, Timothy, there maybe were others, but certainly those three named individuals, how did they become those worthy to be imitated, if we can put it in that way, or suitable to be imitated, maybe a better language?

How did they get to that place? Well, they did so clearly by they themselves imitating Jesus. I think this is implicit in what Paul says here when he says, you became imitators of us and of the Lord.

[8 : 30] Not so much that he's saying, well, you know, you look to us, you look to the Lord on the other hand, you try to imitate both. It's more really imitating us. You were, in a sense, imitating the Lord.

Why? Well, because we're imitating the Lord. Now, maybe that isn't explicit in what Paul says there in verse 6.

But it certainly is explicit in what he says on other occasions. On more than one occasion, but we'll limit ourselves to one occasion where he's writing to the church in Corinth and he expresses himself in this way.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 11 and verse 1, Paul speaks in these terms. Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.

So there it's very explicit. Follow my example and that will be a good thing for you to do. Why? Because I am and have been following the example of Christ.

[9 : 25] That is how Paul became a man suitable to be imitated, to serve as an example, to serve as a role model, to serve as a mentor, because he was following the example of Christ.

Paul, Simon, Timothy, imitated or followed the example of Jesus and in so doing became suitable for imitation themselves.

Now, of course, it is the case that those who were suitable to be imitated were at the same time continuing to grow and develop in their own imitation of Christ.

This isn't a place you arrive at and say, well, I've got here now. I've reached the level where others can follow my example. You know, I've been imitating Jesus for six months, for a year, for five years, and doing so with real diligence.

And I've arrived and now others can imitate me. No, those who are to be imitated are at the same time to continue imitating Jesus.

[10:30] That's very much the sense of what Paul says there in Corinthians. Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ. Not follow my example because I've done that. Look where I am now.

No, as I continue to do so, you follow my example. But let's also just pose one other question about those who are to be imitated.

And the question is this, what are three crucial requirements to be or become the imitated? I guess the foundational one is the one that we've just seen, you know, to be an imitator of Jesus.

But on top of that, if you wish, or alongside that, I think you can identify, and something very interesting that Paul says, three elements, if you wish, three requirements to be a suitable role model in the church.

And the language that I want you to notice and for us to think about a little bit is what Paul says immediately before describing the Thessalonians in this way, you became imitator of us and of the Lord.

[11:38] What does he say immediately before that? Well, he says this, you know how we lived among you for your sake. Now, maybe at first glance that doesn't seem hugely significant.

You could say, well, it's simply a statement of fact. You know, we're there with you. You know that. You saw us. So that's the context of what I'm going to go on to say.

But I think that in this, if you wish, simple statement of fact, we can identify three crucial aspects or elements of mentoring or being a spiritual role model, one suitable to be imitated.

And if I had to summarize it in three words, the three words I would choose are these. Location, motivation, and conduct. I think these three things, maybe you might think surprisingly, we find in these simple words of Paul, you know how we lived among you for your sake.

First of all, location. Paul says we lived among you. Paul, Silas, Timothy lived among the Thessalonians. They didn't disciple from afar.

[12:46] Their instruction in the faith wasn't limited to writing letters, to maybe constructing discipleship manuals that could be printed and distributed.

And if only the believers would go through the manual, then they would become fruitful, faithful Christians. No. Paul, Silas, and Timothy lived among them. That's the idea of location.

They were there with the new believers in Thessalonica. The new believers saw them. They saw Paul. They saw Silas. They saw Timothy day by day, in good times and bad.

They saw how they responded to frustration or conflict. They saw how they behaved when they were tired or irritated. And if we are to be suitable as those to be imitated, if we are to serve as those who can be imitated, we need to live among those we seek to influence and disciple.

We need to be involved in people's lives. We need to give of our time and of ourselves. Paul, Silas, Timothy, as he states here, we lived among you.

[13:58] So I think that's a crucial element that we're summarizing by the word location. But I think there's another element even in these simple words, and that is motivation. Because notice what he says there. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

For your sake. And I think that phrase points to or speaks of motivation. Paul and his companions were motivated by or driven by a desire to serve the believers in Thessalonica.

You know, they weren't in Thessalonica because this was, you know, a task they had to perform because it was their job. You know, and they had to go and they had to do their job and then move on.

No, they were there because they wanted to bless the believers in Thessalonica. They wanted to be an influence for good. They wanted them to grow in their faith.

So they were there for them. Not for themselves, not for self-interest, but for others, for the Thessalonians. And of course that must be true for us.

[14:57] If we are to be useful in God's hands as those who can be role models for others, our motivation must be the good of the other, not some personable benefit for ourselves.

So there's location, there's motivation. But I think in these very simple words of Paul, you know how we lived among you for your sake. There's a third element and we might describe it as conduct. Because Paul says there, you know how we lived among you and for your sake.

Paul doesn't say, you know that we lived among you, which would simply be a statement of geography that we were there. He says, you know how we lived among you.

The Thessalonians saw how Paul and Silas and Timothy lived lives marked by holiness of conduct and conversation.

Not perfect lives. Lives where they would have fallen short in greater or lesser measure. Perhaps of the three we mentioned, some holier than others.

[16:00] Perhaps, but over the peace if you wish. The Thessalonians could see how they lived. And they could see that here were men that they would do well to imitate.

And of course when they did fall short, we can be sure that they had the humility to acknowledge their failings and seek forgiveness. So in these words, you know how we lived among you for your sake.

We have these three elements that are crucial to being suitable as those to be imitated among you. Involved in the lives of others for your sake.

Motivated for the good of others. And a conduct that is visibly suitable for imitation.

But I think there's something else quite telling in this language. And it's this. And I pose the question to you.

[17:05] What or who does this expression most wonderfully describe? Let me just read it again. Who does this describe? You know how we lived among you for your sake.

Who does that describe? Does that not describe the incarnation? Now I'm not saying that Paul has that in mind when he says that. Paul may be simply stating a fact.

But does that not describe very beautifully the incarnation? What does it say? You know how we lived among you. Is that not what God did in the person of Jesus?

He came and lived among us. In the very language of the Bible in the first chapter of John. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. And why did he do it?

Well he did it for us. In the very language here of Paul. You know how we lived among you for your sake. And we know the conduct that he exhibited as he dwelt among us.

[18:07] And so those who saw him could see the life that he lived. The sinless perfection that characterized his walk and all that he was.

So of course when Paul and Silas and Timothy are marked by these things. These things precisely because they are imitating the example of Jesus.

Be that very consciously or maybe sometimes even unconsciously. Paul and his friends imitated Jesus in what we could call to use a bit of jargon there.

Incarnational ministry in Thessalonica. They were like Jesus in the manner in which they ministered. Among them. For them. And in a conduct that was becoming of who they were.

Now let's move on to look at those who could be described as the imitators. Those who are in need of a role model. Those who would look to a mentor that their lives would be molded by that.

[19:09] Or directed by that. And again we can pose three questions more briefly. Who are they? Well that's a simple one to answer. They are the new believers in Thessalonica. That's who are being written to.

Some of them maybe not so new anymore. But at one point they were new believers. They are the ones who imitated Paul. How did they become imitators? Well I think the point here is simply that they did become imitators.

That's precisely what Paul says. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. And I think the language does carry at least in some measure the sense of deliberate decision. They consciously determined to imitate Paul and Silas and Timothy.

They came to the decision that this is what they should do. That this is what they needed to do if they were to grow in the faith. I think it also points to the reality that imitation is a process that develops over time.

We need to stick to it. They became imitators. And having become imitators they continued in that activity of imitation.

[20:14] What did they imitate? We know who they imitated. They imitated Paul and Silas and Timothy. And in some way they imitated the Lord. But what's particular about these men?

They imitate. Well if we look at verse 6. We'll discover the usefulness of punctuation. Because notice how we read the verse. You became imitators of us and of the Lord.

And then we have a semicolon. And that flags up for us that in what follows there will be some kind of definition or description of what that looked like. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. What did that look like? What were the elements of that? Well in spite of severe suffering you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. Certainly in these things they imitated Paul and Silas and Timothy.

And in other things as well no doubt. In welcoming the message. This is what Paul did. You know when Paul first received word from God. We're told that when Ananias came and spoke to him. [21 : 16] What he had to do. We're told that Paul immediately went and did it. He received. He welcomed God's word. And the Thessalonians imitated him in that.

Jesus himself received the word of the father. Commission of the father. And he welcomed that word. And fulfilled that word. They imitated these men in the matter of the joy with which they received the message.

Joy given by the Holy Spirit. And they did so also in spite of or in the midst of severe suffering. We know in this matter Paul was an example.

The measure and the severity of his suffering was something of course that the Thessalonians would have known about. Maybe in a measure witnessed. And in some measure they imitated him in this also.

Let's look at the third aspect of this process I suppose that Paul is describing. And we've described it in this way. The imitators become the imitated. Verses 7 and 8.

[22 : 24] The Lord's message ran. Sorry. Verse 7. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message ran out from you. Not only in Macedonia and Achaia.

Your faith in God has become known everywhere. And Paul goes on. And I think it's striking how Paul here is not only describing or offering or proposing some theoretical model of discipleship. He said wouldn't it be good if we did this? You know if the older more mature Christians were role models and younger new believers imitated them. And then they in course they could become mature and they could then serve as an example to others.

And wouldn't that work well? Let's try and get this going. That's not what he's doing. He's actually describing what had actually happened. Paul and his companions imitated Christ.

The new believers imitated Paul and Silas and Timothy. And now the new believers, perhaps some of them no longer so new, are imitated by others while still imitating themselves.

[23 : 30] The language is clear. And so you became a model. You were imitators. You became imitators. But now you've become a model. You're still imitating.

But you are in parallel to that also now, though suitable to be imitated. You have become a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

And notice the scale of the impact. Macedonia and Achaia, these two Roman provinces, cover all of and indeed beyond modern day Greece.

Major cities are found within these two provinces. Thessalonica, Philippi, Berea, Athens, Corinth, all of them within these two provinces of which Paul says that the believers in Thessalonica had become a model to all the believers.

And indeed he says that their impact, their example, extended beyond that. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

[24 : 36] The verb there translated, the Lord's message rang out. Has the sense of it resonated. The church in Thessalonica, full of imitators of Paul and of the Lord, was like a loudspeaker for the good news concerning Jesus.

The Bible sometimes speaks of Jesus-like lives adorning the gospel. But Jesus-like lives also amplify the gospel.

These two things that go together. Let me just close with a couple of applications or practical challenges for us. You need to find who you're going to imitate.

If you're a Christian and if you're a desire to grow in your faith, to become more like Jesus, to do that which is required of you. Gratefully acknowledging that God has begun a work that he will complete.

But as you recognize that there's something you have to do, you need to identify who you're going to imitate. And you need to choose well. Because amongst us there will be those much more suitable for imitation than others.

[25 : 38] That's simply the reality of it. And so God would grant you the insight and the wisdom to choose who you're going to imitate. Of course, it doesn't have to just be one person. But that's something that we all have to do.

I was struck by something that I was reading just on social media. Some of you may have heard of the passing of Neil MacArthur, who was an elder in the Tain congregation.

And Gordy and Jonathan Bremner, they're grandsons of Neil. And I'm taking the liberty of sharing something that one of the grandsons said about him on social media, public platform.

And he said this, and I think it kind of catches what Paul really is saying here. He says this, What is being expressed there?

What is being expressed there? There was a man who was a role model, who was suitable to be imitated. And in the imitating of him, others could become more like Jesus.

[26 : 57] And that is what we need to do. We need to identify those we can imitate. But of course, the other thing we need to do, and it follows reasonably and necessarily from what we've been seeing, is that we need to, you need to rise to the challenge of living a life worthy of imitation.

And your life, if it is to be a life useful in that way, needs to be lived among those who God would have you influence for good. Your life needs to be lived for those whom God has placed in your path.

Your life needs to be lived in such a way that those who you would be used to bless and to influence might see how you live and see that you are indeed a man or a woman suitable to be imitated.

And I would say to all of you, but perhaps particularly to the younger folk among you, I would say this. You can't live your life only imitating. It's good to imitate.

It's good to identify that role model, maybe that older, more mature Christian who you're seeking to be like. That's good. But you can't live your life only imitating.

[28 : 10] You need to step up to the mark and become a man or woman worthy of imitation for those who come after you. And if we take this seriously, we can reasonably expect the kind of results, if not in scale, certainly in kind, that Paul witnessed in the church at Thessalonica.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the Bible.

We thank you for your word. We thank you for your purposes, eternal purposes for us as your people. We thank you that we will be conformed to the likeness of your Son.

But we thank you also that you dignify us in granting us a part to play. Not that our failure to do so, or at least our failure in the measure that we ought, will frustrate your purposes.

But nonetheless, you give us this challenge and this part to play in this regard that we are to imitate those who in so doing will help us to become more like Jesus.

[29 : 26] As we identify those who are following the example of Jesus, so as we seek to follow their example, so to grow in our faith. Help us to be wise in identifying who we will imitate, provide those who are suitable to be imitated for us.

But help us also to become swiftly those who also can be those who will be imitated by others, role models, examples for others.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.