



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 6 Issue 45

November 18, 2007

The Faithful Servant of God

This past week the sickness that has been going from house to house throughout our church entered my house. Consequently when I'd normally be studying for the sermon, I was laying on my back. Yet while there, I had the opportunity to think about my ministry as a servant of Christ in which I asked myself these questions:

- Am I ministering the way God would have me minister?
- Where should my focus be?
- What ought to be my goals?
- Am I beating the air?
- Am I running in vain?

When I got better, I turned to 1 Thessalonians 3 to answer to these questions; and I want to share the answer to these questions with you.

Specifications

Specifications: Each of us is touched by them in someway. After all, a specification is a detailed and exact statement of particulars; especially, a statement prescribing materials, dimensions, and workmanship for something to be built, installed, or manufactured. When one buys a toaster, clothing, fertilizer, groceries, etc., they are buying something that either has been created according to a particular specification, or has

been inspected according to a particular specification. Truly, we are all touched by specifications; which raises these questions:

- Are there specifications for the Christian when it comes to his ministry or service?
- Is there something against which to
 - Judge the success of our ministry?
 - Evaluate the integrity of our work for the Lord?

A glance at our passage, 1 Thessalonians 3, shows us that indeed, there are specifications for the Christian minister. Paul is writing this section to encourage the Thessalonians with regard to their view of Paul's character. See, after Paul departed from Thessalonica, the Thessalonians experienced much persecution.

1 Thessalonians 3:3-4, "That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we [the Thessalonians are included] are appointed thereunto. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know."

Part of the Jewish attack against the Thessalonians was to attack Paul's character.¹ Yet because Paul was unable to return to Thessalonica, he opted to send Timothy in his stead.² And it is from this that we learn the specifications of a faithful servant, not only from Paul himself, but also from Paul's choice in sending Timothy, as Paul describes the things that made Timothy faithful. So with this in mind, let's look at this passage and learn three specifications of the faithful servant.

Passion

1 Thessalonians 3:1, "Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone."

The word rendered *forbear*, means to cover, to ward off by covering, to support and therefore to protect. It refers to the keeping out or the keeping in of water, and was used of a watertight house or of a vessel that does not leak. Here as a negative, Paul essentially was saying this: "When we no longer could keep the rain out" or "when our ship was taking on water and it was beginning to sink we thought it best to be left behind at Athens."

What was it that Paul considered a sinking ship? What was it that Paul could "no longer endure"?

First, notice what it wasn't:

- Health problems.
- Financial problems.
- Lack of popularity.
- Evil and depraved government.
- A natural disaster.
- Computer failures.
- Etc.

Well then, what was it that Paul considered a "sinking ship?"

¹ Compare 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

² Compare 1 Thessalonians 3:2 and 5:6

After his departure, the Thessalonians experienced great persecution.

1 Thessalonians 1:9, “For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”

The Thessalonians started well. They had a dramatic conversion experience whereby they turned from their idols (this is saying much since Thessalonica was the idol capital of the world being situated at the foot of Mount Olympus). Yet this angered the local rabble, and so they began furiously to persecute Paul and the believers in Thessalonica. After running Paul out of the city³ they turned their focus on this brand new church.

1 Thessalonians 2:14, “For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews.”

1 Thessalonians 1:6, “And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost:”

Now Paul knew that the Thessalonians were by themselves and in need of spiritual encouragement and guidance and yet, he himself couldn't personally provide this encouragement- for Satan blocked his way.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-18, “But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us.”

The word rendered *hindered* here means to cut slits in a road making passage impossible. Satan was thwarting Paul.

To Paul his sinking ship was a people in need of ministry (encouragement, exhortation) and his not being able to provide for this need! Truly when people are your passion, the inability to minister to their needs causes stress! And so we read this:

1 Thessalonians 1:1, “Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, **we thought it good to be left at Athens alone.**”

To be left, carries the idea of being abandoned and is used of leaving one's loved ones at death.⁴ This term is packed with emotion. It is in the emphatic position and thus it receives the stress or the focus here. Paul cared so much about the Thessalonians that he was willing even to be abandoned in Athens for them (this is significant when you considered that Christ's standard was ministering in pairs).⁵ Yet here he was willing to allow his co-laborer to minister to the Thessalonians while Paul stayed behind, which was no small thing.

Athens was the intellectual capital of the world. Many of its inhabitants were cultured people, cynical by nature, who would not hesitate to persecute Paul over his message. In fact, of all places ever visited by Paul,

³ Compare Acts 17:10

⁴ Compare Mark 12:19

⁵ Compare Luke 10:1

Athens would be the most trying. And so, never had Paul been left alone in a place so unsympathetic; never had he felt so great a gulf fixed between others' minds and his own. And yet, for the Thessalonians' sake, we read this:

1 Thessalonians 3:2, “**And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God**, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith.”

Truly, if Paul could not minister to the Thessalonians, the next best thing was to send a person who could fully represent him and take his place. From this, we learn of Paul's concern: The spiritual health and welfare of his children in the faith, even at the highest cost to himself! And yet it is not just Paul, we see this passion throughout Scripture. The Apostle John said this about his greatest joy:

3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.”

And of all the things that made Christ lament while walking the earth, it was for people that we read this:

Matthew 23:37, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!”

How about Paul's incredible statement:

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy.”

This is why when we read of Paul's final words, they weren't about a theology or doctrine, but people.⁶ When it comes to the passion that ought to move us in life, it is people!

And thus we see the first mark of the faithful minister we find that he has a passion for people. He wants them to

- Know Christ.
- Grow in their faith.
- Mature.

Each of us are faced with an important question: What in your estimation is a sinking ship? Is it

- The lost job?
- The sick family?
- The sagging economy?
- Aids?
- An uncertain future?
- A difficult past?
- Boredom?
- A bad job?
- A bad marriage?
- Lack of fulfillment?

⁶ Compare 2 Timothy 3:9

- Poor grades?
- Embarrassment in public by a spouse or child?
- Finances?
- An inattentive spouse?
- A bad election?
- Bad laws?
- The decisions of a governmental official?
- Natural disaster?
- Unfulfilled expectations?
- Bad looks?

All of these are things with which people have struggled in my office during a counseling session. And while some are more serious than others, notice that none of them qualified as a sinking ship to Paul! Oh Christian don't miss it! That which you must consider a sinking ship that which you must give your heart and soul to on earth should be the spiritual growth and nourishment of people! This was the heart of Christ! This was the heart of Paul! And this must be our heart!

Qualifications

As we just mentioned, Paul could not go to Thessalonica in order to minister to them. And so he sent the next best thing: Timothy. Notice the characteristic that stood out in Paul's mind as that which made Timothy credible:

1 Thessalonians 3:2, “**And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ**, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith.”

Paul sent Timothy because he was a fellow laborer, one that work with or beside Paul. It is from this term that we get the word, synergy. Accordingly, another way of saying this is "fellow worker with God" or "in God's work." Notice then the nature of all kingdom work: It is NOT God watching us as we work before Him BUT it is God using us as He works His will in this world. It is to this that we are called: In and through all things, working unto the Lord participating in the ministry of God's kingdom. This is one and the same as the priesthood of the believer.

1 Peter 2:9, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

In and through all things in life, we must recognize that we are living in the presence of God. Just as the high priest once yearly stood before the mercy seat so in Christ we have been ushered to the throne of God to live out our lives before Him!

Truly, the faithful servant of God is the one who not only has been saved by grace, but uses his salvation to further the kingdom of God, and not himself. He is one who spends his life actively engaged in the work of the kingdom. This is what Paul had in mind when he called Timothy "God's fellow worker." Truly Timothy's purpose in life was NOT

- Gaining money.
- Acquiring glory.

- Enjoying a position of power and authority.

BUT serving God with the life that He had been given!

This is so important for us to understand! The faithful servant of God is not the

- Capable servant.
- Available servant.
- Talented servant.
- Bright servant.

For most heretics can boast of these! Rather, the Faithful Servant of God is

- The DEVOTED servant!
- The man/woman whose greatest desire in the world is for God's glory to be advanced.
- The parent whose longing and prayer is NOT for their children to do great things BUT for their children to know God.
- The worker whose passion in life is NOT the pay check or the fulfillment gained BUT an honest service rendered to his King!
- The person who is so committed to God that they are satisfied to be nothing in this life if only God would use!

If we are to be faithful servants in God's kingdom we likewise must have a similar passion!

But how do we gain such devotion? Is it something we just simply do?

Luke 7:47, “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: **but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.**”

Truly, he who is forgiven much, loves much and he who is forgiven little, loves little. Devotion to the Lord and thus becoming the faithful servant of God is secured NOT as we purpose to give more of what we have to God BUT as we truly recognize that all we have is God's already! Devotion to the Lord is secured as sinners recognize the great debt that has been forgiven them, then respond in love to their Savior.

The Call

1 Thessalonians 3:2, “And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, **to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith.**”

What a surprising call. Here we have Timothy being sent to a people who were facing persecution and difficulties and his job was NOT to deliver the Thessalonians from their persecution, or give them a course on how to avoid difficulties in the future, or change and modify the Thessalonians' ministry such that it would become more "user friendly"- you know, less abrasive. Rather, he was called to strengthen.

The word *establish* carries the idea of putting in a buttress or a support. It was used of Peter's call to the church to “strengthen the brethren”⁷ and it is identified as the result of the word of God in the lives of God's

⁷ Compare Luke 22:32

people.⁸

The word *comfort* means to call to the side of, to encourage by means of teaching. It is primarily help by way of exhortation, and so encouragement of the faith or the trust of the Thessalonian believers.

Now brothers and sisters, this is an important calling that far too many of us miss. When it comes to the TACTIC OF SATAN and his work against believers, a study of Scripture reveals that one of Satan's primary objectives is the ruining of our faith.

Luke 22:31-32, "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."

Ephesians 6:16, "Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked."

1 Peter 5:8-9, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world."

1 Timothy 1:18-19, "This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck:"

And here, when the Thessalonians were persecuted by the "tempter" Paul called Timothy to build up the faith of the people.

1 Thessalonians 3:5, "For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain."

Paul knew that when you boil down all our theology and all the stuff that sets the believer apart, the question really is this: On whom will you rely? When

- You sin again that sin you know is rotten, on whom will you rely?
- Your life is a wreck and your greatest fear is realized, on what basis will you stand before God?
- Tragedy comes or persecution, when you suffer not on account of your sin but for doing what is right, on whom will you rely?
- The world discovers that you are a phony- that you're really not as together as you portray; on what basis will you stand?
- Will you stand on His mercy, grace, and love?
- Will you believe that
 - God is good?
 - His plans for you are for your welfare?

God accepts the sinner into His presence NOT because they have straightened out their lives BUT because He Himself died in their place.

Or when the heat is on because of your circumstances or sin, will you

⁸ Compare 2 Peter 1:12

- Chuck the gospel and with it your God?
- And rise on the basis of your self-effort?

Brothers and sisters, that is the issue when it comes to this life, its struggles, and its issues! And so, what must be our goal when it comes to

- Discipleship?
- Maturation in our faith?
- Child rearing?
- Schooling?
- Witnessing?
- Fellowshiping?
- And the like?

The goal, and thus our call is NOT the hundreds of priorities to which our world would have us aspire BUT the engendering and/or the strengthening of our faith!

Miss this in

- Your Bible study.
- Sunday School class.
- Weekly fellowship group.
- Quiet Time.

and you undoubtedly will fall into moralism and the snare of the devil. Oh, but capture this goal and make it your calling, and you and I will become more and more faithful to our call as Servants of God.

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word is published regularly.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon and these notes can be found at [The Faithful Servant](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

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