

God's Fertilizers for Growth in Christ

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Strong & Ready! (Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

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Wednesday, December 9, 2015, 7pm at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois
livinghopechurch.net

Introduction: Open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians 2. I want to bring a teaching to you tonight entitled: "Leaders' Love for the Sheep."

"A high view of Scripture is of little value to us if we do not enthusiastically embrace the Scripture's authority... To our shame, we have hungered to be masters of the Word much more than we have hungered to be mastered by it... the challenge to preserve and articulate... Scripture cannot be met by intellectual powers alone, but only on our knees and by the power of God."

- D. A. Carson

The Chinese Bamboo Tree

I want to tell you about an unusual tree, called the Chinese Bamboo tree. You plant it, and nothing much happens except a tiny shoot coming out of the bulb.

- You water, fertilize, and watch, but nothing happens.
- You keep watering, and fertilizing, and waiting—4 to 5 years, sometimes even longer—and nothing seems to be happening.
- Then, one day, after years of watering and fertilizing, and only if that watering and fertilizing was done regularly and faithfully, you see a little spring of new growth happening.
- In the 6 weeks that follow, the Chinese Bamboo tree grows as much as 2 feet per day, until it grows to be ninety feet tall!
- In extreme cases, bamboos can grow to be over 150 feet tall!

During the first 4-5 years, all the growth is underground in a massive fibrous root structure that spreads deep and wide in the earth, and this is critical. The outward growth only occurs if the bamboo tree has been properly watered and nourished along the way so that its root system is established.

D.L. Moody said, "Many of us want to do the great things for God, but no one wants to serve God in the little things."

We need to realize that the Christian life is much like the Chinese Bamboo tree. We need a lot of watering and fertilizing and faithfulness in order to grow in Christ.

There is a threefold cause for Paul's gratitude: the Thessalonians' reception of God's Word, their honoring of the saints, and their perseverance in suffering.¹ It is in this we see the three means of grace God uses to grow a believer: the Bible, the church, and suffering.

This evening, I want to show you three fertilizers for the Christian life from 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16.

Reading of Holy Scripture

1 Thess.2:13-16, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.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,¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!"

I. **God's Word** is a spiritual fertilizer, 1 Thess. 2:13

1 Thess. 2:13, "And we also thank **God** constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you **heard from us, you accepted** it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

The Power Comes by Believing the Word

The word that the Thessalonians had received was 'at work in you believers,' which means it was effective and profitable. The divine origin of the word causes it to work powerfully in all who believe its message. The word 'believe' is in the present tense because it shows the condition we must fulfill if we are to experience the word working in our lives on a daily basis.²

Thanks to God for the Powerful Word

Paul had God to thank for the effect of God's Word. Aren't you glad God's Word can transform the heart. God's Word can radically change our attitude and how we think.

Psalms 119:105 (NLT), "Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path."

A High View of Scripture

D. A. Carson, "A high view of Scripture is of little value to us if we do not enthusiastically embrace the Scripture's authority... To our shame, we have hungered to be masters of the Word much more than we have hungered to be mastered by it... the challenge to preserve and articulate... Scripture cannot be met by intellectual powers alone, but only on our knees and by the power of God."³

¹ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2002). *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (p. 57). Chicago: Moody Press.

² Shenton, T. (2006). *Opening up 1 Thessalonians* (p. 43). Leominster: Day One Publications.

³ D.A. Carson, *Collected Writings*, "Recent Developments about the Doctrine of Scripture," 106–9.

We Cannot Regard God's Word to Highly

We are familiar with the claims of the Old Testament prophets that they were bearers of the word of God, for they introduced their oracles with formulas like 'the word of the Lord came to me', 'listen to the word of the Lord', and 'thus says the Lord'. But here in verse 13 is a comparable claim by a New Testament apostle. Paul does not rebuke the Thessalonians for regarding his message too highly. On the contrary, he commends them for having recognized it as what it truly is (God's word) and for having accepted it as such.⁴

The Reason that God's Word is Effective

We have a lot to thank God for. We know the only reason we choose to obey Him is because He has chosen us. John Piper says it well: "Divine election is the guarantee that God will undertake to complete by sanctifying grace what his electing grace has begun. This is the meaning of the new covenant: God does not merely command obedience, he gives it."⁵

God Opened the Hearts of the Thessalonians

Paul gives thanks that God allowed the Thessalonian believers to "received the word of God" so that there would be no hindrance of the Word's grip and power and divine authority in their lives.

The Gospel is Authenticated in Our Transformed Lives

"The gospel authenticates its divine origin by its transforming power in our lives."⁶ The proof that God had truly worked was that it was at present "at work in you believers" (vs.13).

A Sweet Interplay: God, us, you...

There is a deliberate interplay in this important statement between 'God', 'us' and 'you'. What you received (the technical term for receiving a tradition which is being handed on), namely what you heard *from us* (the apostle), you accepted as the word *of God*, which is effectively at work *in you*.

The message came from God through the apostle to the Thessalonians and was **changing** them.⁷

APPLICATIONS

Is Meaningful Change Possible Apart from God's Word?

We need to ask the question dear saints: Is meaningful change even possible apart from a diligent study of God's Word? Yes, the Word can come to us in many ways: personal devotions, preaching, someone's biblical advice. But apart from being exposed to God's revelation, can we change? The answer is no!

Title

Robin Boisvert four powerful principles of change that interrelate with what we are talking about in 1 Thess. 2:13. He says in his book "How to Change" he says there are four vital ingredients to lasting change in your life:

⁴ Stott, J. R. W. (1994). *The message of Thessalonians: the gospel & the end of time* (pp. 54–55). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁵ John Piper, *The Pleasures Of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1991), p. 147.

⁶ Stott, Ibid.

⁷ Stott, J. R. W. (1994). *The message of Thessalonians: the gospel & the end of time* (p. 54). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- (1) A commitment to the Bible, not our feelings
- (2) Knowledge of the Bible with specific application
- (3) Unconditional surrender to the Holy Spirit
- (4) Participation in God's forever family (the church)

- The **Bible** is our infallible standard for faith, doctrine, and practice. Those who resist its authority will be blown off course by their own feelings and cultural trends.
- **Knowledge without application** is lifeless. In order to be transformed, we must apply and practice the truth of God's Word in daily life.
- Application of Biblical principles is impossible apart from **the Holy Spirit**. While we must participate in change, he is the source of our power.
- The **church** is God's intended context for change. God never intended for us to live isolated from or independent of other Christians. Through committed participation in the local church, we find instruction, encouragement, correction, and opportunities to press on toward maturity in Christ.

Martin Luther Quote

I know you want to grow and change into Christ's image as soon as possible, but let me give you a warning from Martin Luther that as God's Word takes hold, you must avoid the sin of perfectionism. He says:

"This life, therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished but it is going on. This is not the end but it is the road; all does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified."⁸ — **Martin Luther**

A Heart to Obey God's Spirit Applying God's Word

We need to keep in step with the Spirit who speaks through the Word of God. God produces the desire to change through the Spirit applying God's Word – it is every Christian's sincere desire to obey God's Word because of the Spirit. R.C. Sproul explains how the transformation is ongoing throughout the life of a Christian:

...the instant that true justifying faith is present in the life of the believer, the person begins to change. That change will be evidenced in a life that moves to obedience [in response to God's Word applied by the Holy Spirit]. Good works necessarily flow out of true faith. The works do not justify us. It is the righteousness of Christ that justifies us. But if the works do not follow, it is proof positive that we do not have genuine faith and are therefore still unjustified people.⁹

God promises when He removes our heart of stone that He will give us a heart of flesh that obeys the Spirit.

Ezekiel 36:26-27, "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my judgments."

⁸ Martin Luther. *Defense of All the Articles*, Lazareth transl., as found in Grace Brame, *Receptive Prayer* (Chalice Press, 1985) p.119

⁹R.C. Sproul. *Pleasing God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994), 153.

There is a second kind of fertilizer, a means of growth in grace, and it is the church.

II. **God's church is a spiritual soil,** 1 Thess. 2:14a.

1 Thess. 2:14a, “For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea...”

You Became Imitators of the Churches

Paul's thanksgiving leads to an affirmation of the Thessalonian imitation of the apostles and of the Lord as they received and began to live out the implications of the gospel.¹⁰

In other words, Paul was thankful they saw the importance of the local church. You cannot grow and change under normal circumstances without the Body of Christ.

The Church, a Means of Grace

God uses another means of grace here to conform us to Christ – He uses the church! Jay Adams says, “The Christian life is a matter of becoming in intrinsic character what we already are in Christ...The purpose of these passages [that tell us to grow in the context of the local church] (e.g. Romans 6, Colossians 3:5-14, Ephesians 4:22-32) is to show us the great gap between what we are counted or reckoned to be in Christ (justification) and what we are actually in ourselves in daily living (sanctification) in order to urge us to close the gap...Paul's purpose is to urge us to become in everyday living what we already are counted to be in Christ.”¹¹

Theologians call this the “indicative” and “imperative.” Realize who you already are in Christ, and then walk worthy of your calling.

III. **Suffering is a spiritual sun,** 1 Thess. 2:14b-16.

1 Thess. 2:14b-16, “...For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they [the Judean believers] did from the Jews...”

Filling Up the Sufferings of Christ

Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”

Family Persecution

This similarity was seen not only in their receiving the word, but also in their suffering for it: *You* (Thessalonians, mostly of Gentile stock) have *suffered from your own countrymen the same things those* (Judean) *churches suffered from the Jews* (14b).

But what sufferings at the hand of the Jews does Paul have in mind? He tells us:¹²

Vs. 15-16, “¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved...”

¹⁰ Martin, D. M. (1995). *1, 2 Thessalonians* (Vol. 33, p. 86). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹¹ Jay E. Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1986), p. 78.

¹² Stott, J. R. W. (1994). *The message of Thessalonians: the gospel & the end of time* (p. 55). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Vengeance is the Lord's

And then Paul adds in **verse 16b**, "so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!" As a result of their hostility toward God, *they always heap up their sins to the limit*. Just as God's judgment fell on the Amorites when their sin 'had reached its full measure' (Gen. 15:16), so it would fall on the Jewish people when they had filled up the measure of their sins and those of their forefathers.¹³

Don't ever take vengeance on anyone who harms you. That is God's area alone. **Romans 12:17-19**, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

The World Hates Christ, therefore They Hate Us!

We are hated because Christ is our head! He is our exalted head. Remember the words of our Lord in **John 15:18-21**, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me."

Do You Want to Grow?

Do you want to grow? They you will need lots of fertilizer, good soil, water, and sun! We need the fertilizer of His Word, the good soil of God's church, the good water of the Holy Spirit applying the Word, and the sun of suffering and persecution.

¹³ Stott, 56.