

LIGHTS OUT! – PART 5

A Church on Fire!

Isaiah 60:2 (KJV) - For, behold, the **darkness** shall cover the earth, and **gross darkness** the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.

Matthew 5:14-16 (NKJV) - ¹⁴ **"You are the light of the world.** A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house. ¹⁶ **Let your light so shine before men,** that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 - ²We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, ³remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. ⁸ For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. ⁹ For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *even* Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

I have never liked the word "average." Someone has defined average as being, "One step above the worst, and one step below the best." I don't know about you, but I have no desire to be the worst; and, I see no reason why not to be the best.

Sad to say, there are many "average" churches today. Let me give you a picture of the average Church. The average Church:

- Has 100 members
- Of those 100 members, 29, or 29% do not live in the nearby community
- It takes 81 of those members to win 1 person a year to Jesus Christ
- The average church baptizes only 8 people a year
- It takes 5 churches to support 1 missionary.
- Only 15 of the members are faithfully tithing and giving
- 95% of Christians will never win one soul to Christ

Many churches are like the airplane pilot who came on the loudspeaker and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know that our navigational equipment has malfunctioned. We don't know where we are; and, we don't know where we're going, but we're making excellent time."

That is the plight of many an "average" church today. They don't know where they are, don't know where they're going, but they think everything is just fine. As a result, because of a lack of passion, priority, or purpose, every time they assemble together it's just business as usual. They don't burn with the glory of God – they are not a light on a hill, at best they are a candle in a basket of obscurity and ineffectiveness.

However, I want to introduce to you a model church for a modern world, a light in the darkness of their culture, a burning city on a hill. Notice I did not say a "modern church" for a "modern world." I don't believe that Christ ever intended for His church to become like the world to reach the world; but I do believe that He intended for His church to be a model, and example to a modern world.

The church at Thessalonica is such a model church. Paul established the church at Thessalonica in Acts 17. After his version of "Jailhouse Rock," with Silas, in Acts 16, Paul left Philippi and headed for the important city of Thessalonica where he started what would become one of the greatest churches of his ministry, as well as the New Testament.

Thessalonica was established around 315 BC by Cassander, who named it after his wife Thessalonica, the half-sister of Alexander the Great. The Romans took the city in 168 BC and made it the capital of Macedonia in Greece.

Thessalonica was a "free city" (without a military force) governed by its citizens and was more Greek than Roman in character. Its population, estimated at 200,000, was made up of Greeks, Romans, and Jews.

The city borders the Aegean Sea, providing access to the Mediterranean. Its location made it a major shipping center, second only to Corinth and Ephesus. Artisans, merchants, and trade guilds made it wealthy, although most citizens performed physical labor of all types.

Religious pluralism filled Thessalonica with all types of pagan cults, temples, and deities. Archaeological evidence indicates at least 25 gods were represented in heathen worship, including Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and the Roman emperor, to name

a few. However, some Gentiles had become proselytes to Judaism and were known as God-fearers.

In the first letter, Paul answered their inquiries concerning the rapture of the church. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope ... For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, CSB). Hallelujah! Jesus is coming to take His beloved bride home to heaven!

The second letter was sent just a few months later. The persecution was becoming increasingly violent (2 Thessalonians 1:4-5, CSB) and some believed that the great tribulation had arrived (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, CSB). Paul lovingly encourages them. “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal encouragement and good hope by grace, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good work and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, CSB).

Paul writes to encourage the Thessalonian Christians, who have endured a great deal of persecution and who remain vulnerable to pagan Greek influences. He praises them as an example of faith, but presses them to push on toward perfection.

This church was on fire and impacting their culture...

The qualities that Paul outlines in chapter 1 give us the qualities that he found which constitute a model church for a modern world, and an example for our church to follow. First of all, Paul identifies that:

A church on fire is FASHIONED by Its EXCITEMENT!

There was something about the church of Thessalonica that set it apart from any other church. These were an exemplary people, an expectant people, and an excited people. Their excitement is seen in:

The WORSHIP that they EXPERIENCED!

We read in verse 5, "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance."

The key to the worship of the church of Thessalonica had nothing to do with their instruments, orchestra, choir or musical arrangements. The key was that it was "in power, and in the Holy Ghost." To put it simply, their worship had the touch of God on it. You could say that "God was all over the place in this place."

Their worship was not dull, dry, flowery, formal, monotone, or mundane. God had taken it out of the hands of men and placed it in the hands of the Holy Spirit. As a result, when they left church, they were different than when they came to church. They did not experience just a service, but a worship. They came to meet with God, and God, in the person, presence and power of the Holy Spirit, came to meet with them. That, my friend, is worship!

I recently read a great definition of worship, **"To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God; to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open up the heart to the love of God; and, to devote the will to the purpose of God."**

Worship is the believer's response to all that we are to all that God is!

I think of a church service where all the deacons sat on the front row. The service was in progress, but it was dead as a hammer. Finally, one of the deacons fell dead of a heart attack. The paramedics came, but when they arrived it took them 7 tries to figure out which deacon was dead.

You can have well-trained musicians, and not experience worship. You can sing praise choruses, or hymns and not experience worship. You can bring in the best group on the road and not experience worship. But, when God shows up, shows out and shows off, you will experience worship.

By the way, since He is not a "God of the dead," but a "God of the living," **TRUE WORSHIP WILL BE DIVINE IN ITS FOCUS AND DYNAMIC IN ITS FORMAT.** You can go to a funeral home and be around dead things. You can go to a cemetery and find people dying to get in there. **But, when we come to the house of God with the people of God, moved by the Spirit of God by the preaching of the Word of God, we should have no problem giving praise, glory and honor to the Son of God.**

Thus, when the glory goes up, the glory will come down. True worship will be "in power and in the Holy Ghost."

Notice that the worship they experienced was a result of:

The WORD that they EMBRACED!

We get the idea that these Thessalonian believers not only enjoyed the singing, the shouting and the service; but they also enjoyed the sermon.

We read in verse 6 that they "received the word of the Lord in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost."

The word "received" literally means, "to welcome." The idea is of welcoming a guest into one's home. In other words, these Thessalonians received the Word into their hearts like you would receive a guest into your home. The Word was not something that they resented it was something that they received. It was not something that they endured it was something that they enjoyed.

These Thessalonian believers eagerly received the Word, and earnestly received the Word. Although they were the recipients of persecution, opposition, and oppression they longed for the Word, and they looked to the Word.

I want to make it clear that the most important thing that will ever take place in this church is the PREACHING OF GOD'S WORD. As a result, NO THING can ever take the place of the MAIN THING. And, the main thing is the preaching of God's inspired, inerrant, infallible, incorruptible Word. As long as I am the pastor here we will seek to give the Word of God prominence and preeminence in every service.

As **John Calvin said, "We owe to scripture the same reverence we owe to God."** This book was written by 40 authors covering a period of 1600 years. It is filled with 66 books, 1187 chapters, 31,373 verses; and, 775,693 words and every "jot" or "tittle" is absolutely, unequivocally, and totally true. It is the FINAL AUTHORITY in all matters. Thus, whenever the Word of God is preached don't resent it but receive it. **Don't allow it to become something you ENDURE, but allow it to become something you ENJOY and EMBRACE.**

Of all the weapons of war used in the ancient world, the short sword, the 'marchaira,' was the most deadly. It was not a large slashing sword designed to cut or break, but a sharp sword used in close combat. It was the sword that could penetrate and cause internal damage to organs, leading to death. It was used in face-to-face, hand-to-hand combat. The deeper it penetrated, the more it accomplished its purpose.

The more that we embrace the Word of God, and the deeper that we allow it to penetrate, the more it will accomplish in our life, and in our church. **Thus, when the Word is embraced worship will be experienced; and this will become a place that is fashioned by its excitement.**

A Church of fire is FERVENT in Its EVANGELISM!

According to Jesus, His great purpose for coming into the world was "to seek and to save that which was lost." This was, in the words of C. H. Spurgeon, "The Errand of Mercy."

It would seem that the church at Thessalonica never lost sight of the purpose for their existence. THEY DID NOT EXIST TO BE A MUSEUM FOR SAINTS, BUT A HOSPITAL FOR SINNERS. THEY DID NOT EXIST TO BE KEEPERS OF THE AQUARIUM, BUT FISHERS OF MEN. Thus, while they knew of, in verse 4, their "election of God," it was a message that they could not keep to themselves. They were fervent in their evangelism of getting the message of the Gospel beyond their 4 walls.

I believe the reason for their evangelistic fervor was due to the fact that they were:

CONCERNED about the CONDITION of the LOST!

Verse 8 describes the outreach program of Thessalonica, "For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad." The verb "sounded out" actually means, "To sound as a trumpet." They were not tooting their own horns, but they were blowing the trumpet of the gospel of grace.

In other words, they could not keep this message to themselves. They had to share it with everyone they encountered. They were not interested in promoting their own name and agenda. Rather, they picked up the gospel trumpet and faithfully echoed forth the message of salvation.

Why? **Look at verse 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."** In other words, they knew what they used to be, and from what they had been delivered. They once served "idols," but because of the message of salvation, they had "turned to God."

The church at Thessalonica was surrounded by a Pagan society. They were faced with idolatry and the false worship of many pagan gods. Thus, they knew firsthand the condition of the lost world that surrounded them, and they were concerned about the lost condition of their community. **So much so that they could not keep what God had done for them to themselves.** They wanted to "sound out" and get the message out to everyone they could.

Ladies and gentlemen, **THE #1 PRIORITY OF THIS CHURCH MUST BE EVANGELISM.** Vance Havner said, "For a church to say it's going to major in evangelism is like a railroad to say it's going to major in transportation."

When Christianity first began, it was a small crowd following Jesus who traveled throughout Galilee performing miracles and sharing the Good News. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, Christianity has become the largest religion in the world. Out of over 7 billion people in the world, 2.3 billion, or 30.9%, adhere to the Christian faith.

Although this is a great milestone, there is an even greater challenge that our faith is facing. Namely, the Church of today seems to have turned a blind eye to those who have never heard of the Gospel. In fact, 70% of evangelical Christians have never even been told about the 1.6 billion unevangelized people in the world. (World Evangelization Research Center) How are we supposed to take the Gospel to the unevangelized if we don't even know about them?

8,000,000,000 billion people on the planet – 8 billion divided by 70 equals 114,285,714. This means that 114,285,714 people, on average, die every year. If we divide 114,285,714 by 365 days in a year, this means that an average of 313,111 people are dying every day in this world.

In the next 60 minutes, 7000 people will die; and 6000 of those have never heard the name of Jesus. It is estimated that 313,111 people die everyday, over 6000 every hour, 120 every minute, and 4-5 every second.

Only 10% of those who die are saved – born again believers!

281,800 people die and enter hell every day!

196 people a minute are entering hell!

During my sermon 11,760 people will die and go to hell!

If you compress the population of the world into a community of 100 people, 23 would live under Communist rule; 25 would belong to the Roman Catholic church; 15 would be Moslems; 11 would be Hindus; 15 would be Confucianists or Buddhists and only 8 would be "born again Christians."

Yet, while we sit here in our padded chairs and cooled auditoriums, we have become more concerned about buildings, budgets, business and belongings than about what God has called us to do: WIN THE LOST!

R. A. Torrey asked, "I would like to ask what right a man has to call himself a Christian who is not a soul-winner."

If there is anything that we, as a church, should be concerned about, it should be the condition of our lost community.

The Thessalonian church was concerned about the condition of the lost, because they were:

COMMITTED to the COMMISSION of the LORD!

Notice, in verse 8, that they "sounded out the word of the Lord." In other words, **the commission of Christ became the mission of this church.** They were committed to carrying out the Great Commission.

We find an interesting connection between verse 4 and verses 8-9. In verse 4 they were reminded of their "election of God." However, in verses 8-9 they were involved in evangelism. Election and evangelism go hand in hand.

The person who says, "God will save who He wants to save and He doesn't need my help," understands nothing about election or evangelism. In the Bible, election is always in regards to a purpose. In other words, God elected the nation of Israel for the purpose of witnessing to the Gentiles. In the same way, God has elected the church for the purpose that we might win the world to Jesus Christ. **Election is not an escape from evangelism; it is the greatest excuse for evangelism.**

That is the reason that all 4 gospels end, and the book of Acts begins with commissions for the church today. In the New Testament, the entire congregation was involved in sharing the gospel of Christ. New Testament did not hire staff to do the witnessing and evangelism; but, **EVERYBODY told ANYBODY that God's grace could make a NOBODY into SOMEBODY!**

In our day, many churches have become like the Dead Sea, which takes in, but having no outlet, never gives out. **However, the Thessalonian church not only received the gospel message, but they released the gospel message and "sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in EVERY PLACE your faith to God-ward is spread abroad."**

Someone has said, "There is no fear that the church (today) will not succeed, but that it will only succeed in those things that really don't matter." Ladies and gentlemen, the fact of the matter is that it matters not what else we do, how well we do it, or how nice it looks. If we are not reaching men, women, boys, girls, red, yellow, black and white for Christ, then it means absolutely nothing.

Finally, notice that a model church is not only fashioned by its excitement, and fervent in its evangelism; but:

A church on fire is FAITHFUL to Its EXAMPLE!

I love how Paul describes this church in verse 7. He describes them as "*ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.*" The word "ensamples" is the Greek word tupos. It was often associated with the impression made by a hammer-like instrument. It referred to "the impress made by the blow."

Later, the word seemed to identify with a stamp, or the visible impression made by the outline of a stamp. In other words, *God made such an impression on the Thessalonian church that the Thessalonian church made an impression on others.* Paul left a mark on them, and they left a mark on their society.

The truth of the matter is that The Bend will leave an impression on this community. Whether we realize it, or not, we are leaving an impression by what we practice, preach, promote and pursue. May it be an impression of divine significance. May it be an impression like the Thessalonian church.

They left an impression because:

They LABORED in the WORK of God!

What a beautiful tribute Paul gives to the Thessalonian church's work ethic. They labored in the work of God sacrificially. We read in verse 3 about their "work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." They didn't seem to be interested in being applauded on Earth, only to be accepted in Heaven.

However, not only did they labor in the work of God sacrificially, but sincerely. *In verse 9, we are told that they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."* The word "serve" is the Greek work *douleuo*, the verb form of the word *doulos*, which speaks of a bondsman, or servant.

The word indicates "to be given to another's will and interests." In other words, we get the idea that to these Thessalonian believers, God's will had become their will. They only wanted to serve His purpose, His plan, and His program. They had totally dedicated their lives to will of the Master of all masters.

The statement in verse 9 seems to connect the cycle that began in verse 3. They labored sacrificially because they labored sincerely. In other words, the "work of faith" parallels with the fact that they had "turned to God from idols." The "labour of love" corresponds with the words

"to serve the living and true God."

It is because of what Christ has done for us that we should sacrificially and sincerely do all we can do to labor in His vineyard. I should never have to plead, beg, or implore you to serve God. If you have been saved, then laboring in the work of God should be as natural to you as breathing.

Finally, they not only labored in the work of God, but:

They LOOKED for the SON of God!

I believe that verse 10 outlines the entire motivation for everything these Thessalonian believers did. They **loved** God, they **lived** for God, and they **labored** for God because they **looked** for God. We see them "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come."

The word "wait" implies "patience and trust." In other words, although these believers may not have understood all the details concerning Christ's return, they believed that He would keep His promise to come again. Thus, while they labored in His work they looked for His return.

One of the very foundational doctrines of our faith is the rapture/return of Christ for His church. However, if we really believe that it will be proven by what we preach, what we practice, what we pursue and what we prioritize.

A church that truly lives in the expectation of seeing the Lord Jesus Christ at any time will be a vibrant and victorious group of people. We are not looking for the signs; we are listening for the shout and longing for the Savior. And, while we look, listen, and long, we labor by sharing the message of the gospel with everyone we can.

Church family, we are living in a day when the world is at its worst. Surely a world at its worst demands a church at its best.

Conclusion: