

“Good Doctrine Requires Good Practice”

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

St. Paul commends the church in Thessalonica for their perseverance in the faith in the face of persecution because of their faith. He commends them for not turning away from the One, true God – going back to worshiping the pagan gods of their neighbors. Life was tough for the Christians in the First Century. You may have to deal with some uninformed, obnoxious atheist co-workers or college professors, but the Christians in Paul’s day were driven from their homes, put into prison, beaten, and a number of them were killed for their faith. Others had their businesses destroyed – if you were a Christian, very often the Jews and the pagans would refuse to do business with you. Economic persecution.

Yet, Paul is happy to acknowledge that the Thessalonians are filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Paul spoke of joy in our Epistle reading from last week, Philippians 4 (words familiar to us all), “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. . . The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything.”

Listen to what the Roman historian Tacitus says as he describes what he saw happening to the Christians in Rome during the time of St. Paul: “In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and [bitten] to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights.”

Nero lit up the city with human torches. This is the reality of

persecution which inspires Paul to write, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

It is into this reality that Paul gives thanks for the faithful devotion of the Thessalonians who received the Word of God “in much affliction.” We look at the pictures of persecuted Christians in the Middle East today and marvel at the “full conviction” and steadfastness of their faith. It should embarrass us at the ease with which we are able to conduct our lives and gather for worship. Don’t ever take that for granted. Satan would love to raise up another Nero Caesar. That is, after all, what the number 666 is in Revelation. Hebrew uses letters for numbers and when you transliterate Nero Caesar from Greek to Hebrew, the Hebrew letters total 666.

We as Christians must always be prepared for persecution in its many forms, even if or when the next Nero Caesar rises up. Paul commends the Thessalonians because they not only said all the right words in regard to their faith, but in action, they became imitators of Paul and Silas and Timothy.

There has always been the temptation for God’s people to express their faith in the words that they speak without following through with actions which mirror those words. I will just say this up front. In this, we Lutherans are not without guilt.

Throughout the Old Testament we see this. The 70 elders of Israel meet with God and approve the covenant at Mt. Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain. They make a golden calf. During the 400 years of the Judges, during the times of the kings, the Israelites would come to the Tabernacle or Temple for worship, made sacrifices, but most of the time, they thumbed their noses at God and did not see a problem with conducting their business and acting no better than the pagans. Therefore, God spoke

through the prophets such as Isaiah who said: “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’” [Is. 29:13].

Jesus warned His disciples to beware the teachings of the Pharisees. He said to them: “do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” [Mt. 23:3]. Good doctrine, that is, good teaching, requires good practice. You cannot have one without the other. Early church father St. Ignatius, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, wrote, “It is good to teach, if he who speaks also acts” (Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1 p. 55).

We learn much more from watching someone than merely listening to their words. A person’s words do not mean much if their actions are contrary to that which they say. When Jesus was teaching and training His disciples to be proclaimers of the Good News of salvation, He did more than meet with them a few times a week for classroom lectures. The disciples lived with Jesus. They accompanied Him as He traveled throughout the land. They not only learned He was the Son of God through the words of His mouth, but they were able to see that every aspect of His sinless life pointed to the fact that He was truly the Son of God.

The disciples were not only taught to preach the words of Christ, but to imitate the actions of Christ. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, after He had washed the disciple’s feet, Jesus said to His disciples: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” [Jn. 13:34-35].

Next week, we and much of the Western world will be recognizing the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther posting the 95 Theses. (There are some churches who won’t be celebrating as fervently as we will be) but

Luther's teachings and the rediscovery of the Gospel was much more than just an intellectual exercise. Luther's legacy is not simply volume upon volume of doctrinal statements.

In my set of Luther's Works, there are four volumes entitled "Word and Sacrament." There are also four volumes entitled "The Christian in Society."

Paul, Silas, and Timothy taught the Thessalonians to be imitators of Christ by living among them and demonstrating what living a life in Christ is all about. Being content in every situation; facing persecution of all kinds and having the confidence that "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" – even face my own death with the full conviction that the grave has no mastery over the life or death of a Christian.

We understand that we can never even come close to being perfect imitators of Jesus Christ or live our lives never being anxious or worried about anything. Even the great saints of the Bible continually fell into sin. Their legacy is defined by their confession of faith not the works of their hands. Luther wrote, "The first, highest, and most precious of all good works is faith in Christ" (LW 44:23).

Whether we are talking about the people who walked and talked with Christ Himself, or those who only recently have been called home by our heavenly Father, their faith is their legacy. This is our legacy also. We are following in the footsteps of faithful generations. Through the Holy Spirit working in our hearts, we have heard the Word of God proclaiming salvation in Christ, and we have witnessed Christ in action through the lives of those faithful people.

We remember with thanksgiving the cloud of faithful witnesses of whom we are imitators, and we look forward to our happy reunion with them in heaven. Amen.