

The Blessings that are St. Andrew

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – November 9, 2003

Scripture Background Study

Scripture Passage

1 *Thessalonians 1:2-10* (NRSV)

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

This is Commitment Weekend!

Today, we conclude our series:

“Sharing Our Blessings”

St. Andrew

I love St. Andrew. I've been a bit of an itinerant in my life and have belonged to many churches, but St. Andrew stands apart from them all. My wife, Patti, and I, with our son Robby, have been attending St. Andrew for about five years. From the beginning, we felt that this was a congregation of God's people that seemed to have received a large measure of God's grace. Our family has been deeply blessed here. Indeed, God reached out to me here as he never had before. And for these many blessings, the blessings that are St. Andrew, my family and I thank God each day.

As we reflect today upon the community to which we all belong, it is appropriate that we look back to another church, a church that had received the Good News with great power and, thus, had become a blessing to countless others.

Christians in Thessalonica – the new kids on the block

Thessalonica lies on a major highway about 200 miles north of Athens, Greece. This port city had been visited by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 16 & 17) and, as he had done throughout his travels, Paul founded Christian house churches there. Not longer after leaving there to continue southward across Greece, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. This letter is 1 Thessalonians and it is probably the oldest of all the NT writings, having been written in 50AD or so.

The Imitation of Christ (and of Paul!?)

When Paul gives his thanks that the Thessalonians have become “imitators of us [Paul Silvanus, and Timothy, see 1:1] and the Lord” it can strike us as a bit odd or off. After all, aren't imitations mere copies of the original, even phony at that? And is Paul really so bold (arrogant?) as to expect that these Christians will remake themselves into *his* image?

In our world, we get pretty shy about being role models. But the language of imitation was prevalent in Paul's day. If Paul had not been willing to hold himself up as worthy of imitation, he would have been seen as an unworthy teacher. Paul means that we can look to Jesus and even to himself as we seek to learn the shape of an authentically Christian life. It is not a call for us all to do and say the same things, nor to be cheap knock-offs of the real thing. I must live my life, not Jesus' life and not Paul's. But from them, I can learn much about what it means to live each day in right relationship with God and with other persons. Look back a few weeks to Philippians 2:5-8. There, Paul urges the Philippians to have the “same mind” that was in Jesus. It is a call for us to imitate the selflessness of Jesus so that, like the Thessalonians, we might, in turn, be an example to others. (v. 7)

It was customary in those times for letters to begin with an expression of thanks to the letter's recipients. But this is no run-of-the-mill thanksgiving. Paul is so effusive in his thanks for the Thessalonian Christians that it is hard to even discern in the letter where the thanksgiving ends!

Though this Christian community is perhaps only a few months old, already they have been persecuted (1:6; 2:13-16) and some have died, though whether from the persecution we can't be sure (4:13-18). Yet, despite their spiritual youthfulness, Paul is convinced that they have been grabbed by God, empowered by his Spirit . . . chosen. Paul is as sure of this as he is of his own empowerment, for in them he sees already "the work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" that ought to characterize the lives of all Christians. Not only did the Thessalonians hear the words of Paul's gospel proclamation to them,¹ they grasped its power, and for this, Paul is deeply thankful, remembering the Thessalonians "constantly."

"You turn to God from idols"

In v. 9, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their willingness to "turn from idols" and embrace the one true and living God. What's involved here escapes most modern readers. Tom Wright notes that this turning from idols was "unheard of in Paul's world. It would be like asking people in a modern city to give up using motor cars, computers, and telephones."¹ The gods of Greco-Roman paganism were everywhere. Going on a business trip? . . . stop by a local shrine. Planting a tree? . . . you better pray to the appropriate god. Generally, most people simply hoped to stay out of the gods' way! And by Paul's day, this effort to live with all the gods was becoming even more difficult. For now, the Roman emperors were expecting (demanding!) to be worshiped as gods themselves, erecting numerous shrines and temples to themselves.

It is in such a world that Paul, a Jew, comes claiming that all these idols and gods are frauds, including Caesar! Little wonder that Paul and the Thessalonians were persecuted and shunned. The Christians' claims set them apart from society to a degree that is hard for us to imagine, making their faith an enduring witness to the one true God.

1. from *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* by N.T. (Tom) Wright, published by SPCK, 2002.

Being the light to the world!

As thankful as Paul was for what was happening within the Christian community in Thessalonica, he is even more thrilled by their witness to others. In the short time since their coming to faith in Jesus Christ, the Thessalonians had been an inspiration and example to other Christians throughout Greece.² Indeed, Paul is so expansive in his praise that one wonders if he is indulging in a little hyperbole. Perhaps, but regardless, the power of God that seized this small group of Christians quickly turned outward as word of their faith and love and hope spread.

Having turned from idols, these Christians had become imitators of Paul and of Christ and, in so doing, had become an example to all. The power of God that had worked within them and their community was quickly directed outward. We shouldn't imagine that they had developed lots of ministries and new programs. There had been no time for any of that! Yet, nonetheless, others saw in the Thessalonians a transformation that reached every part of their lives - their work of faith, and their labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope. This transformation revealed that, by God's grace, the Thessalonian Christians understood that they were to be the light to the world (Matt. 5:14). Others wanted that the Thessalonians had!

We at St. Andrew have been richly blessed by God and this community is a blessing to all who belong. The blessings that are St. Andrew are too numerous to count. Our challenge will always be to remember that the charge given us by God is to be a blessing to others - to be the salt of the earth and the light to the world. Bright lights shine always and in all directions!

¹When Paul refers to "gospel" in v.5 he is not referring to the four Gospels of the NT. The first of the Gospels, Mark, would not be written for another 15 years or so. Instead, Paul uses "gospel" to refer to the Good News of the proclamation that he brought to Thessalonians and everyone else who would listen. This proclamation, the gospel, can be summed up in three words; "Jesus is Lord!"

²In v. 7-8, Paul refers to Macedonia and Achaia. Macedonia was the region encompassing the northern portion of modern-day Greece and also Albania. Achaia was the large Greek peninsula south of Macedonia. Paul purposely refers to a huge expanse of geography.

Daily Bible Readings

(outline from Abraham Smith's commentary on 1 Thessalonians in the *New Interpreter's Bible*)
Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Thessalonians 1 God's unstoppable word!</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Thessalonians 2 Continuing with the Gospel; concern for the church's survival</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Thessalonians 3 A visit of consolation; Paul's coming visit to them</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Thessalonians 4 Walking a distinctive life; maintaining the hope of Jesus' coming and the consummation of God's kingdom</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Thessalonians 5 Nurturing resources for the distinctive life; the closing prayer</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are you in a Sunday morning class? If not – try one!

Scott Engle's new Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall (the 'old' sanctuary) at 9:30. It is a great chance to make new friends and learn more about the Bible and the Christian faith. More than 150 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. As we come to Commitment Weekend, this is a time to reflect upon the ways in which we have been blessed by God and by St. Andrew. You might share some stories about the most meaningful and memorable experiences you've had at St. Andrew or with other members of the St. Andrew family. What difference has St. Andrew made in your own life? What hopes do you have for St. Andrew? As we talk about where we go from here, what things about that journey will be most important to you?
2. Imagine how thrilled the Christians in Thessalonica must have been to receive such a letter from Paul! In Paul's thanksgiving, today's passage from 1 Thessalonians, he commends them for imitating himself and Jesus Christ. We often talk about becoming Christlike, though sometimes the very idea can seem a bit overwhelming. But what would it mean to become "Paul-like"? In what ways do Paul's life and missionary journeys inform our own mission to be the light to the world? You might even discuss what we know – or don't know! – about Paul.