

4/16/23 Christ Fellowship

“Faith, Love & Hope” – 1 Thess. 1:1-3

I want you to think of somebody you know or have known that made a big -and positive - impact on your life. Maybe it was your mom or dad, grandma, grandpa, friend, somebody at church or somebody you met in jail. Doesn't matter how you knew them. I want you to think about them and think about what characteristics they showed that made an impact on you. Somebody tell me about that person. What characteristics did they show that impacted you positively? How did those characteristics manifest themselves? How did they show up?

Did that person just talk about loving you but not show it? Did they make promises they didn't keep? Did they say things to you that were not true? Did they build up your hope but ultimately let you down? Probably not. True love is proven. When you care about someone, you will show it. When you believe in someone, you will make it obvious. And that goes for people loving people and for people loving God.

I heard the supposedly true story of a man who was attending a junior stock show when a grand-champion lamb, owned by a little girl, was being auctioned. As the bids reached five dollars per pound, the little girl, standing beside the lamb in the arena, began to cry. At ten dollars, the tears were streaming down her face and she clasped her arms tightly around the lamb's neck. The higher the bids rose, the more she cried. Finally, a local businessman bought the lamb for more than \$1000, but then announced that he was donating it to the little girl because she loved it so much. The crowd applauded and cheered.

Months later, the man, who was a teacher, was judging some statewide essays when I came across one from a girl who told about the time her grand-champion lamb had been auctioned. *"The prices began to get so high during the bidding," she wrote, "that I started to cry from happiness."* She continued with: *"The man who bought the lamb for so much more than I ever dreamed I would get returned the lamb to me, and when I got home, Daddy barbecued the lamb--and it was really delicious."* (Joe Wagner, Reader's Digest.)

That girl really loved that lamb but she loved it most with a little lemon-butter sauce, it sounds like, right? But true love is proven and in about A.D. 51, Paul wrote a letter to a church that he loved, which helped to prove his love for that church but ultimately showed the church's love for God. Have you ever wondered what Paul would write to Christ Fellowship today if he wrote us a letter?

Turn to **1 Thessalonians** in your Bibles and I think this would be pretty close. Thessalonians 1 and 2 are between Colossians and Timothy in the New Testament. And 1 Thessalonians was probably the first letter written chronologically in the New Testament. It was Paul's first epistle,

which basically means letter and he is writing to the church in Thessalonica that he started not long before. He started it on his second missionary journey but could only stay about three weeks before he got run out of town. So, a little while later, Paul sent his buddy Timothy to check on this baby church and see how they were doing. Evidently, Timothy sent back a very good report and now Paul is writing to encourage them and answer some questions they still had.

This church was probably fairly well-off financially. Thessalonica was, and still is, a busy, crowded shipping port and also right on a main “highway” going through Greece. So, as you know, with lots of people comes lots of beliefs about religion and what happens after death so Paul is writing to them and us a practical handbook to use for living correctly in that kind of world.

So, turn to **1 Thessalonians 1:1-3** and let’s see how Paul starts this letter. *Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:*

*Grace and peace to you. 2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father **your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

There are three phrases in there I want to hone in on. “**your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope.**” Now, we all know Paul wrote multiple times about faith, hope and love. We all love those passages. We like to think we all have faith, hope and love. We like to put that phrase on Bible covers and wall hangings and decorative dish cloths. But how many of you have decorative dish cloths that say, “work, labor and endure”? Huh? Nobody?

If you’ll notice, the title of this message is “Faith, Love & Hope” because that is the order Paul mentions them. But the reason that is the title is because “Work, Labor & Endure” doesn’t sound as nice. Would you rather hear a message about “Faith, Love & Hope” or “Work, Labor & Endure”? I know.

“Work, Labor & Endure” sounds like it is going to be hard. It sounds like it might be painful and difficult. And that sounds icky. Well, welcome to icky Christianity. So many people come to faith in Jesus and in the back of their mind, they are thinking about how wonderful it’s going to be when that faith, hope and love kicks in. Well, do you know how you get that faith, hope and love? I’ll give you one guess. Through work, labor and endurance. And the trick is, you can’t truly have work, labor and endurance that amounts to anything for God unless you have faith, hope and love. So, we see that you can’t truly have one without the other.

One of my commentaries (Clarke) said that the church that shows the work of faith, the labor of love and the endurance of hope is in the suburbs of Heaven. I like that. We aren't there yet. We aren't in Heaven obviously. But when we live like that, we are as close as we can get in this life. And I believe Christ Fellowship is a lot like that church in Thessalonica. I believe Paul would write us a similar letter as to what he wrote to them.

The problem that the church in Thessalonica had, and the problem we have being so much like them, is to get this letter and have the temptation to think we can relax now. You know, we have worked hard in the last six months. Our church moved from Lake Bridgeport to Chico. It took all hands on deck to move us here physically. We have worked hard since we have been here with parties in the park and passing out fliers and telling the neighbors who we are. And it might be tempting to think we deserve a little break. Let's coast for a while. Just chill out.

Whenever you feel like that, I would encourage you to think about the Apostle Paul. I don't have to tell you how hard Paul worked. He was a workhorse for God, always going, always preaching, always being abused but he kept on keeping on. Why? Have you ever wondered why he did it? Yes, Paul was called to this life by Jesus Himself but don't you think Paul wanted to just take a break sometimes and chill?

The reason he kept going was because...well, let me read to you what he told the church in Thessalonica in the next chapter. It's the thing that kept Paul going. In chapter two, Paul tells them why he never gave up. Read it in **chapter two, verses 19-20**. *"For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy."* He is saying that making disciples out of those people in Thessalonica was his glory and joy.

That word glory is "*doxo*" in the Greek and it means the blessing of God in this life and the next. When we are persistent and consistent in working for God, we are blessed, sometimes with physical blessings and sometimes with spiritual blessings. That sounds pretty good. Then Paul mentions joy. How many of you need joy in your life? Well, here's the secret. Continued obedience in working for God, never giving up brings joy.

So, what does this look like? If you want to be blessed and you want to have joy, what does it look like to work, labor and endure. Let's look at it closer. The word "work" as Paul used it here in the Greek is the word "*ergon*". You have heard of the word "ergonomic"? That comes from this word and it means to toil, to work and do it efficiently and effectively.

We have been praying a lot around here for God to show us how to reach the city of Chico. I was telling somebody the other day that when our church was in Lake Bridgeport that we would have something special going on and I would make up some fliers and we would pass them out around town and we had pretty good success with that. People there responded well

to fliers put on their door. Well, I have tried that twice since we have been here and the only response has been angry neighbors. That doesn't seem to be effective or efficient work so far.

But do you know what does work well; what works efficiently and effectively? Word of mouth. Telling your neighbor or your friend that you had a great time at church the other day and you like it because it doesn't have any rules or that we minister specifically to the poor, the addicted and the incarcerated. That works. That "ergons."

I've told some of you before that my whenever my dad met somebody new, he almost always asked them where they went to church. He didn't ask confrontationally but just part of the conversation. And so many times people would say they went to such-and-such church and my dad would ask who the pastor was there. *"Uh, uh, well, uh, you know, it's been a while since I've been there...honey, what's that guy's name that..."* Okay, okay, we get it. And then he would invite them to our church. He was always working like that.

But there is more to working and toiling than just inviting people to church, a lot more. Paul said to the Thessalonians that it was their work produced by faith. It was because they were convinced of the truth of the Gospel that made them work so hard. I don't know how their church was set up but it has to be your conviction of the truth of the Gospel that makes you teach a little kids' class or mow the lawn or clean toilets...and keep doing it.

Because you are convinced that Jesus died for you and has forgiven you and is the only way to Heaven, you are motivated to count the money or run the video camera or lead the music. It's not always a glamorous job but it has to be done. It might not even be where you are gifted but you do it anyway until somebody gifted comes along. And nobody ever feels led to say their gift is cleaning toilets but it has to be done.

That second word there, labor, is very much like the first word, work. But it is a different word and it means to toil or labor **to weariness**. The Greek word is "kopos" and we have all "koposed" at one time or another. In **2 Corinthians 11**, Paul said, *"I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked."* That was just an average Tuesday for Paul. What makes a person do that? Why did he work to such weariness? He tells us in this passage. It was a labor prompted by love, a labor of love, agape. He loved people so much and he loved God so much that he wore himself out. In **Philippians 2**, he said he was being poured out.

When people first come to truly know the Lord, they often think in terms of giving their whole life to Jesus like they were going to be a martyr and be burned at the stake or something. And, yes, God calls us to give our lives to Him but usually we do it one little act of obedience after another, after another, after another for the rest of our lives. And sometimes it gets hard. It

gets tiresome. It gets boring and dull and difficult and nobody even notices and what's the point?

The point is agape love. Agape love is the kind of love that makes a choice to love someone unconditionally; to work for their good whether they appreciate it or not and whether they even know it or not. Agape love is more concerned with other people than self. And it continues to make that choice every day even when it gets tiring. And it will get tiring.

That leads right into the last word which is "endurance". I'll save you the Greek word because I can't pronounce it (hupomone) and that's okay. And you know what "endurance" means, right? Well, let me give you an illustration of what it really means.

Young William Wilberforce was discouraged one night in the early 1790s after another defeat in his 10-year battle against the slave trade in England. Tired and frustrated, he opened his Bible and began to leaf through it. A small piece of paper fell out and fluttered to the floor. It was a letter written by John Wesley shortly before his death. Wilberforce read it again: *"Unless the divine power has raised you up... I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that (abominable practice of slavery), which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might."* (Daily Bread, June 16, 1989.)

That word "endure" means to cheerfully continue working under trial by the power given by the Holy Spirit. That's the word that Paul used of the Thessalonian church and it should describe you. Do you want a real-life picture of what that looks like? How about **Cindy and Anna** back there teaching the little kids? Every week. Day in and day out. One kid or twenty. Doesn't matter. And they are so excited to do it.

Have you seen the mural on the hallway wall back there of the empty tomb? Cindy and Anna made that because they were so excited to show the kids that Jesus is not dead but alive! They love Jesus so much and they love those kids so much that they are willing to work to weariness back there with very little appreciation from most people. Good grief, I wouldn't want to do it for one Sunday. And they don't get paid. All that they do, every craft they make, every picture, every song, everything they do comes out of their pocket and their time. And they do it because they want to and they do it because the Holy Spirit gives them the ability. That is endurance. Lord, thank you for them!

Paul says in **Galatians 6:9**, *"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."* Do you want to reap a harvest? Do you love God and love people enough to keep doing what you are supposed to be doing? What if nobody sees?

What if nobody knows or even cares? What if nobody tells you how much they appreciate what you have been doing? It doesn't matter. God sees what you are doing and your reward is in Heaven.

You know, I have talked a lot about working around the church but there is more to working, laboring and enduring for the Lord than just at church. What about your own personal ministry? What about your family? Your kids? The neighbors? The school? The city? We all have different circles of influence and you have been called by God to influence your circle. Do you love them enough to speak truth in love...and keep doing it? Again, Paul tells this church in the next chapter, *"Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."*

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica and to Christ Fellowship to encourage them and us to continue doing what God has called us to do. There are no shortcuts. The only easy day was yesterday - and all those other cliches but it's true. But I'm not just talking about trying harder. I'm talking about being so close to God that you can hear Him tell you what to do and when to do it. You can hear Him encourage you as well through His word like this passage and through prayer.

Do you have that relationship with God through His Son Jesus? Can you hear Him speak to you? Is there sin in your life blocking that relationship that you need to confess and ask for forgiveness? Do that right now as we pray.

Maybe you have never asked Jesus to be the Lord of your life. Ask Him right now to come into your life and save you and to forgive you. Then repent – turn away – from that lifestyle. Do it right now as the music plays.