

Imitating, Not Impersonating

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[0 : 00] So we, as Martin said, are going to start looking at 1 Thessalonians over the next six weeks or so, which I think is amazing. I love when Martin sent out that we were speaking of 1 Thessalonians.

I did think I replied pretty quickly saying, yes, let's do that, and I want to do the start. Because it is a really positively charged letter. Could you go to the first slide, please, Andy?

To give you a bit of background of the letter, its setting is Acts 17. In Acts 17, you see this story of Paul and his kind of group of co-workers come to the city of Thessalonica, and they're there for a month.

And within a month, this kind of gospel message they bring starts to really spread like wildfire. And this community made up of people from a Jewish background and people from a Greek background really springs up really quickly.

But soon they're kind of hit by this kind of wave of persecution because this message that Paul has brought that actually Jesus is the king of all things, he is the Lord and Savior of all things, really conflicts with Caesar is lord of all and Caesar is king of all.

[1 : 08] And so this persecution is so intense that Paul leaves. He has to run away. And this is clearly a very painful thing for Paul. And you'll see this as you go through the letter. It's part of the reason, maybe as a counselor, why I love this letter.

It's very relational. And so the language Paul will use of these people is he didn't just kind of pop in, tell them a message, and then go door to door. He formed deep bonds with these people.

So he cares really deeply for them. The process of leaving was really painful. But he asks Timothy for a report, which you'll see later in the letter. And Timothy's report is, under the persecution, these people you've left are actually doing really well.

In fact, they're doing better than well. They're flourishing. And to have a community of people who are flourishing, Paul responds with this letter. He writes back to them. And that's what we're going to be looking at.

Chapter 1, now I know it's only 10 verses, but for me I think it's absolutely chock-packed of stuff. And so I'm going to touch on two or three things with the hope that we're actually going to go into them further and further throughout the week, weeks to come, sorry.

[2 : 14] Because the letter is structured. You have this kind of like first big section of Paul's celebration of their faithfulness to Jesus and why they have been faithful to Jesus before it moves into this idea of reminding them to endure, to keep going, celebrate this good thing that has been happening, but we need to keep going.

And it kind of caveats it in both the start and in the end, in the middle, with these beautiful prayers. And that's the way this letter starts, with a prayer. And one of the reasons I asked the question, what do you think it means to do well as a Christian?

Sometimes when I think about that for myself, I realize quite quickly I start to make a list of things that I attempt not to do or places that I think I should go and be seen in.

The things that Paul holds up as the things that are... Is that echoing for a reason? Okay. They're doing well in these ideas of love, faith, and hope.

These are the hallmarks of the Christian faith. So he says in verse 3, Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 31] A kind of love and hope and faith that has manifestations in the real world. They're not just ideas. A faith that leads to how they work in the world.

A love that helps them to kind of be these laborers. And the word laborer has many different connotations. We're not going to go into it tonight. And a hope in Jesus.

I don't know what you think about your faith, of what it means to walk well in the Lord. But to be people who are growing and expressing these three characteristics is what it means to be a community.

So much so that when they're doing it, as Paul will go on to say in the rest of this chapter, the rest of the world is starting to know about it. But Paul doesn't even really need to say anything. He kind of indicates at one point.

Because the way these characteristics of God are working out in their community are so powerful, even in the face of persecution. This is not a context of, you know, they have just a great life and everything's going well.

[4 : 35] And when everything goes well, they just go out there and do these things. And I have to say, that is hugely challenging for me. And this idea that I can just wake up one morning and decide, I'm going to really love every single person I come across.

I'll let my work be completely filled with faith. And throughout the whole day, I'll have my hope set on Jesus. When I do that by myself, I don't know if you've ever woken up and decided to do that one morning, it's generally ruined before I've left the flat.

That's my experience of what life is quite like a lot of the time. And this is not a letter about, just keep doing these things you manufacture by yourself. Instead, he points to two really important things.

They're not just two really important things. They are central starting points of what it means to have these things at root in our lives. And the whole letter will unpack what it looks like for these characteristics.

But primarily hope. What does hope actually look like and taste like and feel in our culture where you are being bombarded from all sides and told, you need to give this up because it's going to get in the way.

[5 : 44] And actually, you need to worship these things. Because these are the things we've been worshipping for a long, long time. This is the political system. This is the society you live in. Your faith doesn't work here anymore.

Stop it or there will be consequences. This is the culture that the people in this letter would have been in. And Paul is reminding them of something to look forward to and hope. Can you go to the next slide, please, Andy?

So he goes on to talk about God's love and God's power in verses 4 and 5. For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you.

Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction. You have to start with God's love.

Now, that might sound like the most basic thing that anybody would stand up. In front of a church and say. But to kind of start with my idea of just, I will just manufacture love. I will just manufacture faith.

[6 : 44] And I will manufacture hope. Off the back of my best day will fail. I know what I'm like myself. And even the most positive day, when I think everything's going well, something will annoy me.

Somebody will get on the wrong side of the way I like to do things. And I'll start to have doubts and questions by the end of the day about where I'm heading with my life. Now, I don't think I'm just a neurotic mess who has lots of questions about things.

I think that is a lot of our common experience. But he starts with this celebration that their faith, love, and hope are attached to a God who's chosen and loved them. And that's our starting point always.

We start with a God who's chosen and loved. Because without it, we're basing a love on something unseen. We operate out of a response to a love which is being given us, which he touches on at the end, this love that is demonstrated by Jesus.

So they look to the hope of who Jesus is in the present reality and what he promises in the future. And that demonstrates something of the love of God that impacts the way they seek to love others.

[7 : 49] It is not the other way around. If I keep loving and keep loving and keep loving in my own strength, maybe God does love me in the end. That kind of system, which I can get caught in quite a lot, is the opposite of the gospel.

It is the opposite of what it means to be found in the good news of who Jesus is. And God's power is more than just simple ideas and conversations. Of course, it can include that.

But this movement of power that is beyond themselves, a love and a power that when they sit together, they demonstrate not just an idea of who God is, but part of who God is in the world today.

He is a God of love, but a God of power as well. God moves. And in that movement, he convicts. The way power is demonstrated is through the Holy Spirit and in conviction and with power.

I don't know about you, but whenever I feel genuinely convicted in a way that is of God as opposed to I feel really guilty that I've not met my own standards, it comes with a degree of power, a specificness that says, this here, bring it before me.

[9 : 01] But it doesn't leave you abandoned in the sense of you're on your own with this. And I think that's why God's love and God's power, when they are experienced together, and they have to be experienced together, God's love is a movement of his power.

And his power is a demonstration of his love. So Paul then goes on. Could you go on to the next slide, please? I'll go back one. Paul then goes on to talk about their story.

And how did they get to this place? Because this might sound brilliant a few verses in. Look at this great group of people who demonstrate faith, love, and hope, and they understand God is love and God is power. And Paul just ended the letter there and said, all the best, keep going.

No, well, if he did, I'm not sure what I'd have spoken about tonight beyond that. But thankfully, Paul goes on and starts to talk about how did this group of people become to this place?

That's why I think testimony is powerful. This event that we've got going on on Friday night is the power of people's story, not just made up, but interactions with who God is in their lives that changes things.

[10 : 07] And this is part of their story. So Paul says in verse, the second half of verse five, you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. So Paul goes on to talk about how these people started to come like this.

And it has something to do with how they started to imitate Paul, who was imitating Jesus. Now, can you go to the next slide, please? Did any of you watch this program? God, at least somebody did this.

Thank you. So The Trip is this brilliant comedy. I think it's one of the best things on television. There's only two seasons. There's a third one coming out next month, though, so don't worry. Which follows Rob Brydon and Steve Coogan playing exaggerated versions of themselves, touring around Yorkstradales and Italy in the second season.

And every episode is essentially the same. They go somewhere to eat, they get a bit cantankerous with each other, and part of the whole thing is they start to do lots of impersonations, which is, they're fantastic at them.

[11 : 23] And the thing is, with their impersonations, they're kind of like, they have like, who can do the best impersonations. There's whole scenes in which who can do the best Michael Caine. And as you do it, you're like, man, these guys have really studied Michael Caine.

They know the depth, like his little nuances. They have Michael Caine through the ages and how he ages to the point when he's in Batman and smoked too much cigars. My point here with this is when Paul uses the word imitating, he does not mean impersonating.

So I think you look at Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon and you think they're brilliant at impersonating these people, but are they trying to become like Michael Caine? Well, of course not.

If anything, they're mocking these people. And I think this is an important thing. When we talk about imitating, it's not like we are pretending to be something else. And that's something I definitely can get caught up quite a lot of, not just in the Christian world, but in any area of life.

This word imitation that Paul uses is just got connotations of following, becoming fully like Paul, who is becoming fully like Jesus.

[12 : 38] Impersonating, though, is pretending. It's pretending to be something you're not. Based on what you see around about you, you see how people act. You think, okay, this is how I fit in. This is how I do this. I just need to act this way.

I can read the words of God and go, okay, I just need to act like this. If I act like this long enough, then maybe I'll be that person. As opposed to this learning and becoming the full embodiment of what it means to be in Christ.

The scriptures talk quite a lot about this idea of being given a new identity, a new life that God has made his home now within us. And because of that, there is a transformation going on.

This imitating, I think, is about transformation. It's not just simply look at these concepts and pretend to be like this. I know I have definitely done that in church circles. I've looked around and thought, okay, this is what this group of people need me to be.

But there's zero going on in my head and my heart in terms of transformation. Equally, though, I can do it out with the church. As soon as you put me among my group of mates, I think, how do I need to act here in order to be accepted?

[13 : 46] And very rarely are those two things compatible. So I start to kind of pick and choose and pick and choose. And it's a pretty exhausting way of living your life. As opposed to this imitating of, I think it echoes the language of when Jesus says to the disciples, come and follow me.

He's doing the very same thing to us. And it's not come and follow me and you'll get an absolute complete personality transplant and you just become a different person. I think it's the reason we're imitating Jesus is because he is the perfect human.

When he walked this world as a human, he walked in the perfection of what God meant for each one of us to have a fully human experience. And so as we imitate him, we're not just trying to pretend to be like Jesus.

We're not trying to do a really shoddy impersonation of Jesus if you would follow me around for a day. But imitating what it means to be fully human. I don't think it is a personality transplant.

I think it's this process in which you become the truest version of you that you're ever made and designed to be. And it can only be done by imitating Christ and following him.

[14 : 51] It can be hugely powerful and restorative, but it's long and complicated. And Paul is saying, look at me. And the verse before, he said, you know what I was like. Like, there's a relational integrity there that Paul will go on to talk about in the next coming chapters.

But imitate Christ. Imitate Paul. And it leads to the fullness of what it means to be yourself. And I don't think that's some sort of, like, Christian self-help program where, like, if you go into any bookshop that's full of self-help, be the best you can possibly be.

And I'm not affirming a Christian experience where God's cosmically hanging around in the background going, you're amazing, you're amazing, you're amazing. Just go and be the most amazing person ever. And everybody happens to be amazing. But it's a fullness of God's creation right from the start of when he fills man with his image.

And we know the story of how that becomes broken. We don't need to look long at ourselves or the people around about us and go, we're not quite the people we want and need to be. So we fire off in all these different directions to try and find out how to do it.

And I think this is why, not completely, but I think this is why Paul starts to talk about idols. So, could you go to the next slide, please, Andy?

[16 : 04] So in verse 9, Paul says, Now, I know if quite a lot of you have been at Life Explored, you've probably done quite a lot on idolatry.

But idolatry for me, when we think of idolatry anyway, is this idea of old Indiana Jones films where he comes across these civilizations, which are so backward that they need to kind of sacrifice things to these kind of old unseen gods.

And we, of course, don't do things like that anymore. But of course we do. And idolatry is when you take something good and seek to worship it as the thing that gives you meaning and purpose and identity.

That's why I've come to understand idolatry as. So when we look at imitating Jesus, Jesus is saying, If you follow me, this is who you are intended to be as part of God's creation, as a being in relationship with God, the creator, can only be done through me.

And in that place, you find out what it means to be fully human and a full worshiper of God. When we start to look to other things to do that, that is idolatry. And I was trying to think of a few examples, and there's tons and tons of examples, but the one that really struck me recently was I was out with a friend who works in finance.

[17 : 31] I realized the way he was talking about the economy and the stock markets and all those kind of things. It's a very pagan way in which he was talking about it. The God of the stock market.

So he was talking about the stock market and was like, Yeah, the markets aren't good. They're not in a good place today. They're pretty unhappy. We need to make cuts and sacrifices in order to make the markets happy again.

Now, he wasn't using the word sacrifice, but I was preparing for this thinking, Oh, wow, you're talking about a present-day idol. We look at this movement of money, this unseen God, and think, How do we keep this happy?

So it will bless us, because when the markets are happy, we will get good things, and we will be a blessed group of people. And this idea that all idols, when you follow them, you start to become imitators of them.

They start to shape you. You start to make sacrifices for the idol in order to try and get it to do what you want it to do, because you think it gives you purpose and meaning. Then you're going to give yourself to this thing.

[18 : 33] I look at certain members of, well, there's no chance my family will listen to this. I look at certain members of my family and look at how some of them have sacrificed whole swathes of their life pursuing this stuff to serve it, because it has good consequences.

Now, again, I'm not saying money is the problem there. It's what we look to become. I think the other one, which is a huge one for me, is people-pleasing.

Making people happy with you. Making people want to accept you, which I touched on earlier. So if you present yourself with, okay, this is what it means for this group of people to accept me, I need to keep reinforcing this thing.

This version of me that will be accepted, whether that's in church circles or not. It doesn't matter where you do it. We all do it to some extent. Now, the thing is, we know that that version of ourselves isn't completely real.

We know that deep down. So it's a very shaky foundation. This is a very shaky God. So it keeps needing more of our energy, more of our time, more of our pretense, because if it ever gets exposed, the whole thing might come crashing down.

[19 : 41] All idols demand a sacrifice from us. They demand something of us to serve them. The reason future hope is amazing is because I believe Christianity is not only God in this kind of little pantheon of gods that we can describe, it's the one place where the God says, you do not need to make any sacrifices to me.

I make the sacrifice for you. I sacrifice myself for you so that you may have this firm foundation of being held in my presence.

So when you look for purpose and meaning and direction, it's actually found in God because he's already sacrificed himself to give you that very thing. Can you go to the next slide?

And so Paul kind of ends this chapter with this verse because they are waiting for the Son from heaven who died, who's raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers from the wrath to come.

Like when we use, when I use words like repentance, it is choosing to turn away from these idols and saying these things where I've sought to give me identity and give me purpose and give me meaning, they cannot do it.

[21 : 04] They were never designed to do these things. That's why they can't work. When you take anything and put it in the place of God, it will crumble and it will fall or it will betray you. And to acknowledge that I do that, I do that on a daily basis and to return to a God who starts with love and power and say, yes, this is where, this is where we become fully who we're meant to be, fully in the presence of Jesus.

And I think it allows us to look to the future where we see the ultimate victory. We'll look at the book of Revelation and these beautiful pictures of what creation will become one day.

It doesn't just become a nice idea. They look at the sacrifice and death of Jesus and his resurrection as an actual historical event that affirms a future to come.

And so it gives them hope, but not a hope that takes them out of where they are in their life, but actually a hope that helps them fully re-engage with the present. I believe sometimes we're told a very mixed message in our world today.

We're always told mixed messages, but a very particular one is live for the moment, do everything that fulfills you. If you're hungry, go eat. If you want to have sex, go do it. If you want to have an adventure, you should do it.

[22 : 17] Don't let anybody hold you back. You are the boss of your own world. At the same time, you're told, this is who you make a plan of who you need to become. Think about the future and nobody can tell you where that thing and where that plan will go other than you.

Now, I don't know if you see the conflict in that, live for today and never let anybody get in the way, but also think about the future all the time and be perfectly planned. But they can't really coincide much without having an identity crisis.

If you want to ask me if I'm between 2010 and 2013, that's kind of what I'm to me. And I believe that this idea of, it's not an idea, it's a truth of where Jesus is headed with each one of us allows us to actually fully engage in the moment.

So an example of that for me would be I was up visiting my, so my grandmother's 87 and she's very old and she's in hospital and she probably won't get out of hospital now. But my grandmother has faith.

She's probably one of the few other members of my family that does. And we're very close to her and so when you're in a hospital and somebody's failing and they're about to die, one of the things you're kind of not really allowed to talk about is sentimental things.

[23 : 26] You're not allowed to talk about feelings or actually what is happening. You're allowed to talk about the medical stuff because it becomes emotionally charged and rightly so. Yet when I talk to her, her faith gives her a framework to engage with what's happening.

this idea that she has a future hope doesn't mean that she doesn't engage with what's happening. Oh, you don't need to worry about this. God's got a plan and what's happening to me is fine. Actually, it allows her to fully engage with fear, some questions, but a tangible hope that actually, although I'm in this moment, it does not define me.

It's part of what life is, but it's not the full story. And to have that kind of nuance to be able to engage in life where we can go, this moment is where we are.

What does it look like to have faith, hope, and love here? Yet know at the same time this is held somehow, mysteriously and very unknown in a lot of times, but in a very tangible and meaningful way when we look to the person of Christ and see what he's done.

And I think that is really, really unique. I don't do it perfectly. I'd love to do it better. But these moments and places where it allows us to actually fully engage. And it makes me think of Jesus and Lazarus, where Jesus is at the tomb of somebody who's dead.

[24 : 52] He's the son of God. He knows he's going to raise this guy from the dead. He has the power to do it. Yet he enters into the full emotional realities of both sisters and he cries himself.

Now is that because Jesus has lost all perspective of the moment and he doesn't understand what's going on? He's just like, this is awful? Or could somebody have said, don't cry, Jesus. God's got a plan here.

You don't know how to do all this stuff. He does both, doesn't he? He enters into the fullness of the situation. I think that's what future hope allows us to do. It allowed the Thessalonians to enter into the fullness of their persecution and suffering, not as people who do not care what's happening to them, but they hold what's happening to them in light of hope of what is to come.

That is a challenge to each one of us. It's a challenge to me, but it's possible. It's definitely possible. And it actually brings us into the fullness of what it means to be human.

This isn't a message about don't care about things and don't worry about things because they don't have any meaning in the light of what's to come. But actually, in light of what's to come, live this way. Live this way.

[26 : 01] And that's a hope for all time, for all people, regardless of our context and where we find ourselves. I'm going to pray and then John's going to come back up.

Jesus, we thank you for these promises that in worshipping you, you lead us into the fullness of life.

And that's part of what it means to imitate and walk in the ways in which you have done, in which you have lived yourself and which you have shown us, but equally in the ways you continue to intercede for us each day.

I pray, Father, where we and I am tempted to make idols of things that can give us this stuff quicker or faster, but actually leads to a lessening of ourselves and a pretending and an impersonation.

Would you free us from those things? Would you convict us with the power and love that is unique in his expression from you than more so than any other place we can find it?

[27 : 10] Jesus, I pray that the faith, hope, and love that we have, regardless of how big or small we think it is, we look to you as the source of these things, as the model of it, but also as love itself, as power itself.

Would you protect us in the areas where we are quite quick to lose ourselves in places where consumers really quickly and giving over all our time and all our energy to an idol?

Ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. I meant to say, if you want to know how these people become like that fully, that's next week, so you have to come back. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.