

1 Thessalonians 1:1-7

Intro: April 22, 2007 Encouraging Evidence

We spot them a mile away, those whose life and lip are out of sync, whose walk and talk are out of joint. Hypocrisy is ugly, but at times humorous when seen in someone else, especially a public person.

- Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* made him so rich he's got to have armed guards to protect him so he can talk out more about not owning guns.
- John Travolta needs all five jets, including his 707, to fly to the various locations to warn against global warming, calling on people to do their part for the environment.
- Al Gore's four homes, including the one which consumes 20 times more energy than the national average, are necessary so he can have the free time to tell us not to consume so much energy.

But beware, glass houses are owned by all sorts of people.

- It has been quipped that the term *Republican Hypocrite* is a pleonasm, a redundancy of excessive words and verbiage, like tuna fish, free gift, true fact.
- Hypocrisy was leveled against Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich who acknowledged an affair even as he led the charge against President Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair.
- Sen. Orrin Hatch, a former Mormon bishop who does not drink, smoke or gamble, but has taken more money from wine, beer and liquor groups this year than any other congressional candidate, and is among the top recipients from tobacco and gambling concerns.
- Colorado Springs pastor and President of the National Association of Evangelicals, Ted Haggard, whose vocal support of traditional marriage rang hollow when it was found out he was cheating on his wife with another man.

But do be careful, for if you are sitting rather smugly here this morning it may only be due to the fact that you are not in the spot light, that your sins are known to so few. Truth be told, we all, with enough scrutiny, are different only by degree, but not by kind. Don't forget, I know enough secrets to be dangerous.

But this raises a tough question for us as Christians. Shouldn't we expect that the gospel would be evidenced in our lives? Hypocrisy is offensive, not because we have mastered our lives and eradicated it from our beings, but because we know the ideal and desire to be different. This is where the good news of Christ comes to play most clearly.

Because our lives should match our beliefs, God gives us evidences of his work in us. The answer comes not in our ridding our lives of duplicity, but in seeing when and where God is at work in us, so that we can point not to our advances, but His goodness to us.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, he could be thankful for many things. He was encouraged by the evidences of God's grace in their lives. The opening of his letter expresses thanks, as was common in the letters of the day, but Paul takes that form and places his own distinctive Christian spin. Rather than just a simple acknowledgement of the gods' watchful care, Paul encourages his readers to see how God works in our lives. In all of Paul's letters, except Galatians, there is this characteristic thanksgiving section. But here Paul takes it to new heights. He is more effusive in his praise, but the praise he gives is not directed toward obedient believers, but to God who works in and through them. READ 1 Thessalonians 1:1-7

Paul looks not to the person for the evidence of God's grace at work, but he looks for God's grace to be at work within them. The difference is important. He is able to thank God for his transforming power in the messed up lives of everyday people, so that they become neither discouraged by their constant failures nor self-absorbed with their successes. Whatever evidence we see in our lives of that which is pleasing to God is because of God's grace at work in us.

Paul is thankful for the evidences of God's grace in their effectual lifestyle, their elect condition and their exemplary life.

GOD GIVES EVIDENCE OF AN EFFECTUAL LIFESTYLE 1:2-3

Paul begins with the Christian triad: faith, hope and love, as attributes belonging to the Thessalonians. If there is any evidence of a person being a Christian, we would expect these to apply.

You meet a person who claims to be a Christian but has no faith in Christ, no love for God or other people, and lacks any shred of hope, you would be right to question their standing before God.

What is more these three go together. You can't pick and chose which of these suits you best.

There is no love without hope, no hope without love, and neither hope nor love without faith.¹

Yet, Paul's praise is not that these qualities are present, rather they are place holders for what is more important, the actions which are produced by these virtues. He is thankful not just that they believed, but the evidence of their faith, he is thankful not just that they have loved, but sweated while loving.

Paul's thankfulness is that they evidence faith, hope and love in a tangible way. If these qualities have no feet, they are simply empty pious concepts.

- The debate between Paul and James is answered here. It is not a contest between faith and works. It never was. Rather, it is the expectation that our faith will work, that there is a dynamic outworking of a life transforming principle in our lives. In Romans 1 Paul calls it an obedience of faith. In Galatians 5:6, it is faith working itself out through love. The Christian life is to be visible, not an interior, private faith.
- The next evidence is similar. Where as work is a generic term, labor is intensive, toilsome. While we may wistfully speak of a young boy's feeble attempts to clean his room to please his mother as a labor of love, the term is more sacrificial, self-denying. The focus is not on the love that is expended, but the costliness of that love, love that gives to the point of exhaustion.
- Hope is evidenced by its steadfastness, bearing up under difficult circumstances. Hope is not a passive virtue, but is that determination, unswerving in purpose that faces difficulties. Again, this is not a pious optimism, but an antidote for worry, a confidence of God's grace.

Paul is not thanking the Thessalonians for doing such a good job, but he is thanking God for doing this work in them. The final clause in our English modifies the whole list. It is the source of the power to do this - in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We should expect to see evidence of God's grace at work in our midst. According to several mission agencies, in southern China a few years back the lifestyle of some Christians was effective to bring about a change in Yunnan. The area is plagued with opium production which brought with it addiction and sickness followed by increased poverty and violence. Law and order deteriorated.

Officials noticed, however, that some of the tribal people known as the Lahu were prosperous and peaceful. There was no drug problem, stealing was minimal and households had plenty of food. Their investigation discovered the reason. Decades earlier some of the Lahu became believers and established churches.

Officials launched a daring experiment in 1998, the likes of which would have been unthinkable in China 10 years previous. They sponsored Christians to go into the troublesome villages and share their faith. They started by picking out the worst village, which had 240 people, 107 of which were hopelessly addicted to opium. Christian Lahus were bussed into the village, and the villagers were herded together by the police and made to listen to the testimonies of the Christians.

A year later, there were 17 converts in the village, and they began to save money because they stopped spending it on drugs. Eight of the 17 converts even had enough to own sewing machines and start small businesses. By early 2002, 83 of the villagers were Christians and the prosperity had spread.²

The Lahus that were brought in did not have their act together perfectly, but given the pervasive problem, the effectiveness of their lifestyle can be attributed not to genetics nor government programs, but to their work empowered by Christ.

What about us? Where do we see work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope? Certainly in those of you, who have hung in here for so many years, have given sacrificially of time and money. Often, however, where the real sacrifice and endurance comes are in areas I should not publicly express. It comes in the relationships we have with one another, in which we put up with each other's fallenness and point one another back to the cross. That is something we do, empowered by Christ and is an evidence of our effectual lifestyle.

GOD GIVES EVIDENCE OF AN ELECT CONDITION

1:4-5

To speak of election as being an evidence seems odd, especially as Christians are divided over this concept. But throughout the New Testament, election is used as an encouragement. It keeps the focus of our lives where it should be, not on us, but on God's graciousness.

Paul begins this next evidence with a term reserved for God's people in the Old Testament: *beloved*. The tense of the word is perfect, implying an ongoing condition of being loved.

The joining of these terms together encourages us to speak of election not as some cold process of determination, but a loving reaching out to us by God. Paul combines these terms in his second letter, in 2:13. Likewise, when he writes in Romans 9 in a passage that for some has made election seem cold, we are reminded of the parallel term there in v13 that God's choice is based not on who we are or what we've done, but on his love alone. (Eph 1:5)

But our election is based not on our performance nor is it tattooed on the back of our neck so that we can speak with confidence that God has chosen us. But Paul does have confidence, by the way in which the gospel came to them and its effect on them.

The evidence that God gives that he loves and chooses us is in v5. The gospel comes not only in word but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

When Paul says not only in word, he does not deny the importance of the word. Last week we saw from Acts 17 how word-centered Paul's work was in this city. But the Christian faith is not just the acceptance of a doctrine, but life-changing truth.

Paul piles on the terms, each one further describing the other. The power that came upon them was not just miraculous occurrences, but the Spirit who applied the Word. These two are absolutely necessary for real change. How do we know The Word and Spirit are at work in a person's life? Conviction.

In his book, *God Is Closer Than You Think*, John Ortberg describes God's convicting power.

Driving down the road, Jim pulled his car off the road to help a woman change a flat tire. While he was lying under her car, another vehicle accidentally swerved to the shoulder, and in the collision the car was shoved onto his chest. His right thumb was torn off at the joint, five of his ribs were broken, and his left lung was pierced and began filling with blood. His wife, who is barely five-feet-tall, placed her hands on the bumper of the car and prayed, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," and lifted the car off his chest so he could be dragged out. (Some weeks later she found out that she broke a vertebra in the effort).

Jim was in a state of shock as he was taken to the hospital. Doctors prepared him for emergency surgery. "His thumb won't do him any good if he's dead," one of them said. His survival was iffy. Suddenly, spontaneously, the man's skin changed from ashen to pink. He experienced a miraculous healing. He invited a surprised surgical team to join him in singing "Fairest Lord Jesus." They did not even bother to hook him up to oxygen. He did not find out until later that this was the precise moment his father-in-law, who was a pastor, had his congregation start to pray for him.

Sometimes these stories come from not-very-credible sources—such as publications sold in grocery checkout lines that also carry news about extraterrestrial creatures secretly playing third base for the Boston Red Sox. In this case, however, the subject was James Loder, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. His life was not only saved, but changed. Until then, although he taught at a seminary, God had been mostly an abstract idea to him. Now Jesus became a living Presence, his heart grew so tender that he became known at Princeton as "the weeping professor." He began to live from one moment to the next in a God-bathed, God-soaked, God-intoxicated world.³

The evidence of God's loving choice of you may not be so astonishing, but God's work in you is just as miraculous. God's convicting power which produces a changed life is a sign not of your wisdom to choose to be a Christian, but the Holy Spirit calling you to Himself.

The evidence of God's calling in your life is seen not in your perfectly keeping God's law, but in not running and hiding from your own sin. Knowing that you can be convicted of your sinfulness before God and still know he calls you his beloved, that is an evidence of your elect condition.

GOD GIVES EVIDENCE OF AN EXEMPLARY LIFE 1:6-7

The final evidence that God gives us is found in vv6-7, the evidence of an exemplary life. The Thessalonians saw it in Paul and Silas before. Paul recounts how he behaved when he was there in 2:8,9. Now the church follows through with their lives being an example to others around them.

In our day imitation may be a form a flattery, but it is considered substandard. We value creativity and originality. But in the ancient world to imitate that which is worthy showed good taste. Their imitation, though, was not just of the missionaries, but of Christ, himself.

Following the footsteps of others is a tremendous privilege. Over 50 years ago two men blazed a trail that has been followed by others since. The summit of Mount Everest in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal towers 29,035 feet above sea level. On May 29, 1953, two men were the first to reach its summit. Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary became famous for their accomplishment. By 1970, 24 climbers had reached the top. Since then, another 800 climbers have successfully made it to the summit more than 1,460 times. A record was set on May 16, 2002, when 54 people conquered Everest on the same day, with many more waiting

below at base camps. One of them was Tashi Tenzing, 37, the grandson of Edmund Hillary's Sherpa guide in 1953. Hillary's own son, Peter, was with one of the teams waiting to ascend. In life, someone always has to go first, and then others will surely follow.⁴

We are called to follow those before us and set the example at the same time.

What was the Thessalonian church imitating? Receiving the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

The word to receive was used of welcoming a guest or Simeon in Luke 2 taking the infant Jesus in his arms. We think it gracious just to not complain when times are hard, here the picture is that of throwing open the door and inviting in something that will both positively change your life, but does so in a difficult way.

It is easy to think of warmly receiving the good news that our sins are removed and God looks on us with love for a newly adopted child. But for the Thessalonians as well as for us, being a Christian comes with a cost – there is affliction.

For the church in the first century it included being ostracized from family and friends all the way to physical harm. We do not face the same problems, perhaps, but affliction still continues. The pressures we face may well include some of that, too. Or it could be the affliction of our own hypocrisy, our own sinfulness and how we respond makes all the difference – to us and those around us.

18th century pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards' most famous composition, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is stunning, considered to be one of the finest sermons every preached. It marked a high point in the Great Awakening, a revival in the colonies in the 1740's. What is often not realized is that the sermon's form was not common Sunday morning fare. Rather it recalls a then-current style of sermons preached to condemned criminals just before their execution, during which the minister would stress their imminent encounter with God and exhort them to repent.

In a shocking move, Edwards applied this form to those in Enfield, emphasizing the sinfulness of even respectable church folk. As he hammered home the instability of their position before God, whose hand alone held them from immediate death and the judgment that followed, he was in effect comparing them to condemned murderers. The church responded with repentance, evidencing God's work of grace in their lives. In turn, they became an example to others in New England as how one should receive the Word of God.

But the sermon was not always well received, for Edwards preached the same message to his own congregation a few weeks before whose only response seemed to be to shake the pastor's hand and smile nicely as they left.

All of this reinforces Edwards's own analysis of the revivals: the word is the occasion for awakening, and a necessary one, but the Spirit of God does the work.⁵

Our problem with hypocrisy will never leave us. We, like all people will fail to live up to what we profess to believe. But that should not dissuade us. We are not called to consistency, to perfection, we are called to repentance, and we are called to look for God to work in and through sinners like us.

So when you see God at work in the person next to you – thank God and remind them what God is doing in them, that evidence will be an encouragement.

¹ Taken from Augustine.

² The Pastors Connection (Open Doors USA e-mail, August 2002); corroborated by Kelly Callaghan, prayer and courier coordinator, Open Doors USA; [OpenDoors](http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples_and_places/people_groups/lahu_of_china) serves the persecuted church worldwide. See also OMF's site: http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples_and_places/people_groups/lahu_of_china

³ John Ortberg, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Zondervan, 2005), pp. 24-25

⁴ Michael Hirsley, "Some Summit Meeting: 54 Conquer Everest," *Chicago Tribune* (5-17-02)

⁵ Stephen R. Holmes, "A Mind on Fire," *Christian History* (Issue 77), p. 13