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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“NOT WITHOUT RESULTS”
First Thessalonians 2:1-13

Wednesday, July 1st will be the first day of my fifteenth year as your pastor. Having completed fourteen years with you, it is a good time to take stock:

- ? Is our shared ministry profitable?
- ? Are we accomplishing anything of value?
- ? Do our works please God?

■ Please turn to First Thessalonians 2:1: **“You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results.”**

{1 Th 3:3; 5:14} The Thessalonian church is small, unspectacular, and poorly funded, not to mention socially and politically powerless. Its members are inclined to be **“unsettled.”** Some are **“disheartened,”** others are **“weak,”** and a few are **“disruptive.”** Nevertheless Paul writes: **“our visit to you was not without results.”**

First century Greco-Roman culture equates size with significance, values style over substance, worships money, and craves power. In this setting the apostle’s assertion sounds far-fetched, absurd even.

Your average Thessalonian can hardly help but ask, “What results?” Look at it from their perspective:

- ◆ Christians are a tiny minority in the city.
- ◆ Most of them are Jews, which automatically makes them weird. A lot of the Gentile converts used to hang out at the synagogue, so they are even weirder.

- ◆ The majority of them are poor and uneducated. Quite a number are slaves.

- ◆ In addition Paul, Silas, and Timothy provoked such a hostile reaction they had to flee Thessalónika a few short weeks after starting the movement there.

Granted, they have a *little* to show for their efforts –but so *very little*. By common standards, there is a hopeless cause.

Let’s take a step back. Modern Thessaloníki is 5,281 miles away. What is more, nearly 2,000 years of change separates us from Paul’s original readers.

Still, while this epistle was not written *to us*, in God’s foresight and goodness it was written *for us*. The parallels are not exact, but they are significant:

- ◆ Ours is a small congregation.
- ◆ We are often out of sync with American culture.

Even most Christians have never heard of the Covenant Church, and that makes us even weirder.

- ◆ We are not poor, but our resources are modest.
- ◆ Although the Church in America is not being persecuted we are losing cultural dominance, and with it some long-standing social and political advantages.

Maybe Thessalónika isn’t really that far away. Maybe the first century wasn’t so long ago, after all.

Back to the text: **“Our visit was not without results”**?! Is Paul naïve or uninformed? Is he just trying to make them feel better? Or does he define **“results”** differently than the ancient Greco-Romans and, for that matter, most 21st century North Americans?

■ Verse 13: **“We...thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.”**

★ Two things stand out: they have accepted the word of God, and the word is working in them.

★¹ They initially accepted the apostles’ witness as God’s word. They have trusted it is true, received it as sacred communication, and yielded to its authority.

● {II Tim 3:5; I Th 1:5} Unlike some who **“act... religious, but... reject the power that [can] make them godly,”** the **“gospel came to [them] ...with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”**

{Catechism} Brothers and sisters: that description applies to this body as well. We mean it when we say **“Holy Scripture, the Old and New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”**

{Heb 4:12} We do not deal with the Bible as a dusty relic or abstract treatise; we interact with it as a Spirit-breathed document that **“is alive and active.”** As we read *it*, it reads *us*; as we examine *it*, it examines *us*; as we penetrate *it*, **“it penetrates [us].”**

{Ps 36:9; II Ti 3:15-16} We do not manage the Bible as a stringent legal code or expedient self-help manual; we interact with it as **“the fountain of life”** in which **“we see light.”** The Spirit utilizes it to **“[equip us] for every good work,” “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training”** us **“in righteousness.”**

{II Ti 2:15} For as long as I have known you we have done **“our best to...correctly [handle] the word of truth.”** Now, I see us taking it further: increasingly, we are more eager for the Word to master us than for us to master it. This is as it should be!

To be sure, our knowledge is limited. At times we struggle to come under the Scripture – still, like our Thessalonian siblings we have **“accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God.”**

★² Not only have they accepted the Word it is **“at work in [them] who believe.”** By God’s grace they are intentionally acting on the faith he has given them.

● In 1: 3 Paul draws attention to their **“work produced by faith... labor prompted by love, and... endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

That describes us, too. I see our **“work produced by faith”**: prayer warriors interceding for me, the church, and others; musicians offering their best; TGIS staff nurturing their students; board members doing nuts-and-bolts tasks – **“work produced by faith”** in confidence that the ministry is worthwhile because it is done for, with, and in the power of, God.

I see our **“labor prompted by love”**: MOPS grandmas caring for infants; PADS volunteers feeding the homeless; Deacons caring for the needy with generosity and discernment; individuals reaching out with a card, a phone call, a visit, a ride, a meal; and so on – **“labor prompted by love”** because God first loved us.

{II Co 4:8; Ro 5:5} I see our **“endurance inspired by hope”**: those **“hard pressed, but not crushed”** by sickness or disability; the bereaved, grieving painfully but not without hope; members **“perplexed”** by a loved one’s addiction or mental illness, yet **“not in despair”**; and so on – **“endurance inspired by hope in Jesus,”** for we know that his is the only hope that **“does not put us to shame.”**

Many look at a church like ours and fail to see the fruit. Paul looks at it and declares: our time with you **“was not without results,”** crucial results, eternal results. You have **“received the word... as...the word of God, which is indeed at work in you.”**

And get this: **“the results”** to which Paul points are not confined to the laypeople. We have spent all this time on verses 1 and 13, but in verses 2 through 12 Paul concentrates on Silas, Timothy, and himself.

A few weeks after they arrived, enemies of the Gospel drove them out of Thessalónika. Some of the new believers felt abandoned. If they could not rely on the messengers, how could they rely on the message? So Paul’s purpose in writing verses 2-12 is to combat discouragement and substantiate the Gospel.

★^{ff} But in the process, Paul also reveals how God worked *in* his team even as he worked *through* them.

■ Verse 2: **“We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi... but with [God’s] help ...we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.”** God used their time in Thessalónika to fortify their courage.

■ In verses 3, 5, and 6 we learn that God used their sojourn to purify their motives and methods.

■ In verses 7-9 Paul speaks in motherly terms of how God used their visit to strengthen their love.

■ And in verses 10-12 we catch a glimpse of how God used their time there to cultivate their righteousness.

Paul does not use these terms, because he isn’t trying to share his testimony. It leaks through anyway.

His ministry in Thessalónika **“was not without results.”** Among those results was *his* growth in grace and knowledge brought to light in his faith-generated works, love-prompted labor, and hope-inspired endurance.

★^{ff} I am confident of this interpretation, because it is my story, too! The Living God has used *you* to produce significant **“results”** *in me*:

Your reception of God’s Word enables me to more fully receive it.

Your cooperation with Scripture inspires me to better cooperation.

“Your work produced by faith” multiplies my works of faith.

“Your labor prompted by love” provokes me to greater labors of love.

“Your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” reinforces my endurance in hope.

My courage is fortified, my motives and methods are purified, my love is strengthened, and my righteousness is cultivated by the work of God in you. I am growing **“in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior”** by his presence in and among you.

Fourteen years ago I came to give to you and to bless you, and by the grace of God I have. I never imagined how much I would receive and how deeply I would be blessed!

? {Jn 15:16} Is our shared ministry profitable? Yes! We are bearing good **“fruit – fruit that will last”!**

? {1 Co 3:12-15} Are we accomplishing anything of value? Yes! Some of our deeds like **“gold, silver, costly stones”** that will stand the test of time!

? {Mt 25:21} Do our works please God? Yes! When we stand before the Lord of the Church will he say **“Well done, good and faithful servant[s]!”**

■ **“You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results.”** First Thessalonians 2:1-13 is the word of the Lord.