

A Faith That Works

by David Roper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith that works, which is a faith that is based on trusting in a living, true, and faithful God.

Duration: 39:08

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1

Topics: "Saving Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the life of David as an illustration of the Christian life. He focuses on the story of David's encounter with Goliath, highlighting how faith operates in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds with limited resources. The speaker ponders the significance of David taking five stones before facing Goliath, emphasizing that the scriptures always have deeper meaning. The sermon also emphasizes the faithfulness of God in sanctifying believers and equipping them to be instruments in the world.

Transcript

Each sermon is about a year apart, and it gets a little bit difficult to keep up with where I am in the series, but we're basically talking about the same thing. I'd like to invite you to turn to the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, and we'll be looking at the first chapter today, these ten verses. As you may know, the book of 1 Thessalonians was the first of Paul's letters to these early churches, and though it is early in his experience, it in no way represents any immature ideas or half-baked thinking on Paul's part.

By the time he penned this first letter, he had been a Christian about seventeen or eighteen years, and had been engaged in his apostolic mission about ten years, and so it represents the thinking of a man who had not only grasped the basic principles of the Christian life, but was learning to put these principles into experience. In this book of 1 Thessalonians, he mentions that God has approved his ministry, and while I'm no Greek scholar, I did discover that the word that Paul uses to describe his ministry is very interesting, because archaeologists have found this word that's translated approved, the Greek word is dakimos, inscribed on the bottom of thousands of pieces of pottery in Palestine as they've been excavating, and it seems that the potters had a practice of making a vessel and then they would put it in the furnace to fire it, and when they withdrew it, if it had stood the test of the firing and there were no flaws or cracks in the vessel, they would take their stylus and right across the bottom, dakimos, approved, and as such it would be qualified for sale. But if it cracked, they would write adakimos on the bottom, disapproved, and it would

be worthless.

So it's a very interesting picture of Paul's ministry, because what he's saying is that God has put him in the fire, and his ministry has been tested, and he feels that God has put his stamp of approval, he's written across Paul's life, *dakimos*, approved. So though this is an early writing from Paul's hand, it represents something of deep thought and personal experience. We're going to begin our study this morning, where Paul does, with this brief introduction.

He writes in chapter 1, verse 1, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace. And you'll recognize that this is very similar to introductions to other books that Paul has written, and is, of course, the contemporary style of first century letter writers. A brief word, first of all, about the writer, or in this case, the writers, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, this team of men who, along with Luke, had been engaged with Paul in his second missionary journey, and had been traveling with him through Macedonia and Achaia, preaching the gospel and establishing churches.

And now they're in the city of Corinth, and they join with Paul in sending this letter to the Thessalonian church. And then a brief word about the recipients, to the church of the Thessalonians, and then a brief greeting, grace to you and peace. Grace being the Greek word of greeting and peace, the Hebrew word *shalom*.

The thing that's striking about this introduction is that, perhaps without intending to, Paul gives us a definition of what the church really is. He speaks, first of all, of the geographical location of the church as being in Thessalonica, but far more important than that, he says that this is the church in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a church composed of individuals who know God in a personal way, who have entered into his family, who have become sons of God on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ.

And secondly, they're people who have put themselves under the authority of Jesus Christ. They know him as Lord in their life. And of course, this was the burden of Paul's teaching in Thessalonica.

As we read in this earlier passage in Acts 17, the magistrates of the city had leveled a charge of treason against Paul because he preached another king, Jesus. And while they didn't realize that this king was no threat to their rule in Thessalonica, what Paul was saying is that Jesus Christ wants to reign in your life. And this the believers had come to experience.

They knew God as Father and they knew Jesus Christ as Lord. Now it's easy to see from this that Paul's not talking about an organization or some loose association of people in Thessalonica, but he's talking about individuals because organizations and associations can't have a relationship to God and they can't know Jesus Christ as Lord. He's talking about people who know God.

And of course, this is what the church is. The church is not a building. It's not an organization.

It's people. It's you and me. And this is not the sanctuary.

You are the sanctuary. The Holy Spirit dwells in you. Now this is old ground, and I'm sure that we all understand this, but it's important to see as we begin to study this book that when Paul talks about the church, he's not talking about the organizational church.

He's talking about the individual. And while we're going to be looking at the marks of the church, essentially we're speaking about the church as individuals, about you and me. And when we talk about the marks of a growing church, we're not talking about the fact that we have pews in our auditorium now or that we're adding to our plant or that our budget is increasing, but we're talking about men and women who are growing in their knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Now Paul turns in the following verses from this brief definition of the church to a description of a vital church. We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brethren, beloved by God, that He has chosen you.

For our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we prove 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 joy inspired by the Holy Spirit so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you and how you turned from God to idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

In the opening verses of this chapter, Paul puts his finger on the three characteristics of a maturing church. He identifies the fact that they had a work that proceeded from faith, a labor that was the result of their love and steadfastness or patience that was the result of their hope. And he looks at these three characteristics from two standpoints.

First of all, he looks at the attitude that inspired them, the attitudes of faith and hope and love. And then he changes his perspective and he looks at the actions that follow, their work and their labor and their patience. Now I think it's important that Paul so states these because both of these are important.

Our attitudes are important and our actions are important. We must start with attitudes because right attitudes are the key to right conduct and activity. So much of Christian activity is trivial and worthless because our attitudes are wrong.

It looks good on the outside, but the motives that precipitate the actions are wrong. For instance, Paul writes to the church in Rome and he points out to them that whatever is not of faith is sin. The point is that any activity can be sin if it does not proceed from an attitude of rest and confidence in God.

It can be helpful, it can be constructive, it can be religious activity, but if it's not sourced in an attitude of faith, it's worse than ineffective. It's sin. So the attitude is important.

In another place, when Paul writes to the church in Corinth in speaking with regard to love, he says that we may be wise and we may be noble and we may be altruistic. We may even give ourselves to be a martyr. We may give our bodies to be burned, but if we have not love, it profits nothing.

It's worthless and sterile. So the heart attitude first is the key to any activity. But actions are not unimportant because actions reveal the attitude.

As Paul writes or as James writes in the book of James, you say that you have faith, that's good. But you show me your faith in your works. Because faith without works is dead.

It's useless and powerless and inert. Faith, if it's real faith, always projects itself into some kind of activity. You can't see love, but you can see people acting in love toward one another.

In fact, the scriptures always define love this way. You search in vain for any real definition of love. It seems to define love in terms of its functions.

For instance, John writes, Herein is love. This is a definition of love. Not that we love God, but that He loved us and gave His Son to be the satisfaction for us.

We can't see love, but if we look at God and His actions toward men, we can see something of the character of love and how it functions. Or Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 gives us the catalog of the outworking of love. Love is patient.

Love is kind. Love has good manners. Love does not envy.

These are all functional definitions of love. You can't see hope. The confidence that we have that God is absolutely faithful and that He's pursuing His program.

And in His sovereignty, everything is moving toward a purpose. But you can see the attitude of patience and steadfastness. The action of steadfastness and patience that this attitude of hope produces.

And so I see both of these as vital. The attitudes and the actions. Now in the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at these three marks of maturity.

Taking one each week. And look at them in terms of what God is looking for in our lives. The degree to which we're growing in apprehension of these principles is the degree to which we're growing in maturity.

Now the first we want to look at is Paul's statement that they had a faith that worked. That produced activity. First, the attitude.

What is faith? That's a very difficult question to answer. But I think there are some clues in this book that tell us something of the nature of the faith that the Thessalonian church had. Paul says that this is a patterned church.

That by looking at this church, we can see something of God's pattern for all believers. And as we look at some of the things for which they were commended, we can see something of their faith. And the first mention that you have in this book is in verses 8 and 9. Where Paul says that not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything.

For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols. It says that the Roman world, these two provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, had heard about the startling fact that down in Thessalonica something had happened. There was a new dynamic.

That these people who formerly had been worshiping idols had turned to God. In fact, it put the Apostle Paul out of work. He didn't have to say anything.

Because the whole world was talking about the quality of their faith. The first thing I notice here is that we are obliged to have faith in something. We must depend upon something or somebody.

That man is never really independent. And the option is never faith or non-faith. The question is, what is the object of our faith? We're either trusting in idols or we're trusting in God.

Those are the only two options. Now, of course, an idol may not necessarily be a piece of wood or metal. As Augustine said, that thing that precipitates the predominant thought in our mind, that is our idol.

What is the thing that pops into your mind and mine when you have nothing else to think about? It's sort of like a yo-yo. You throw it away and it comes back. And you throw it away and it comes back.

That is our idol. That's what we're basing our life on. That's what we've placed our confidence in.

Now, an idol can be a lot of things. An idol can be a person. It can be a husband or a wife or a child or a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

It can be a thing. It can be a car or a house or a job or a four-point average for a student. Or it can be ourself, our confidence in ourself and our ability to match wits with the world and our command and grasp of every situation.

And, of course, the problem with an idol is that it always tends to disappoint us. If it becomes the sole source of our support, it always seems to break down. It can't bear our full weight.

This is why we get so frustrated and so bitter and resentful at times because the things in which we trusted most have let us down. But when we, as the Thessalonian believers do, when we turn from idols to God and I think this is not just a once-for-all practice but a continuing principle of Christian living, of constantly turning from the things that we've been depending upon and resting upon God, when this happens, then things begin to happen in our life. We find that Jesus Christ, as the one in whom we place our confidence, is always, in every circumstance, an adequate resource for living.

He never disappoints us. He never breaks down under pressure. He's always available 24 hours a day to live the same quality of life that He lived 20 centuries ago in these believers in this little town of Thessalonica.

It was true of them, and it can be true of us. I need to take a good look at myself in this regard as we all have to constantly appraise our activities, our actions, our attitudes. What am I really trusting in? What's my source of confidence? What am I resting on? Is it an idol or is it God? Twenty-five centuries ago, Jeremiah, the prophet, wrote these words, Cursed be the man that trusts in men, and that makes flesh his arm, and whose heart departs from the Lord.

For he shall be like the heath in the desert, in a salt land and not inhabited. For a while, when I was in the service, I was stationed down at Camp Irwin, close to Barstow, California, right out in the middle of the Mojave Desert. I gained a real appreciation for some of these bushes out there that have to live in that kind of an environment.

But I found out what a heath in the desert is. It's a bush that just gets along on a bare subsistence level. During the summer, when the full force of the sun plays on these bushes, they have to drop their leaves because they can't live any other way.

They just barely get along. They're living, but no real quality of life. And to place our trust in the arm of flesh is to live the same kind of life.

But Jeremiah goes on and says, Blessed is the man that trusts in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, that bringeth forth its fruit in its season. Its leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever it doeth shall prosper.

Now, I have to ask myself, what am I trusting in? If I'm looking for the quality of life that will draw men to Jesus Christ, if I'm looking for a resource for all of life to meet the demands of my life, I find that the only adequate resource for life is Jesus Christ. He's the only one. Now, I see a second principle in this same verse, and that is that faith is only as good as its object.

There's no value in faith itself. Faith can be misplaced. We can put our confidence in something that has no ultimate power or potency and find that our faith is vain.

Because the thing that makes faith work is God's power. We have a couple of students in our college department that have private pilot's licenses. And I can imagine one of these days, they haven't asked me yet, but someday they're going to ask me to go up and take a spin.

And let's just imagine that we set up a day and on the appointed day, I go down to San Carlos Airport to go flying with them. And I walk up to the hangar and they roll back the doors. And he says, well, there it is.

And there's this biplane, World War I vintage with one wing drooping and a flat tire. It's held together with a couple of turns of baling wire and bubble gum. And he says, isn't that a beauty? And I say, well, frankly, it looks like a piece of junk to me.

He says, no, it's really a very stable craft. And he says, help me push it out. And we push it out on the runway.

He says, all right, are you ready to fly? And I say, well, frankly, no, I think I'm going to stay on the ground. And they say, what's the matter? Don't you have any faith? And I say, well, sure, I have faith in you, but I don't have any faith in that plane. And to go up in that thing wouldn't be an expression of faith.

That would be sheer stupidity. Now, I think that this is the point that Paul is making, that faith just in and of itself is of no consequence. That faith has to be resting upon an object that's valid and worthwhile.

Now, what do we know about God? I wish we had time to really go into this in depth because the book itself, as you read through it, is a study in the character of God. And I would commend this to you on your own to read what Paul says about what God is and what He does and the resources available to Him. But he picks up a few right here in this verse.

He says, first of all, you turn from idols to serve a living God. Dr. Altizer, to the contrary, God is alive. I'm sorry his God is dead, but mine's not.

We serve a living God who's alert and available and active in the world. Living today in power and accessible to each one of us. Secondly, he says that we serve a true God.

If God isn't true, who else can we trust? The Scriptures tell us that He's absolutely faithful. Paul writes to the church that Titus was responsible for and he points out that we serve the God who cannot lie. He never misleads us.

He always loves us enough to tell us the truth. He's absolutely faithful. As Paul says at the end of this book in the fifth chapter in verse 23, May the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who calls you is faithful and He will do it. There's a process at stake. He's building into every life the qualities of life that we're looking for.

He's equipping us to be what we're intended to be. Men and women who are totally available to God to be His instruments in the world. He's called us to this and He says that He's faithful to do it.

We can trust Him. He's bound by His own Word. And then he goes on to point out in this passage back in verse 9 or in verse 10 that they turn from idols to the God the One who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

He has the power of a resurrection life in His hands. Now, there are other things that we could say about God. Obviously, this doesn't exhaust His character but it gives us a glimpse of the object of our faith and why our faith is valid because God Himself is worthy of our commitment and our trust.

There's a third principle of faith I see in another chapter, chapter 2, verse 13 of 1 Thessalonians. And we also thank God constantly for this that when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the Word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God which is at work in you believers or literally you men of faith. He says that when we came to Thessalonica and we preached Jesus Christ, you accepted it.

And this to me indicates another principle of faith that faith is basically taking God at His Word. Faith is the stance that we take on His authority. It's the determination to do what He says without quibbling, without second-guessing, without trying to be a Monday morning quarterback, without accepting our analysis of circumstances but doing what He asks us to do.

There are so many illustrations of this in the Scriptures but I just ran across one recently in the 27th chapter of Acts in the account of Paul's journey on board ship to Rome on his way also to another one of his shipwrecks. And as they were en route, the storm came up and the mariners began to panic and began to abandon ship. And Paul speaks to them in verse 22.

He says, I now bid you take heart for there will be no loss of life among you but only of the ship. For this very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship and he said, Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand before Caesar and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you.

So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. Now that's what faith is all about.

A tenacious, unremitting hold on God's word. A sturdy determination to believe God despite outward circumstances. Now, the thing that comes to mind is what do we think about His promises when we face the daily round of problems that all of us are involved in? How do we react when things begin to run against us? When the dishwasher breaks down and the kids have chicken pox and the income tax is due and undone and the house is a mess? In the face of this, can we remember the firm word of Scripture? My God is able to meet your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Because that's where faith has to work, right down in the daily problems of life. Just taking God's word and applying it to a specific situation and holding to it no matter what the circumstances may tell us. How do we react in a hostile world, in an office or on a campus where we're called upon to lift up Jesus Christ and we see some of the words of Scripture? As the Lord said to Paul, Take no thought how or what you shall speak for it shall be given you in that same hour what you shall speak.

Or Isaiah's words, The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned that I might know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary. And we discover that by stepping out on those promises, the ground is firm. It's secure.

That He hasn't misled us. That by placing our faith in Him, we discover that He's really adequate to do everything that He says He's going to do. Or we have an impossible assignment to face this week, a workload that demands more in terms of time or energy than we could ever accomplish.

And Paul writes, God is able to do exceeding, abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think. Or that we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. Now, this is God speaking.

These are His promises. And when we see our problems against the backdrop of these promises, they become very inconsequential. It's how faith behaves.

This takes God at His word. I suppose Abraham is the classic example. In his 90s, scriptures say his body was as good as dead.

And God says, Abraham, you're going to have a son. And through this seed, I'm going to make a great nation. And the translation obscures a little bit Abraham's answer, but essentially what he said was, Amen.

I believe it. So be it. Let's get on with it, Laura.

What are we waiting on? Now, this is how faith responds. It simply takes God at His word. Chapter 3 tells us a bit about another quality of faith, the fact that tests reveal the quality of our faith, that faith shows its true pressure, true colors under pressure.

It reveals to us what our confidence has been placed in. But I'd like to move through this and talk just a moment or two about the activity of faith. We've looked at the attitude and we've seen some characteristics of faith, but now just what does faith do? Faith produces works.

Faith is valid because it's productive. And I'm firmly convinced that any activity in the world that's grounded in a confidence upon God is going to be significant. It may not look good in terms of the world's evaluation, but in terms of eternity and God's purposes in the world, it's intensely significant.

Some weeks ago I was up at Foothill and I was talking to one of the members of the hippie group who was manning the peace table out in front of the student center. And I was asking him something of his program and the particular group that he was associated with, the Constitutionalist Club at Foothill, and asked him what they were hoping to do about the world situation. And we both had to admit it was pretty filed up.

And he began to list some of the activities that they were engaged in, all of them the sort of thing that we've come to designate as passive resistance. And as I was listening, the Lord brought to mind a statement in the book of Hebrews. And I drew out my New Testament and I read these words.

What more shall I say? For time will fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah of David and Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. About halfway through, I remembered that this was a passage that Mr. Studman had read on Sunday evening several weeks before, which at that time just hadn't really struck me with any significance. And as I read it, I'm sure it didn't impress him at all either.

But it just impressed me intensely with the fact that it's in the very areas today where we see the most strife and turmoil, the struggles of men, man against man, that faith can be brought to bear. I saw that faith is the answer to every problem that the world is facing. Not that this involves inactivity on our part because God may call us to become involved personally in some of these things.

But I saw that any activity that is resting upon a concerned, omnipotent God is going to produce lasting results because it's a means of tapping the resources of an infinite Lord and bringing them to bear on specific problems that we have to face. Now, this is true of matters of worldwide import. It's also true of the most personal and intimate problems that we have to face.

Faith is the means of moving men and changing circumstances and changing ourselves through God. We can take just one area of our life that's troubling us and we can begin to ask God to move in that area and change our lives, change our activities, make us the kind of men that we want to be. And we'll discover that He'll do it because faith really works.

It does change us. For some weeks, we've been studying in the college class the life of David as an illustration of the Christian life. And it's been really exciting to see how David's life so beautifully illustrates the Christian life.

And one story in particular struck me, the story of David's encounter with Goliath as an illustration of faith and how it operates in moving out against what seems to be insuperable odds with inadequate resources. But the thing that perplexed me when I first began to study this passage is why when David went across the brook and was on his way to encounter Goliath, he took five stones. Because I'm convinced that the Scriptures never just use words.

There's always some significance. And the longer I pondered this, the more perplexed I became. Why five stones? There was only one giant.

And it seemed to me to be a flaw in his faith. I mean, did he think he was going to miss? That he'd have four more chances? And then sometime later, I was reading in 2 Samuel and I got the answer. You know what it is? Goliath had four sons.

So there were five giants. And what David was figuring is one stone per giant. Now this is what I mean about being specific.

Now what's your giant in mind? We discover that faith will work right there in the very specific problems that we have to face. This is the victory, the Scriptures say, that overcomes the world. Even our faith.

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