To Walk and To Please God

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As I get older I find I am less concerned with impressing people and more concerned with impacting people. I’ve seen that approach to living modeled by some important people in my life. My grandfather, Papa as we call him, was part of the “Greatest Generation” that lived through the depression and WWII. His generation made a lasting impact on America and the world. Like many veterans he rarely spoke of his wartime experiences. After some research I discovered that Papa served most of the war on U.S. Navy destroyers tasked with protecting ships from enemy submarines. But Papa had never mentioned it. He wasn’t particularly enamored with impressing people.

I want to be more like my grandfather in that respect. Perhaps that is why I resonate so deeply with the apostle Paul. Though the list of dramatic events in his life was long, Paul often described his own ministry as unimpressive. Paul seemed less concerned with impressing people and more concerned with impacting people.

We see this clearly in the book of Acts. Luke frequently describes Paul’s ministry as one of urging or exhorting (parakalēō) the believers in their faith (14.22, 16.40, 20.1–2). Again and again in Acts we see Paul’s passion to deeply disciple believers as he revisits congregations he had earlier established. The first example occurs at the end of Paul’s first mission journey. Luke reports that after preaching in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas backtracked, returning to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, “strengthening the souls of the disciples and encouraging them to continue the faith” (Acts 14.22).

On his subsequent mission journeys Paul continued this practice of returning to exhort and disciple the believers. On one of those return visits Paul traveled through the region of Macedonia where he had earlier established a congregation in Thessalonica. There Paul gave them “much encouragement” according to Luke (Acts 20.2).

As we turn our attention to the book of I Thessalonians we clearly see Paul’s passion to urge and exhort the believers in that city. For example, notice Paul’s use of nurture language. In chapter 2.7 Paul writes “we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.” In chapter 2.11 the apostle indicates he was “like a father with his children” when he ministered among them. These similes suggest Paul saw himself as a nurturer encouraging the Thessalonians to grow in maturity.

Paul also reveals his desire to influence the Thessalonians by his use of exhortation language throughout the letter. He consistently urges, exhorts and encourages the Thessalonian believers. He frequently uses parakalēō, the same term Luke often employed to describe Paul’s ministry of exhortation. For example in 3.2 Paul says he is sending Timothy to “establish and exhort you in your faith.” The fact that Paul is willing to part with Timothy demonstrates his desire to make a difference in the lives of the Thessalonian believers.

With all Paul’s use of exhortation language, we should remember that the Thessalonian believers were already strong in their faith. For example in 4.9–10 Paul commends the Thessalonians for their love for one another. These were solid followers of Jesus. Yet Paul adds, “But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and
more.” Paul sees the Christian life as dynamic not static. The journey always involves pressing on more and more toward the likeness of Christ.

This shouldn’t surprise us. Like all authors of Scripture Paul wrote words that were intended to not only say something to us; but more importantly his words were intended to do something to us. Paul wanted to affect change—to impact those in his circle of influence. And his vision for change is summed up in a simple statement right at the heart of his letter: “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more” (4.1).

Beverly Roberts Gaventa suggests that in this verse we find a rare glimpse of the content of Paul’s instruction and exhortation.1 The Thessalonians had received teaching from the apostle. Paul identifies the essence of his teaching as “how you ought to walk and to please God.”

Here in 4.1 Paul draws from the rich Hebrew Bible language used to describe the person who lives in deep communion with God. Paul’s use of this important term walk appears at the turning point of the letter. 3.11—4.1 serve as the transition between the two major sections of I Thessalonians. In the first half of the letter (1.1—3.13) Paul recounts the history of his ministry among the believers in Thessalonica. Throughout this section he expresses his gratitude for the good faith of his brothers and sisters. He brings this section to a close at the end of chapter 3 with a pastoral prayer for the Thessalonians.

Paul’s genuine intercessory prayer for the disciples in Thessalonica also serves a rhetorical function. The prayer essentially summarizes the key points in the first half of his letter and introduces a theme that will appear in the second half.

Then in 4.1 Paul introduces the second half of the letter as he turns to encourage specific application of the Gospel. This introduction also functions as a concise expression of Paul’s vision for his friends in Thessalonica. Here we find Paul’s hope distilled to a few finely crafted words rooted in the ancient Israelite understanding of a right relationship with God.

So together Paul’s concluding pastoral prayer (3.11–13) and his introduction to the second half of the book (4.1) give crisp expression to Paul’s desire to impact the believers in Thessalonica. These verses deserve our attention because here we find God’s most basic call on our lives. We’ll begin in 3.9 to get more of the context as Paul brings the first section to a close and introduces his key desire.

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more (3.9—4.1).

Notice how Paul introduces his pastoral prayer. In 3.10 the apostle writes, “[W]e pray most earnestly night and day . . . .” He describes his prayers as frequent and fervent. It is a life of prayer rather than a prayer life (there is a difference). Paul’s passion to influence others through prayer stands out.

I’m challenged by Paul’s words. We often tell others we’ll pray for them. But how often are our intercessory prayers consistently intense? Specifically his persistent prayers consisted of requests to be with the Thessalonians in person so that he might “supply what is lacking” in their faith.

Again this challenges me. I grew up in congregational traditions that modeled intercessory prayer for the sick, the lost and others experiencing a specific crisis such as the loss of a job or the loss of a loved one. Rarely did we pray for the spiritual growth of others.

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But Paul’s prayer addresses this very issue. He prays to be present with them so that he might disciple them and “supply what is lacking” in their faith. What was lacking? Earlier in the letter Paul commended the Thessalonians for their faith. These are not disciples who have gone astray. Indeed Paul describes them as “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1.7–8). So what was lacking?

As mentioned earlier Paul understood discipleship as a process of cultivating the holiness God intends for his people. There is always room for growth. Indeed the more we become like Christ, the more we recognize how unlike him we really are. The closer we draw to God the more we recognize the great gap between what we are and what we are called to be. The Thessalonians were solid in their faith, but Paul prayed for the opportunity to disciple them even more. He wanted to see them become people of great depth—the kind of people who impact the world by who and what they have become.

Paul’s reference to his prayers then leads him to actually write a pastoral prayer that begins in 3.11. The fact that Paul not only told them he prayed but actually wrote a prayer to the Thessalonians speaks volumes.

Years ago I became friends with an Indonesian seminary student. He taught me as much about prayer as anyone I’ve encountered. He once said to me, “Jody, do you know the problem with American Christians?” My friend said, “The problem with American Christians is that you are always telling people you will pray for them. Why don’t you stop telling them you’ll pray and just pray with them?”

His words convicted me. From that day forward I’ve been more likely to stop what I am doing and actually pray with someone. Sometimes that means prayers in hallways or offices or at the post office. Sometimes it means prayers over the phone or prayers written in emails. Few activities encourage and impact others like praying together.

Paul’s written pastoral prayer is filled with the language of discipleship and transformation: “Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

Paul’s language reveals his desire to see the Thessalonians mature in their faith. In 3.12 he prays the Thessalonians would “increase and abound” in love. Paul longs to see their love rise to overflowing. This kind of love emerges from deep springs. It comes from abiding in Christ so that one can dispense love to others while still remaining full of the life-giving presence of God.

Again we note that the Thessalonian believers do not lack love. Paul later makes this clear in 4.9–10: “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.” Paul has no issue with their love for others. “But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more.” The issue for Paul is simply a matter of continual growth in faith and love as an expected part of the Christian journey.

So here is a helpful question to ask: “Am I growing in love for God and for others?” Can you honestly say that your love for God and for others is increasing?

Interestingly, love is not the end game. Paul prays for increasing love “so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father.” Paul hopes that growth in love will lead to holiness—a holiness characterized by inward righteousness before God who sees and judges the interior person. Paul hopes to impact the Thessalonians at the heart level. He longs to see their desires transformed and conformed to the desires of the Father.

After his prayer Paul finally turns to a summary of his hope for the Thessalonians. “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.”

Paul finally arrives at the application based on all he has set forth in the first three chapters. This turn to application is typical of Paul’s letters and usually introduced with a phrase like “Now therefore.” (See Rom 12.1, Eph 4.25 for examples.) So in essence Paul says, “In light of all I’ve said this is now what I urge you to do. This is how I encourage you to live.”
Notice Paul asks and urges the Thessalonians to embark on a certain way of living that will please God. The language he uses is interesting. Ask may reflect a gentle, friendly request while urge is stronger: urge is more than a request, but not quite a command. This kind of language implies the urgent need to walk with God and to please God. But it also respects the fact that movement toward maturity in Christ must come from an inner desire for growth. Transformation into the likeness of Christ cannot be commanded. It can only be urged. Our degree of openness to God’s work in our lives will always determine the extent to which we experience growth in Christ. Ultimately we must desire to grow in Christ.

This raises a series of critical questions. Am I truly open to the work of God in my life? Do I long to be conformed more and more to the image of Christ? Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Paul believed that those he discipled could indeed grow, could indeed change, could indeed be transformed by the power of God. The Gospel promises pardon for sure, but it also challenges us to live a transformed life in the power of the same grace that saves us. The Gospel is about life in the future but also changed life here in this present world.

“To walk and to please God” is Paul’s great desire for himself and those he discipled. Paul used essentially the same language earlier in the letter. In chapter 2 Paul summarized his ministry in Thessalonica with these words: “For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (2.11–12 [emphasis added]).

Paul’s choice of language is intentional and significant. The first act of piety reported in Scripture is found in Genesis 5.21 where we read, “Enoch walked with God” (emphasis added). The author of Genesis then repeats the phrase in 5.24, “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him” (emphasis added). From this point in Scripture walk with God becomes the favorite Hebrew phrase to describe the person in deepest communion with God.

The same language appears in the next chapter of Genesis where we read “Noah found favor with God.” Why? Because “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, Noah walked with God” (Gen 6.9 [emphasis added]).

In Genesis 17 God revealed the details of his covenant with Abraham but before he spelled out the particulars God first set forth the basic requirement to be in right relationship with Him. “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless . . .” (emphasis added).

Paul now employs that ancient language. But Paul wants to make sure we don’t miss his point so he does something interesting. When the translators of the Septuagint came to Genesis 5.21–24 they rendered the Hebrew phrase meaning “Enoch walked with God” with a Greek phrase meaning “Enoch was well-pleasing to God” (emphasis added). They did the same in Genesis 6 and 17 when translating the Noah and Abraham passages. In 1 Thessalonians Paul seems to combine the Hebrew language with the Septuagint interpretation: “To walk and to please God.”

To walk with God is to please him. To walk in a way that our lives reflect his character brings honor and pleasure to God. The prophet Micah summed it up well. “And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6.8).

The Lord requires no great and impressive acts. Instead he longs to see us walk humbly with him. That kind of life brings pleasure to God and makes an impact on others.

My grandfather, Papa, passed away while I was working on this sermon. I was away on an extended mission trip at the time and received word too late to return for the funeral. We had traveled to the other side of the world to encourage ministers and missionaries working on a difficult field. In that context I spent a lot of time reflecting on the ways my grandfather impacted and encouraged me. One lasting image kept coming to mind. It wasn’t a dramatic or impressive act. Instead it was unassuming, simple and steady. I remember spending the night at my grandparents’ home as a young boy. And every night we grandkids would all go to


3. The Hebrew halak is translated by the Greek euaresto.]
bed at the same time. My grandfather would lie in his bed and, as he did every night, he would read a chapter or two of Scripture aloud. His voice would waft through that old house carrying the word of life. Papa was one of the first to disciple me, though he would never have called it discipling. He was just walking with God and his walk helped change my life forever.

“Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more” (1 Thess 4.1).

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