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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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Part of a sermon series from Thessalonians:

Preserved Blameless At His Coming

A Sermon Series from 1 Thessalonians

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God’s Election Creates Stereotypical Christians

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

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To the Church of Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians is possibly the earliest of all the New Testament writings. Paul feels the strain of being separated from his brethren in Macedonia and, together with his companions, Silvanus and Timothy, he writes this letter. It was written about A.D. 51, about a year after they had first visited Thessalonica. Thessalonica is located near modern day Greece and was among the cities Paul, Silas, and Timothy visited on their first journey in the winter of A.D. 50. It was on that first visit that the congregation was founded; many Greek Gentiles had just become Christians, only to see Paul forced to leave abruptly due to hostility from the Jews in the city. In his letter to the Thessalonians, we feel the strain of a pastor separated from his congregation, urging endurance. Paul emphasizes the need for endurance, that Christians might be preserved blameless at the Lord’s final coming.

Our series of sermons from 1 Thessalonians begins today with chapter 1 where Paul and his companions are writing from Corinth, giving thanks for what the Lord has accomplished in Thessalonica.

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

² We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers,
³ remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

⁶ And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. ⁸ For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. ⁹ For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

We pray, O Father, teach us hear Your Word and give thanks for the gifts You have given us in Christ Jesus and through Your Spirit. Amen.

In Jesus name, dear fellow redeemed,

I told myself it was the colors. The beige, brown, and maroon, just didn't go well with anything. I was given the tie as a gift, so I said thank you, and promptly, but discretely tucked it way in the dark recesses of my closet.

I told myself it was the colors, but there was something more to it; something I didn't want to admit. Beyond the beige, brown, and maroon, at the bottom was a cross. There was something about wearing a cross so boldly and brownly that just didn't go well with the look I was trying to pull off.

You see – it made me a little uncomfortable. I didn't like being labeled. I was afraid of being labeled. I figured people should get to know me first, rather than just shouting out in beige, brown, and maroon – “I'm a Christian.” I didn't want to be stereotyped.

Of course, there is good reason to be careful and even subtle in your faith. There is reason to be wary of stereotypes. You do not want to be wrongly labeled – a “Bible thumper,” “soap box,” “holier than thou” sort of Christian. There are bad stereotypes we want to avoid.

On the other hand, there is a sort of stereotype that is good; something we want to wear around our neck and lay boldly across our chest. It was just such a stereotype that is the

mark of what it means to be elect. It is just such a label that comes to us by God's election: that is to say, God chooses in eternity those who believe and, in time, His election creates a Christian who is marked not for who he is, but for that cross He wears around His neck.

It is just such a stereotype that was created in the Thessalonica. Paul writes to Christians who have the marks of what it means to be God's chosen ones: v.7 "You became examples..." or in Greek: "typos." That is, the Thessalonians were a type of something all believers want to be. They were stereotypical Christians – in a good way.

We'll consider this in two parts: God's election creates a Christian (1) who's allegiance is changed by the power of the Word; and (2) who is afflicted but endures by the joy of the Spirit. God's election creates stereotypical Christians.

(1) God's election creates a Christian whose allegiance is changed by the power of the Word.

It was the charge that would eventually drove Paul and his companions out of Macedonia. It was a serious legal accusation: defection against the Roman emperor. The Jews had stirred up the city and brought legal charges against these Christians in Thessalonica. So we find it recorded in Acts 17: "They dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, 'These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus'" (Acts 17:6–7). They were accused of standing against the emperor.

As Paul, Sylvanus, and Timothy sit down to write this letter we know as 1 Thessalonians, they think back on these events. It's been a year now since those events which divided the city of Thessalonica and they give thanks. They give thanks for what has happened and what is still happening – the word is echoing forth from Thessalonica. For now, Paul writes, v.8-9 of our text: "... the word of the Lord has echoed forth throughout all the Christian world, for they have heard of how you have turned from idols to served the living God."

Their allegiance has changed. And it was accomplished by Paul's preaching. For three consecutive Sabbaths Paul came preaching Jesus. He demonstrated from the Old Testament Scriptures that the Christ would suffer for our sins, and be raised from death for our salvation. He preaches "this Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."

The city was divided. Allegiances were made clear. And we see what it means to be a Christian – a stereotype we all wear; a label that is placed upon us all: “They say there is another king – Jesus.” God’s election creates a stereotypical Christian – a Christian whose allegiance has been changed by the power of the word.

We don’t like to be labeled, do we? It was more than the mixed colors of beige and brown and maroon – it was the cross on that tie that made me uncomfortable. So I tucked it away in the dark recesses of my closet. But what was I going to wear instead? It made me wonder, where does my allegiance lie?

There are two choices: idols or the living God – the ruler of this age or the Ruler of the age which is to come. Where does the Christian’s allegiance lie? The ruler of this world likes things his way. He wants that other king stuffed away in a closet some where. So he demands you pledge your allegiance to him alone. The devil erects idols throughout our culture, throughout our world, and right in the middle of our lives, all demanding allegiance:

The devil crafts an idol and he calls it “your precious time.”

He leads parents to think that they don’t have time. You don’t have time to teach your children. School is the government’s business and religion is the church’s business, and your business is to get the kids to bed so you can finally get something done.

He leads children to think that they don’t have time to listen to their parents. Mom and dad never seem to understand that you need to finish what you are doing and don’t have time to stop and listen.

He leads Christians to think that they don’t have time to help out at church. You see how much you have going on already; someone will take care of it; someone else will serve in that office; someone else will show up to that work day. Your time is precious.

And Satan says, “Pledge your allegiance.”

The devil crafts an idol and he calls this one “your precious money money.”

He leads you to think your future will be kept secure because you have a nice retirement package or he leads you to worry because you don’t. He wants you to think you need those little comforts of everyday life: that smartphone or cable TV package, those new shoes or necklace, that vacation you’ve saved up for ... He tells you that the church’s budget is something for someone else to worry about. Your money is precious.

And Satan says, “Pledge your allegiance.”

The devil crafts an idol and he calls this one “your precious social status.”

He leads you to tuck Christ away into the recesses of your life for fear that it will affect whether you fit in. He makes you think that the most important lesson in life is learning to fit in. Don’t stand out. Don’t be noticed. That co-worker who is being dishonest with company property, ignore it. That bully who is teasing your classmate, avoid it. That lie you told to cover your tracks, forget it. That Facebook post you know is inappropriate, don’t worry about it.

And Satan says, “Pledge your allegiance and I will drop the charges.”

But we want the charges. The charges need to be brought against us. Mixed away in colors of beige and brown and maroon is a cross that needs to come out; not in a Bible thumping, soap box, holier than thou sort of way – but in a way that shows where our allegiance lies.

For the Word has changed our allegiance.

5 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

The Word is more than just a word. It comes to us in power. And that power is save you. What makes us sure of our election? It is not by looking to yourselves, but by seeing where the power lies: in the gospel, in the Spirit, and in much assurance. For this is how God brings us His election. This is how He reveals that you are His chosen one: He brings you Christ in the Word.

So Paul goes to the synagogue and preaches – three consecutive Sabbaths, he preaches and reasons from the Scriptures: Christ had to suffer because of our sins, and has risen from the dead because of our salvation. And the city is divided.

There are two choices: idols or the living God. And because God is living, Christ is living, and because Christ is living, you belong to Him.

This is something that must be brought out of the dark recesses of our lives and worn boldly around our neck. It is a strange mix of beige and brown and maroon, but in that

blood mixed with that cross, we find the power of God's Spirit. "For the gospel is the power of God to the goal of salvation, for all who believe" (1:16). "And baptism now saves us" (2 Peter 3). And it is not by works of righteousness that we have done, but by His mercy He has saved us, through the washing of rebirth and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3).

Your allegiance has changed – not because of who you are, but because of who you are not. For this Jesus whom I proclaim is the Christ. This Jesus, God has raised up and has made Lord of all. There is another king! And that king is our Lord:

He is Lord of our time, changing our allegiance from one dedicated to how I can use my time to best serve myself, to how my time belongs to Him and He will use it to serve others.

He is Lord of our money, changing our allegiance from one dedicated to using my money to further my cause, to using my money to serve my family, my church, and my neighbors in need.

And yes, He is Lord of our social status, changing our allegiance from one dedicated to fitting in, to one dedicated to fitting Christ in, fitting Christ into conversations with a co-worker, into a confrontation with the bully, into words of repentance about the lies that were told, and even into my Facebook page.

It is time to pull that tie out of the closet and wear it; it is time to be labeled; this is what it means to be elect: a new allegiance created by the power of the Word. But we should know that if we wear that tie, we might be told to take it off; we might be poked fun at, we might have charges brought against us.

(2) It creates a Christian who is afflicted but endures

Paul is driven out, but Jason has to stay. When the city of Thessalonica can't find Paul and Silvanus, they go after Jason. It was Jason who had housed and hid them and it is Jason and the brethren who are left behind to face the affliction for Christ.

God's election creates a stereotypical Christian – one who is afflicted, but who endures.

Do you ever feel like, God has kind of moved on and left you to face the affliction? Jesus came, stirred up the world, and went on, while here you are stuck in the middle of His wake of His work. He has gone into the glory of heaven, and you remain here in

the afflictions of earth. It is this sort of idea that makes us want to take that ugly tie and tuck it away into the recesses of our closet.

We can know with certainty that because we are among the elect, we will be afflicted by persecution and temptation. We know if we bring out that tie and wear it to work, we might be told to take it off. We might be poked fun at. We might be “labeled.” We might have charges brought against us.

6 And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. 8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

Jason and the brethren had to stay behind to follow in the footsteps of the apostles and of their Lord. For this is the mark of a Christian: persecution, temptation, suffering. And this is where our joy is to be found.

When you wear that tie, that is, when you wear your faith around your neck, the Holy Spirit blesses you. When you give up your time in order to have share the Word of God with your children, or listen to the Word of God from your parents, or receive the Word of God at church, the Holy Spirit is giving you His joy. When you give up your money in order to share it with your family, or your church, or those in need, the Holy Spirit is giving you His joy. When you give up your social status in order to echo the word to friends, school, co-workers, when you sacrifice your Facebook friendships in order to echo your faith to the world, the Holy Spirit is giving you His joy. And so the word echoes forth to all the world, so that we do not need to say anything. Your actions have said it all already.

Jesus told us ahead of time that this would happen. He said that in these last days, persecution will grow worse and worse: “And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 10:22–23).

This is what it mean to wear a cross around your neck. But this is your joy and endurance. In the Holy Spirit, Jesus has never left us. You are not alone in the wake of His work; He is with you in the work of His awakening. For in His cross we find Him and the hope of the resurrection. Just like Jesus, we know beyond the ugliness of the cross we are bearing around our neck is the joy of the resurrection.

And so we wait. With the Thessalonians we are “waiting for God’s Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (v. 10). He will come again and will judge the living and the dead and will deliver us from the wrath that is coming against all sin – and will receive the joy of our hope. God’s election creates a stereotypical – one who is afflicted, but endures in the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Beyond the beige, brown, and maroon, is a cross. Beyond the mix of colors, stirred up by the cross is something good, something which reveals the assurance of your election: it is His resurrection and the hope of what is to come. This is a stereotype worth wearing. Amen.