

## **“How Will They Know Us?”**

### **I Thessalonians 1:1-10**

**October 19, 2008**

As I was explaining to a friend this week, one of the first things that I do when preparing to write a sermon is to read the selected scripture passage over and over again looking for one or two particular sentences, thoughts, or phrases that stick out in my mind. Well, on Wednesday afternoon as I sat down to prepare to write this sermon, and as I read these ten verses of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians three or four times, there was this one little piece of scripture that continued to stick in my mind. Here it is, “*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.*” [I Thessalonians 1:7-8]

We’ve all heard that old saying, “*Actions speak louder than words.*” But the people in Thessalonica not only knew the truth of these words, they lived it. Again, Paul wrote, “*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.*” You see, what Paul was saying was that not only did the people in Thessalonica believe in God, and talk about God, they lived out their faith in God in such an obvious, effective and observable way that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy didn’t even need to tell anyone about those Christian people over there in Thessalonica—everyone already knew who they were and what they were about. And they knew this not because of what the Thessalonians believed, or what they had said. They weren’t known because of their faith, they were known because of their actions, which were inspired by their faith.

The past few Sunday mornings I’ve been leading a Sunday School class based on a book called, *They Like Jesus, But Not the Church*. The core teaching of the book is something that we’ve been talking about in and around our congregation for the past couple of years now, and that discussion has revolved around the reality that while there are still a great many people in the world around us who believe in God, and even support what they understand Jesus to have taught and stood for, very, very few of them have a positive opinion about Christian people or Christian Churches.

One example of such a person from the book and video series that we have been studying is a fellow named Gary. Gary is a 20-something-year-old fellow who grew up going to church pretty much every Sunday morning. But then at some point in his teens Gary began to sense a disconnect between the words and the deeds of the people who attended that church. Turned off by what he understood to be a sort of negative and judgmental spirit that pervaded the character of that congregation, Gary quit going to church and he hasn't gone back. Still a believer in God, and a follower of the teachings of Jesus, Gary, who is now a drummer in a rockabilly band, has this to say about his perception of Christian people and why he no longer attends worship in a traditional Christian Church, ***“I read the Bible myself ... That is not Christian behavior as Christ would have wanted it.”***

How would you respond to Gary if you had the opportunity to sit down and talk with him? What would you say to an individual who sees the church as judging, political, money grubbing, filled with hatred and mudslinging against anyone who doesn't agree with them? I know what I'd say. I'd say, *“I don't know what churches you have attended that have given you this impression, but I do know that you've never been to the Quaker Hill Baptist Church, where every single week a diverse and loving group of people gather together to love God and one another, offering their time, talents, and even their hard earned cash generously and lovingly every single week in an unselfish attempt to transform the world with the love and grace of God.”*

But here's the problem: Gary's not here. And neither are the roughly 240 million other Americans who don't attend Christian worship on a regular basis. We hear and read the opinions of Gary and so many other people like him who have an axe to grind with the Church and we wonder, *“How Will They Know Us?”* Our hearts break with grief, and we want to say to them, sure, like any other organized anything we'll admit that there are a few *“bad apples”* in the barrel of Christendom who have given the rest of us a black eye with overbearing and judgmental attitudes. And there can be no doubt that the sexual and financial scandals that have rocked a small handful of predominant churches have caused a wary eye of suspicion and mistrust to be cast over the entire Body of Christ on earth.

And no matter how right we might be in our assertion that most Christian churches are filled with good Christian people who unselfishly love and serve God and their neighbor week in and week out, as Michelle Lovell said in our Sunday School class a few weeks ago, *“Perception is reality.”* You

see, ultimately it doesn't matter if those who condemn the Christian church are right or not. If that's how they see us, then that's who we are until they are convinced otherwise. The Garys of the world have gone away from the Christian Church, and they have no plans of ever coming back. And even if we could get them back inside the doors for even just one Sunday, there is no amount of talking and preaching and pleading with them that could ever convince them that their opinion and perception of us is mostly off base. And again, we wonder, "*How Will They Know Us?*"

If they aren't coming to us, and if our words will never change their minds about who we are, and more importantly the God that we serve, How *will* they know us? They will know us by our love. My friends, in this day and time when 80 percent of our neighbors don't know Christ, and have no interest in coming to this place to meet him, we need to learn from and follow the example of our forefathers and mothers in the faith from that little town of Thessalonica. We need to introduce the world around us to the Savior of the world through our own loving actions and deeds.

We need to get out of the pews and into the streets. We need to get out of our comfort zone and into the world. We need to get our minds off our own problems and so engage ourselves with the people around us that their problems become our own. We need to heed Jesus' great commission to "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*" We need to take seriously and live out Jesus' great commandment, which tells us "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" For if we take these words seriously, then our love for God and our neighbor will so inspire us to go out into the world making disciples and showing others the love of God that 24 hours a day, 7 days a week could never be enough for us to do all that we want to accomplish.

Every single Sunday I see you live out those words here within these four walls. I see you teaching and learning in Sunday School. I hear you singing in the choir, I sit with you a few nights a week, every week doing the hard work of our various teams and the ministries that they bring to life. And words could never express the gratitude that I feel when I see the amount of blood, sweat, and tears that you put into the ministry of this congregation. I see who you are and how much you love God. I see God in you, but the

Garys of the world don't. And until we follow the example of that little church in ancient Greece whose loving action changed the world around them, they never will. How will they know us? They will know us by our love. Amen.