

Tom Coop
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
October 22, 2017

You Are the Message!

Have you ever heard the saying, “Actions speak louder than words”?
They always do, don’t they?

Chuck Swindoll tells about a three-year-old boy who had been learning the game of golf by watching his grandfather play.

“The boy was so enthused,’ said his Grandpa, “I bought him his own set of clubs.”

The following week the entire family had a cookout and the little boy who had learned to golf by watching Grandpa announced:

“Watch me play golf!” and then he said a swear word and threw his golf club into the pear tree!

That little guy had learned about more than golf. And he did it by simply observing his grandfather.

We all imitate others from our earliest years, beginning with our families of origin. And then, as our world expands, we have opportunities to observe those outside our families.

Imitation is a powerful form of learning, changing lives in the process. Our role models are important. What we do and how we live often speaks volumes more than anything we ever say.

And so, Paul praises the Thessalonians for becoming imitators of the missionaries and of he who we all should be imitating ... Christ

Thessalonica, the community to which Paul writes his letter, was a major city in northern Greece.

Situated on the main east-west highway (the “Via Ignatia”) of the Roman Empire, it was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and very loyal to Rome.

It actually survives to this day, and is now known as Salonika, about 185 miles north of Athens.

Chronologically, if our New Testament were arranged by dates, 1st Thessalonians would most likely be the first book and not the gospel of Matthew.

1st Thessalonians, is the earliest of Paul’s surviving letters.

Written around 50 CE, this would place it some 20 years after the death and resurrection of Christ, and about 20 years before the Gospel of Mark, which chronologically was the first gospel written.

When Paul wrote this letter, it was at a time that the Christians had not started writing down their recollections of the life of Jesus and the meaning of his death and resurrection. It was solely an oral tradition.

But Paul was a Hellenistic Jew, who, being a part of that culture, used letters as a way of being present with someone, when one couldn’t be physically present.

These letters were personal, like one written by a friend to friend. Paul instructs the Thessalonians to read the letter to all the brothers and sisters each time they gather together.

Now, you may or may not have heard of the Thessalonians, but in the first century their name was a household word -- especially among the Christians in the Roman Empire.

In the passage we read earlier, Paul tells them “that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you. The word has gotten around.”

He goes on to say, “Your lives are echoing the Master’s Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don’t even have to say anything anymore—you’re the message!”

Nowadays companies, institutions and entire countries are more concerned with their image than ever before.

Unprecedented care is taken to ensure that the original (or what needs to be regarded as such) is depicted as closely as possible – be it on the Internet, on billboards, in ads.

We know very well that a single misrepresentation in the form of a poor product image, a badly constructed advertisement or the wrong words coming from the mouth of a public speaker can have catastrophic consequences.

Take cars, for example. If you happen to own a car from a certain brand and that car keeps breaking down all the time, you'll probably look at other car makers when you are in the market for another car.

On the other hand, if you ended up with a car which never gave you a problem, you will look no further when the time comes to buy a new one.

Recent models of cars are produced in the hundreds of thousands, so a single sample out of the whole production shouldn't have such a power to change your mind.

One could argue that statistically it's insignificant. But, it does change your mind and the quality of that one car is significant to you. At the end, it still represents what the company building it stands for.

Why is it that this is all so clear and natural to us when it comes to the perishable things of this world but we fail to see it in relation to God?

The Thessalonians became imitators of Paul and Silas and, most importantly, God.

Then they themselves became models to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (the two Roman provinces of Greece at that time) and it didn't stop there.

It didn't take much for this to happen because they represented God so clearly in a city filled with travelers and businessmen passing through daily.

The world needs role models. Has there ever been a generation more in need of people who will set an example?

Now, here's a thought: What if indeed we turn out to be somebody else's role model?

What if someone else is looking up to us, imitating us, doing the things we do, the way we do them?

What if somebody else is basing their attitudes, their values, their actions on ours?

It's a scary thought, isn't it? And it's scary because, if it's true, we may have to think about what we're doing and how we're living.

I remember several years ago when NBA basketball star Charles Barkley made a public statement that he didn't intend to be anybody's role model. He didn't want the pressure.

Guess what! Too bad! There were probably thousands of kids that wanted to be just like Charles Barkley. Now, that's a scary thought!

The truth is, there's a chance that somebody is always looking to you for clues about how to live their life.

Consider that for a moment, and then ask yourself this question: How would you live differently if you believed that someone was, in fact, following your example?

Now consider this: They are! Someone is looking to you and imitating you. Maybe not your facial tic, if you have one, or any of your other mannerisms.

But they are adopting your values. They are embracing your pattern of living.

When they are trying to figure out what life might be saying to them about what's important, YOU'RE THE MESSAGE. You're the message.

There was an article in the news sometime back about a New York Assemblywoman who pleaded guilty to driving while alcohol-impaired. Nothing unusual about that, unfortunately.

What was sad was that she is the chair of the Assembly's Alcohol and Drug Abuse committee.

Then there was a woman-- by the name of Dranafice, also known as Rose, who was a poor woman and lived many years ago in Albania.

Rose and her husband opened their home to the poor and hungry in their town.

Whenever one of Rose's daughters would ask who the new visitor at their dinner table was, Rose would answer that it was a relative. And I guess, in a sort of universal way, they were.

Rose's daughters grew up believing that they came from an enormous extended family.

Even after Rose's husband died, and the family was plunged into poverty, Rose found a way to give food to the hungry and help to the destitute.

One of Rose's daughters was greatly influenced by her mother's example of sacrificial love.

And now, as Paul Harvey would say, for the rest of the story: This daughter, Agnes, grew up to become an advocate for the poor all over the world.

She devoted her whole life to caring for those in need.

For young Agnes grew up to become ... wait for it ... Mother Teresa, the twentieth century's living example of Christ in the world.

Mother Teresa became who she was because of the example of her mother. Examples matter.

The best hope that the world has is that God will raise up people who understand that our lives are intertwined--that who I am and what I do affects who you are and what you do.

I can look at my life and see that I am who I am because of the example of significant persons in my life. And the same is true of you.

This is how most people become followers of Christ.

It is not because someone argued them into the kingdom, but because someone loved them into the kingdom and set an example of Christ-like living.

There is a story in one of the CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL books told by a mother in Costa Mesa, California.

It was a hectic day in their home, she says, but with 10 children and one on the way, every day was a bit hectic.

On this particular day, however, this mother was having trouble doing even routine chores--all because of one of her little boys.

Len, who was three at the time, was on her heels no matter where she went.

Whenever she stopped to do something and turned back around, she would trip over him.

Several times, she patiently suggested fun activities to keep Len occupied.

"Wouldn't you like to play on the swing set?" she asked again, and again, and again.

But he simply smiled an innocent smile and said, "Oh, no, Mommy. I'd rather be in here with you." Then he continued to bounce happily along behind her.

After stepping on his toes for the fifth time, Len's Mom began to lose her patience and insisted that he go outside and play with the other children.

When she asked him why he was acting this way, he looked up at her with sweet green eyes and said:

“Well, Mommy, in Sunday School my teacher told me to walk in Jesus’ footsteps. But I can’t see Jesus, so I’m walking in yours.”

And that’s what it is all about, isn’t it? Role models still count. Worthy examples still make a difference.

So many people wonder why their lives are so empty, so hollow, so frantic.

They never consider that it might have something to do with the people that they choose to imitate and the kind of goals that they have set for themselves.

You may have heard the old story about a man who was fired from the Highway Department.

He was hired to paint the lines down the middle of the highway, and the first day, when he painted 8 miles, his supervisor was ecstatic.

Then the next day he painted only 4 miles, the following day only 1, and the fourth day only a quarter of a mile - and so the supervisor had to fire him.

“How come you only painted a quarter of a mile the last day?” his supervisor asked.

“Well, to tell you the truth,” the man replied, “I just kept getting farther and farther away from the paint can.”

If we are not making a difference to others; if our reputation is nothing special; if our lives feel empty and hollow; maybe it is because we are getting too far away from the paint can ... God.

Too far away from those examples of faith and love and hope that are around us - too far away from the source and the inspiration of our faith.

Jesus came to give us life and give it abundantly.

He came to seek the lost and to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.

And he shone. People wanted to be near him, to be like him. Today we, too, can be near him, and we need to be like him.

A favorite musical of mine is "Man of La Mancha," which is about a slightly demented knight, Don Quiote, who wanders in an imaginary world fighting for right and bringing hope to those in despair.

In it he sings one song that I believe sums up pretty well what I am trying to say. He sings:

"To dream the impossible dream. To fight the unbeatable foe. To bear with unbearable sorrow. To run where the brave dare not go.

To right the unrightable wrong. To love pure and chaste from afar. To try when your arms are to weary. To reach the unreachable star!!!

This is my quest, to follow that star. No matter how hopeless, no matter how far.

To fight for the right, without question or pause. To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause!!!

And I know, if I'll only be true to this glorious quest.

That my heart, will lie peaceful and calm. When I'm laid to my rest.

And the world, will be better for this. That one man, scorned and covered with scars.

Still strove with his last ounce of courage. To reach the unreachable stars!!!!"

It's possible. That's what God wants for us.

We can make it happen.

We can be that kind of congregation, and that kind of people.

And if "We are the Message" ... then that's the kind of message I want folks to hear.

Amen!