

Cheap Imitations

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 June 2021

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Well, the world we live in is full of imitations, right? You all know Toblerone chocolate, right? This one. You all know that chocolate.

But do you know this one? Tambourine. Anyone had a tambourine chocolate before? Apparently you get them in Thailand or something. Our missionaries will enjoy some tambourine chocolates, I'm sure.

What about these ones? Next slide. Koolgat. Koolgat. Koolgat. Koolgat. Koolgat. Koolgat. Koolgat. And Dave Beauty Cream Bar. Now, those imitations are quite obvious.

Some imitations are not so obvious, like this one. One of those is a genuine iPhone and one of them is a fake. Can you tell the difference? No. Some imitations look very convincing.

And the next one. One of these is a genuine pair of Nike shoes. The other one is a knuckle. Can you tell which is which? It's difficult, isn't it? Some imitations look very much like the real thing.

[1 : 0 5] Well, sad to say, you also get a lot of imitation Christians in our world. And it's for that reason, amongst others, that Paul writes this letter to the Thessalonians to help us to know the difference between imitations and the real thing.

That's one of the main lessons we're going to learn from this letter. One of the main things we get reading 1 Thessalonians is we get to learn what a genuine, real Christian is, as opposed to the fakes.

And Paul starts this letter by telling the Thessalonians why he knows that they are the real thing. Why he knows that they're really Christians.

Look at verse 4 in chapter 1. For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God, that he has chosen you. He knows that the Thessalonian Christians that he's writing to are the real deal.

They're elect. They're chosen by God and called to life. But how can he know that? How does he know that? Well, that's what he then goes on to describe in this opening to his letter that we're going to look at this morning.

[2 : 1 4] And he gives three reasons. Three reasons that he knows that these Thessalonians are genuine. And they all have to do with what happened when the gospel came to them.

How it came to them and how they received it. That's what these opening verses are about. And so let's look at the three reasons Paul knows that the Thessalonians are genuine Christians. Firstly, because the gospel came to them with power.

The gospel came to them powerfully. Look at verse 5. Because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your benefit. Okay, so, you know if you have to transmit a message via, say, a radio, you need two things, at least two things to transmit a message.

You need a transmitter and you need a receiver. Without one of those things, the message won't go anywhere. You need the transmitter on the one side and the receiver on the other side.

[3 : 19] And the first thing Paul does in 1 Thessalonians is he describes the powerful transmitter for the gospel that came to the Thessalonians. Now, it would be helpful to know a little bit of the back story.

And we're given the back story of the Thessalonian church in Acts chapter 17. We don't have time to read the whole thing. You will be able to in your growth groups this week where you can look a little bit more detail into what happened.

But long story short, what happened was that the apostles came along to Thessalonica, which is kind of northern Macedonia, Greece, modern-day Greece. And they started sharing the gospel with the Jews.

And then the Jews, some of them sort of took it well and then others rejected them. And so they went to the Gentiles and started sharing the gospel. And they made a lot of sacrifices in order to be there and to share the gospel with these Gentiles, these pagan idol worshipers who had never heard it before.

And so they didn't want anything to get in the way of the gospel going out. So they made a lot of sacrifices. They describe it later, in fact, in 1 Thessalonians.

[4 : 28] But eventually they got persecuted and they had to flee Thessalonica only a few weeks after they got there. And so that's why when they later get to Corinth, Paul and Timothy and Silas are so anxious about the Thessalonians.

They're wondering, you know, whether they carried on in the faith at all, because they only spent a few weeks with these people and then they had to go for fear of their lives. And so they sent Timothy to see.

And he came back to Paul and said, wow, not only did they take on the faith of Christ, but they're growing and they're sharing that faith with everyone they come across.

And so despite all the difficulties in Thessalonica, the gospel took root. And as Paul is reflecting on this and writing this letter, he realizes it's because the gospel came to them, not just with words, but with real power.

And the reason is because of the Holy Spirit. He says that there in verse 5. See, he says, but it did not come to you in word only, but also in power in the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 34] And that's why I remember when Jesus ascended, we remembered a few weeks ago, ascension day, he told his disciples that they must go and take the word into the world, but they mustn't do it yet.

They must stay in Jerusalem. Remember, why must they stay in Jerusalem? They had to wait for the Holy Spirit to come. They wouldn't be effective going out into the world and sharing the message of Jesus without the Holy Spirit empowering the transmission of that message.

Without the Holy Spirit making these words that we read in the Bible and we hear about Jesus real, without the Holy Spirit making this real, we will only ever be fake Christians.

We will only ever be pretending. Unless the Holy Spirit is transmitting this into our hearts like he did with the Thessalonians. So you see, with the radio, you need a transmitter, you need a receiver, but that transmitter needs a power source in order to send the radio waves out so that they can be received.

Well, the gospel needs a power source, which is the Holy Spirit, in order for it to be received by our hearts and for it to take root. For anyone to receive it properly and take root.

[6 : 51] And that certainly does stress to us the importance of the Holy Spirit and what he does and why he's here, amongst other things that he does. But it also, if you think about it, it takes the pressure off us when we're sharing the gospel with others, doesn't it?

Because it's not actually our job to cause it to take root and to convince them with our clever arguments and our words. It's not up to our ability to speak.

God doesn't actually need us to be particularly persuasive when we speak. Just like a witness in a courtroom, it's not the witness's job to convince the jury.

That's the advocate's job, right? That's the lawyer's job. The witness just has to give the facts. Well, you know who the advocate is? In the Bible, it's the Holy Spirit. He does the convincing.

We just do the witnessing. We just make the truth about Jesus known. And the Holy Spirit does the rest. God doesn't need us to be persuasive and have particularly clever arguments.

[7 : 56] There are some people, of course, who have been called to defend the faith and show how modern philosophies don't stand. But for the ordinary average Christian who's called to be a witness to the truth, the Holy Spirit is the one who empowers the message for it to take root, just like he did here.

What God does use is our lives and our conviction when we speak. And that's why Paul also says the next thing he says in verse 5.

Now, I think that means most of the commentators think that that isn't so much referring to the conviction that it was received by the Thessalonians, but it's referring to the conviction of the apostles when they shared this word, that they were real about it, that they took it seriously, that it could be seen in how they lived, in how sacrificial they were when they brought it.

You yourselves know how we lived among you for your benefit. And then he goes on later in the letter to describe that and how they really went to the extent of making so many sacrifices so that these Thessalonians could see that the gospel was real.

And so just as important as the Holy Spirit convicting people of the truth of the gospel, just as important as that, is the commitment of those who are doing God's work to actually make real sacrifices while they're doing it.

[9 : 40] Because that itself is a witness to the truth. Remember Revelation? Revelation? We've just preached it. I hope you're not going, Revelation? What was that about?

Yet. One of the main themes in Revelation was how God is going to bring His kingdom into the world. How people are going to be changed. How people are going to be converted.

How He's going to establish the rule of His Son on earth and in people's lives. And what we saw is that God's warning judgments aren't enough.

Remember? What was going to change people was God's sacrificial witnesses. Remember that? As God's people on the earth are making sacrifices and putting themselves out to make the gospel known, that's when God's power works in the world.

That's when God's kingdom gets established. When people are willing to make sacrifices for the work of Christ. Powerful transmission of God's word comes when the Holy Spirit is present and when God's people are making sacrifices.

[10 : 51] You put those two things together, you've got power, you've got the growth of God's kingdom. And that's the first thing Paul reminds the Thessalonians of. Why he knows that they're the real deal because of how they received, how the word was transmitted to them.

The next reason he knows it is because how it actually, how it was received by them. In verse 6. Have a look. And you yourselves became imitators of us and of the Lord when in spite of severe persecution, you welcome the message with joy from the Holy Spirit.

Okay, so the next reason Paul knew that Thessalonians were the real thing was because they were willing to endure persecution just like the apostles were. And so, if you read on in Acts 17, the apostles left Thessalonica, they were chased out.

And then the people who they left, these Christians who had only heard the gospel for the first time just a few weeks before, they were now suddenly the targets of all that hostility to the gospel from the Jews and the Gentiles.

We read about one of them, a guy called Jason, who merely let the apostles use his home. He housed them. He gave them hospitality and he was arrested. He was dragged before the court.

[12 : 21] He was in a lot of trouble just because of that, because he was associated with the apostles. And so, you can imagine, a few weeks into their new faith, these apostles leave, you can imagine it's very easy for them to go, whew, you know what, this is not for me.

It's very easy for them to be put off when the whole town around them that they used to be accepted citizens of is now against them. Very easy. You can well imagine how tempting it was just to turn away from the faith that they got from these apostles.

But what we read is that the very opposite thing happened. Not only did they not turn away from the faith when they faced persecution, but they faced persecution with joy.

You see that? Look at verse 6 again. In spite of severe persecution, you welcome the message with joy from the Holy Spirit.

They were joyful when they were being persecuted because they were considered worthy to be part of Christ's sufferings.

[13 : 39] Just like Paul says in his letters as well, when he suffered. That they were so chuffed that God considered them worthy to be part of Christ's sufferings as they lived out the gospel.

And that is real gospel power. More than miracles and signs and wonders. You know, often people say, well, if God only showed miracles and signs, then I would believe.

But you know what's more convincing and more powerful than miracles? It's when Christians have joy in tribulation. That is a witness that's more powerful than any kind of witness that you can get.

When Christians are going through suffering and tribulation and persecution, and yet because they're in Christ, because they have a hope, because they know their Savior, and they know God, and they know their future, they are joyful in it.

And joyful even because of the suffering that God has seen them worthy of going through. And so these Thessalonians showed that they were truly the witnesses that Revelation speaks about, the 144,000, remember?

[14 : 54] Who couldn't shut up, who the world couldn't shut up about the message. They kept on talking, they kept on living it out. Even though it's that very message that got them into trouble, they didn't shut up about it, and the world couldn't keep them quiet.

Joy in tribulation. Have you ever stopped to wonder, actually, why Christianity is the most persecuted religion in history?

And it is, by far. Christianity is the most persecuted religion. Have you ever stopped to wonder why? Christians aren't particularly nasty people. Why persecute them?

Well, it's purely because of the message that they bear. And you've got to ask them, well, what is it about the message of Jesus that causes the world to become so angry?

Well, it's not just the message that, you know, Jesus is the path to abundant life, true as that is. That's not particularly offensive. Many religions actually offer the way to abundant life.

[16 : 05] Buddhism, for example. Nobody's offended by that when you say, well, do this and follow this, and you can find the path to abundant life. And people, they might not believe that, but they'll just go, okay, well, that's good for you.

Nice for you to believe that. I believe my own thing. It's not offensive. What about the message that Jesus came to bring forgiveness? True as that is, that's not particularly offensive. Other religions, lots of other religions have messages of forgiveness and how to find forgiveness.

And people go, okay, well, that works for you. That's fine. That's not for me. No, what is it about the message of Jesus that offends people? I'll tell you. In fact, it was the message that the apostles preached when they got to Thessalonica.

That's what caused all the problems. You want to know what that message is? Turn to Acts 17. Have a look at this. Let's find out exactly what it was that caused all the trouble. Acts 17 from verse 2 says, That's what got under people's skin.

When Paul came and told them, Jesus is the Lord of the world. And you are under his authority. That's what caused the persecutions.

[17 : 48] Look on later. Look, because we read it. I think Luke, who wrote Acts, is trying to make a point of why people were so angry. Acts 17 from verse 6. When they did not find them, looking now, this is a mob hunting down the apostles.

When they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials shouting, These men who have come, turned the world upside down, have come here too, and Jason has welcomed them.

They are all acting contrary to Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, Jesus. It wasn't the message of abundant life. It wasn't the message of forgiveness that got them into trouble.

It was the message that Jesus is king. That's what people didn't like. But that message is what changed these Thessalonians.

You see that? The power that changed the Thessalonians, the message that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Messiah, Jesus is who the whole Old Testament points towards, Jesus is the one who is coming back to establish God's kingdom once and for all on this planet.

[18 : 54] That same message that had the power to change these Thessalonian believers is also the message that got them persecuted. If you want a message that's going to change your life and change the life of others, that's the message that's going to get you persecuted.

If you water it down so that it's palatable to the world, it loses its power to convert. You see that? Very important.

Because it's very tempting to water down our message, make it more palatable, more politically correct, but then it has no power to do what it did in these Thessalonian believers.

That's what they were persecuted for. And they were persecuted for it not just because they said they believed it, but because they lived it out. And that's the third reason that Paul knows that these Thessalonians were the real deal, because the gospel not only was transmitted to them powerfully, not only was it received powerfully, but the next thing we read is that it went out powerfully from them.

Look at verse 7 to 8 of 1 Thessalonians 1. As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, for the word of the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out.

[20 : 24] Therefore, we don't need to say anything. It rang out from them. That word that Paul uses, it's the only time it appears in the whole Bible.

The word ring out. Literally, the Greek is ex-echo. It's echoed out. It resonated out. It reverberated. Their faith literally reverberated wherever they went.

And it couldn't be ignored. You know when something reverberates? You know that word? A particular frequency? Maybe sometimes you're at home reading a book and a car drives past the road and its engine has got that particular frequency and makes your window shake.

You know what I'm talking about? It reverberates. There's a particular note that causes other things to reverberate. That's what Thessalonians' faith was. It rang a particular note that people couldn't ignore.

It caused things around them to reverberate. It made real effects in the world around them. Wherever they went. I wonder if your faith reverberates in your life, in your actions and in your conversations, that people can notice it.

[21 : 43] Like those rattling windows. Then Paul goes on to elaborate just how their faith was noticeable. How it reverberated in their life and in their world.

Later on in verse 9 and 10, have a look at it. This is one of the most concise and best descriptions of Christian conversion from paganism that you can find in the New Testament.

Have a look at what he says. From verse 9. Talking about the other people who were a witness to the Thessalonians' faith. He says, So there's three aspects to the Thessalonians' conversion that Paul lists.

Firstly, they turned from idols. They turned from the idols of their society and their day. They stopped valuing what society said will give them life and happiness and salvation and satisfaction.

Now to them, it was actual, literal idols made out of wood and stone. And the society around them was pressuring them and everyone else to believe in these idols, to worship these idols.

[23 : 20] And these idols were the ones who were going to give them good harvests and fertility and all the things that would make life good and juicy. They looked to these idols to give them.

Even though, yes, they were only built out of stone and wood, they put their faith in these things. And idol worship, you've got to understand, in the pagan world, wasn't just about your own personal belief.

It was about being part of society. You would only be an accepted member of society if you came to the idol feasts. And it was a whole social network. It was the way of life to worship these idols.

It was the accepted thing to do. And society said, these things are the things you need to value and people went along with that. And so actually, if you think about it, it's not too different to how today's world works, is it?

Society says, these are the things you've got to value. Society tells us, this is what's going to give you life and liberation and freedom, money, sexual liberation, being able to choose your gender.

[24 : 31] I mean, the list goes on. What society's idols are, what they say is going to make you happy. You know, often we think back to when they actually worshipped wooden idols.

And they used to bow down to these pieces of wood. And we think, how stupid were they? Who would do that? They must have been so backward to be able to think that these things were real gods.

They could see that they were made out of wood. How stupid were they to bow down to these idols? You know what? Transport one of them into the 21st century, they'd look at us and go, you guys can decide your gender.

That's pretty stupid. I mean, think about it. The idols of today are just as stupid as the idols back then. Again, it's deception because of what society says.

You've got a value. But Christians, Christians are the ones who reject that and say, no, Jesus is king. Jesus gets to tell us what reality is about.

[25 : 37] Not us. We don't get to decide our own reality. Jesus has shown himself as Messiah. And that, saying that to the world today is going to get us into trouble just as it did for the Thessalonians back then.

They turned from idols. True Christians turned from the idols of society. Secondly, they served the living and true God.

How you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. True conversion is seen not only in turning away from what the world values, but turning towards what God values.

which is the growth of his kingdom, the glory of his name, and the gospel of his son. And so true conversion is seen in looking for every opportunity to serve God and his kingdom out of love for him and love for each other that is more than our love for our own comforts because serving is uncomfortable.

Serving the living and true God. But these Thessalonians did it and they didn't only do it willingly, they did it with joy. You know, just as you serve your wife or your kids because you love them, even though it's uncomfortable, you don't mind because you love them.

[26 : 59] In the same way, true Christians serve God and his people even when it hurts. That's the second part of their conversion that made Paul convinced that they were the real thing.

Turned from idols, they served the living and true God, and then thirdly, they eagerly waited for Jesus to come back. Verse 10, and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

And that future orientation they had, living every day in light of Jesus coming back, looking to him as the morning star that Revelation spoke about, who is assuring us of the coming dawn, that vision that they had, that they lived out day by day, reverberated in their life and their conversations.

And it caused them to endure whatever the world throws at them. And as we have that future orientation, so it will reverberate in our lives and conversations and cause us to endure whatever this world tries to throw at us.

And that is what marked out to the Thessalonians as genuine Christians. Those three things. Paul actually starts his letter, I wonder if you noticed, earlier on, by summarizing those in a little concise statement in verse 3.

[28 : 26] Have a look what he says. We recall in the presence of our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope.

in our Lord Jesus Christ. Those, and this is not the only time you'll see those three things together in the New Testament. Those are the hallmarks, the three hallmarks of genuine, true Christianity.

Faith, hope, and love. But notice, notice, it's faith, hope, and love that have real outward effects as well.

Did you see that? It's not just you have faith, hope, and love in your room quietly when you're reading the Bible. No, you have work produced by faith, labor motivated by love, and endurance inspired by hope.

Hallmarks of true Christianity that have outward effects. Faith, hope, and love that reverberate in life, proving that the message of Christ has taken hold in the hearts of these people.

[29 : 37] And so, in closing, if you are working in faith, laboring in love, and standing firm in hope, then be encouraged. Paul writes this as an encouragement to the Thessalonians.

Be encouraged because it means God has chosen you and has worked powerfully to bring you to that point because you wouldn't do those things if the gospel hasn't taken root in your life.

And then realize, that it's as you look for opportunities to wring out that faith and that hope and that love that God has implanted in your heart to reverberate in every area of your life and as you let it do that, reverberate at your workplace, reverberate at your school, reverberate at your sports club, as you look for opportunities to reverberate your faith and your hope and your love in every area of life.

It's then that God will do his work in and through us as he did with the Thessalonians. And the rest of this letter to the Thessalonians is going to help us to make sure we do that.

So come back next week. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that Paul wrote this letter and that in it we can learn the hallmarks of true Christianity and we can look at our own lives and we can learn how to take the faith and the hope and the love you've given us and make it reverberate out in the world.

[31 : 05] Help us to do that evermore and as we do would you work through us to grow your kingdom and to glorify the name of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.