

Building A Church Of Thessalonica For The 21st Century | Part 3 | True Transformation | Dr. Madana Kumar Series

Contributed by Dr. Madana Kumar, Phd on Feb 12, 2024

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6, 1 Thessalonians 4:7, 1 Thessalonians 5:22-23, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Denomination: Evangelical/Non-Denominational

Summary: In this third part of the series Dr. Madana Kumar explains what True Transformation is, and how it will prepare us for the second coming of Jesus.

Building a Church of Thessalonica for the 21st century | Part 3 | A True Transformation

This is part 3 of the series on 1&2 Thessalonians

Good morning and welcome to the Part 3 of the series on 1&2 Thessalonians. So far in Part 1 and 2, we have seen the historical background in which the Church at Thessalonica was formed. We have briefly looked into some of the reasons why this congregation thrived. We saw that one of the main reasons was the hope and anticipation of the second coming of Jesus. We looked into what the second coming of Jesus looks like, and we understood some of the conditions that need to be met before that event happens. And we are filled with hope and anticipation about that day when sin will be wiped out and we will be with the Lord forever.

From this part 3 of the series onwards, we are going to look at what do we need to do to prepare for that day.

Remember we learnt that while we know that Jesus will come again, we do not know when exactly that will take place. And hence our role is not to speculate on when Jesus will return, but to be ready for the return when he comes.

We are going to look at four pillars of a true church.

1. True transformation
2. True Ministry
3. True Fellowship
4. True Evangelism

In this part 3 we will look at the first pillar of a true church namely True transformation.

In the opening verses of this epistle, Paul lays the foundation for true transformation. He thanks God for the true transformation of the Thessalonians. Let us read 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10 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.

This passage gives us several aspects of true transformation. First, in verse 4 he talks about their election by God. Paul is referring to the circumstances that made him come to Thessalonica. As we saw in Part 1 of this series, Paul reaching Thessalonica was a result of great orchestration by God. He was planning to go to Asia, and the Holy Spirit prevents him from going to Asia. Instead he receives the "Macedonian Call" in a dream and then he proceeds to Philippi where he gets put in jail. He is released through a miraculous intervention, and that is how he ends up in Thessalonica. It was according to God's plans that the church in Thessalonica was established. You have heard several testimonies of transformation. It does not matter whether you are from a Christian family or you are a first generation Christian, we all have that transformation experience. The time when we know that we are God's elect. You have heard the testimony of Sister Elizabeth a few weeks back. You might have heard the testimonies of John or George about how they knew that they were God's elect. In my own case, it came after a prolonged series of events orchestrated by God. I took up a job which was supposed to be based in Mysore, and had to visit the head office of the company at Kolkata for induction training and onboarding since the Mysore facility was just being built. The plan was for a few weeks at Kolkata. A couple of week's into my stay there, the project manager who was overseeing the Mysore project decided to quit. Nothing to do with me, I must admit). By God's great orchestration, the Managing Director (MD) of the company had taken a liking to me by that time. Remember, I was a rookie with just a few years of industry experience at that time. The MD called me and told me that he has no plans of replacing the project manager immediately and he asked me to work with him directly to complete the project. That resulted in my staying at Kolkata for almost two years. And that longer stay resulted in me meeting Leslie at the office, and the subsequent courtship, and marriage, and her prayers for my salvation, my association with a church, my reading of the word and my final acceptance of the Lord Jesus. (You can listen to my full testimony here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvpxU6D-asM>).

I am amazed by God's orchestration of events. And that is good news for us. God loves us. He wants us, and He will spare no means to reach us. The question is how long will we resist God, and how soon will we surrender to Him. For me it took eight years. For the Thessalonians, it took just a couple of weeks. And the reason for the quick conviction in Thessalonica is because For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance (v. 5). Transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Let us not forget that. Our job is to make sure that the gospel reaches others with the power that it deserves.

So, the first step of true transformation is hearing the word through circumstances orchestrated by God. What is the next step? After the Thessalonians received the gospel, and they became followers of the Apostle and the Lord (v. 6), in that order. It is a human tendency to follow a person before we start following the Lord. In my servant leadership trainings and consulting my focus is always on behaviour. It is the behaviour that others see and then follow you. It was the behaviour of the people in the church that Leslie was attending, that made me curious about their faith and led me to the Bible. Our behaviour matters a lot. That is why the purpose statement of BBF is to be light and salt, wherever God has placed us. I know that all of us at our best behaviour when we are in a church. Let us reflect on our

behaviour outside the church, and ask the question, is that behaviour distinct enough to make people follow us so that we can lead them to the source, which is Lord Jesus Christ?

Let us see what happens after the Thessalonians started following the Lord. Verse 7 tells us that they became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia. They followed Paul and discovered Jesus because of the example that Paul set for them. Paul is delighted that they did not just stop at following his example, but became examples themselves. This is the third step of true transformation. Be an example to others. The word has to be evident in our behaviour, so that others see Christ in us.

And the final step in true transformation is indicated in verse 8. The word of the Lord sounded forth from the Thessalonian Church. I found it interesting that Paul puts this after affirming the example set by the Thessalonian church. And not before that. This is one area where many of us get it wrong. You have heard the saying, walk-the-talk or practice-what-you-preach. We know what it means. But Paul is actually giving it an interesting twist. Using the example of the Thessalonian church, Paul is saying that what we should actually do is talk-your-walk or preach-what-you-practice. We must become an example first before we share the gospel to anyone. Imagine a situation where we are not managing our lives well, we are living in sin, we are indulging in financial irregularities, we are giving in to corrupt practices, we are a burden to others, we are always complaining, we are always gossiping, we are talking about people behind their backs. And we try to share the gospel with someone else. The person whom we are sharing the Gospel with, has every right to look into our behaviour and say, "oh.. if this is Christian life, I don't want to be a part of it, I don't want to be like you, I don't want your life". Being Christ-like must precede sharing the gospel.

So let us review the steps of true transformation. You hear and accept the word from someone, you imitate the person and finally the Lord, you become an example, and then you share the word to someone else. Those who hear the word from you then repeat the cycle. Hear & accept , Imitate, Example, Share.

After giving us this step by step process of true transformation, Paul goes on to describe the marks of someone who have had the true transformation experience. The first one he describes is the matter of idol worship. In verse 9 he speaks about the Thessalonians giving up their idols and worshipping the true God. This was not easy for them. As we saw in part 1 of the series, they were idol worshippers, they lived among idol worshippers. They lived right in the foothills of Mount Olympus , the abode of several Greek gods. But their true transformation helped them to give up their idols and worship the true God. I was truly perturbed by a news item yesterday. This is a powerful person and a Christian. He is handing over an idol to the most powerful person in India today. We need to pray for the Christian in this news item. But let us use this opportunity to identify our own idols and seek God's help to give them up. Let us remember , all idols do not come in stone, or mud or metal. There are several other ways of idolatry. Those who have gone through a true transformation experience will identify their idols and worship the true God alone.

Elsewhere in the epistles, Paul highlights another key mark of true transformation. Sanctification and Holiness. Staying away from sin. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6 he highlights the issue of sexual impurity. In 1 Thessalonians 4:7 he affirms For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. In 1 Thessalonians 5:22-23 Paul asks us to abstain from all forms of evil so that we might be prepared for Jesus' second coming. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 Paul gives a discourse on idleness and without using a direct linkage identifies idleness as a sin. Paul urges believers to stay away from those who are idle. In

2 Thessalonians 3:6. The harshest warning about idleness comes in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 where he goes to the extent of saying that those who do not work should not eat. Paul is reaffirming his point of being an example in the cycle of transformation. Idleness is not a behaviour he wishes Christians to set. Paul believes that Christians should contribute to the society by earning their own livelihood, and not become a burden to the community. There are of course other reasons for not being idle. Idleness could become the starting point of several sins like gossiping, meddling in others affairs, neglect of own responsibilities etc.

The thing with sin is that it is very personal. Just like Salvation. It is personal. You are not saved because you are born in a Christian family, you are saved when you go through the true transformation cycle. And it is a personal pilgrimage. You cannot wait for others to commence that journey. Similar is the case with sin. It is personal. You cannot justify it because others were involved. One of the things Arvi, Aarav and I enjoy is our pillow fights. Leslie does not like them much for obvious reasons. A couple of weeks back, we graduated from soft pillows to big sofa cushions for our pillow fight. We were in our elements hitting each other and throwing the big cushions on each other. Leslie could not stand the sight of it anymore and she withdrew to the bedroom to avoid the commotion and also to avoid being hit. I picked up a large cushion and swung it hard at the kids who were on the sofa, and we all heard a loud crash. We looked down and the floor as well as the sofa was strewn with glass pieces. The cushion that I swung had hit out chandelier and it shattered. A moment of deafening silence followed, and then I heard both the children calling out to Leslie and shouting "Nany (grandma)... Tatha (Granpa) broke the lights". I won't tell you what happened when Leslie came out of the bedroom and saw the state of the hall and the sofa. But let us focus on the children's action. They were enjoying it till the time all was going well, but when the problem came, they completely abandoned me, and it became purely my issue. They had no part in it and they were happy to let me take all the consequences. Sin is exactly like that. It does not matter, who is enjoying the sin along with me, on the judgement day, it is I and I alone who is responsible. The mark of a Christian who has gone through the true transformation experience is abstaining from sin and working towards holiness. Let us examine ourselves and identify the sins that we have not been able to get rid of.

The good news is that because of Christ's finished work on the cross, we now have the ability not to sin. In part 2 of the series, we learned about our progression of not-able-to-sin stage to the stage of total depravity of not-able-not-sin. But when Jesus came the first time, He took our sins, nailed it on the cross, and gave us the ability to choose not to sin. This is the stage we saw as able-not-to-sin.

It is a hard fact that we cannot fight sin on our own. We cannot resist sin on our own. And the beauty of it is that we don't have to do it ourselves. Jesus has promised us to do it for us. Those of you who know the story of the Chronicles of Narnia will remember the last of the series titled "The voyage of the dawn trader". In this movie there is a character called Eustace Stubbs. He is portrayed as a selfish bully, lacking empathy for others. As a result of this, he gets transformed into a dragon with scales and wings and he does not like it at all. In one of the touching scenes of the movie Aslan leads him to a place where he asks Eustace the dragon to shed his scales. The dragon tries his best, but fails miserably. Then Aslan steps in and with a mighty roar, transforms Eustace back into the handsome boy that he was. Let us watch that movie clip (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InAukk4DuRw>). This physical transformation leaves Eustace completely transformed and he becomes a much better person for the remaining part of the movie, and hopefully for the rest of his life. If we try to shed our sins by ourselves the result is not going to be good. But if we surrender ourselves to Jesus and let Him cleanse us, we will be

transformed. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.

Let us summarise today's learnings. We can prepare better for Jesus' second coming by becoming a true church. One of the first marks of a true church is true transformation. True transformation is a cycle of Hearing & accepting the word, Imitating , Becoming an example and then sharing the word with others. Marks of true transformation includes identifying and throwing away our idols and working on fighting sin, including the sin of idleness.

In the next part of the series, we will look into the second mark of a true church , namely true ministry.

Let us pray.