MIND THE GAP

A Study of 1 Thessalonians

by Dorn Muscar, Jr.
# Table of Contents

1. **Christian Armor** .......................................................... 5  
   (1 Thessalonians 1:1-3)

2. **Christian Conviction** .................................................. 11  
   (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5)

3. **Christian Imitation** ................................................... 17  
   (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

4. **Christian Conversion** .................................................. 23  
   (1 Thessalonians 1:8-10)

5. **God Who Examines Our Hearts** .................................. 29  
   (1 Thessalonians 2:1-5)

6. **Christian Care** .......................................................... 35  
   (1 Thessalonians 2:6-12)

7. **God at Work in You** ................................................... 41  
   (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

8. **Our Joy** ................................................................... 46  
   (1 Thessalonians 2:17-20)

9. **Mind the Gap** ........................................................... 52  
   (1 Thessalonians 3:10-13)

10. **Under New Management** ......................................... 58  
    (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2)

11. **No Trespassing** ........................................................ 64  
    (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8)

12. **Christian En-Courage-ment** ...................................... 70  
    (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11)

13. **What Now?** ............................................................... 76  
    (1 Thessalonians 3:12-24)
Introduction

The Christian life is a wonderful journey from being a wayward, self-centered sinner to a whole-hearted, Christ-centered child of God. The first letter the Apostle Paul wrote the Christians in Thessalonica is an invitation to help us move forward from where we are in faith today to where the Lord wants us to be in faith tomorrow. The Lord has already brought us far from where we began with Him, but His work in us is still far from complete. This powerful letter to a group of ancient Christians is a wonderful companion to help us to go onto to greater maturity in Christ.

About the Author

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Paul opens 1 Thessalonians with a common gesture of the time, offering thanks for the recipients. Thanksgiving sections in the New Testament function in several different ways. There is an affirmation of past behavior, which highlights chosen conduct of the readers so they will continue to walk in this way in the future. Another function of the thanksgiving section is to identify key themes or emphases that will be presented throughout the letter. We will see in this series of lessons from 1 Thessalonians that faith, hope, and love are at the core of Paul’s letter.

The triad of “faith, hope, and love” is familiar. They are often found together in the New Testament and are vital qualities of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 13:13, Colossians 1:3-6). In 1 Thessalonians 5:8 they are actually referred to as armor for the Christian life. “But since we
belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” Walking in faith, hope, and love is a means of protection in the spiritual battle we engage in every day. We lay them down to our own peril. Let’s turn our attention to this vital Christian armor.

**WORK OUT**

**Work Produced by Faith**

The NIV’s translation of this verse is helpful. It reads, “We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Every day we put work into something. First Thessalonicans 1:3, implies that our faith in the Lord should transform our work or effort. In other words, our faith in the Lord should transform the energy we put into our lives. Faith is not just an intellectual exercise or something hidden deep in our souls or only what we do inside the walls of our church buildings. Faith is active and witnessed in how we live each day. Several questions circulate in my mind because of this simple phrase *work produced by faith* or *work of faith*. However, one stands out: *Are we allowing our faith or fear to shape our actions?*

An illustration of this daily struggle happened to me recently. We had the opportunity to connect with a local apartment complex in establishing a food ministry. For this to happen, I had to initiate a conversation with the staff of the complex. I drove over, parked the car, and started up the steps. I began to think to myself, *Dorn, they do not want to be bothered. You know this is going to be awkward.* I walked up to the front door of the rental office and froze outside the door. I did not go in, but turned around and
started back down the steps to my car. As I did this, 1 Thessalonians 1:3 came to mind, “work produced by faith.” I realized I was about to allow my work for the Lord to be influenced by fear, not faith! God’s Word helped me to turn around immediately. I realized that I had to trust the Lord with the results. All I could do was to give my best and trust the Lord for the rest. As a result of allowing my faith to produce the work, the management decided to partner with us, and we now provide 60 bags of food for residents there each month. One of the employees even agreed to put up flyers on all the apartment doors. Perhaps thousands of people that week read about the Lord and His church because of work produced by faith, not fear.

**Love That Labors**

I found an article entitled “Mixing Passion with Profession: A Labor of Love” by Maria Ranahan.\(^1\) She points out that it is often said to those entering the work world, “Pick a career you love, so it will never feel like work!” Even if we do not verbalize this, we have all hoped that this could be true. How wonderful it would be if we could spend our few days on earth without exasperating toil. Ranahan points out that at its core this statement is contradictory. By definition, “work” requires expending effort that makes it “feel” like work. She states, “But no matter what skill you have been so graced with, it will require effort. Both mental and physical. It will require early mornings and late nights. A few rough days and a moment of instability or two. So the question is not a matter of work feeling or not feeling like work. Because guess what: No matter how much you love what you do… it’s going to require effort and lots of it.”

Ranahan identifies something that goes far beyond our

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perspective of work. It reveals a lot about our perspective on love: “Pick a career you love, so it will never feel like work!” At the core of this statement, there is a tension juxtaposed between love and the idea of work. Therefore, we think that when we love something or someone it should not “feel” like work or like we are expending great effort. It should be effortless and smooth. If it turns out our love for something or someone starts to feel like work or becomes too strenuous or exhausting, then we figure we must no longer be “in love.” This reasoning is built on sinking sand!

This thinking about love and work or effort bleeds into the fabric of how we love everything in our lives. It impacts how we view our love for God, our family and even our life in the body of Christ. In other areas of our lives, the statement would go like one of these, “Pick a person ‘you love’ to marry, so marriage will never feel like work!” “Pick a person you love to be your best friend, so that friendship will never feel like work!” “Pick a church you love, so being a part of it will never feel like work!” The list could go on. We naturally resist the idea that love demands laboring.

If we examine why we often “love” people or things, it has much to do with what they have to offer us rather than what we have to offer them! Once the costs outweigh the perceived benefits, we part ways. Jesus taught us that it is easy to love those who love you, even the most wicked of persons do this (Matthew 5:46-47). Where is love when the shine wears off? … When the honeymoon phase is over? … When the real brokenness and scratches come to light? … Where is the love then?

Endurance Inspired By Hope
Isn’t it interesting that people can go through similar crises and some endure while others give up? Some people dwell on what they cannot do, and others believe they can do anything they put their mind to. Maickel Melamed of Venezuela is such a person. He was born with
muscular dystrophy and at 39 years old, he had trained for several years, to run the Boston Marathon. The winner ran it in about 2 hours. It took him 20 hours. He painfully moved through the cold and rain to finish the race. There are millions of people who could have run that marathon with greater ease, but they never would have considered it. With great difficulty Maickel endured the 26.2 miles. He had a burden to spread a message to the world that drove his endurance. His body was weak, but his will and mind were strong.

Why do some Christians go through the various crises of life and endure while others give up? Mani Pagidipalli wrote a tribute to Savithri, a sister in Christ in India who laid down her life because “she refused to renounce Christ as her Lord and Savior.” Despite the persecution, she stood tall with courage, conviction, and backbone—defending her belief in the One who washed away her sins and promised her eternal life. Through the beatings, death teased her relentlessly. and Satan enticed her to compromise—just once. Instead, she put death to shame and defeated Satan by embracing her Lord until she took her last breath… What fortitude! What conviction! What dedication!” How was this dear sister of ours able to endure all that she did to the point of death, while others give up on Christ every week because of far less?

This letter reminds us of the invaluable armor of faith, hope, and love we possess in Christ. Savithri faithfully wore the armor of faith, hope, and love. We should, too. We should strive that others

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would give thanks to God for our “work produced by faith, labor prompted by love and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus” as Paul did for those in Thessalonica so long ago.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Why are faith, hope, and love in Christ vital armor for Christian life?
2. What are some ways you have or are struggling to live by faith versus fear?
3. Why must love labor?
4. How does our hope in Jesus help us to endure?
5. What did Christians in Thessalonica have to endure in Acts 17:1-9?
6. What are some of your favorite passages about faith, hope, and love? Share one of each with the class.