

## Gospel Power

Jonathan K. Dodson | 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5 | August 21, 2018

Early in his ministry, the apostle Paul made an unexpected visit to the Greek coast, to the capitol city of Thessalonica, Macedonia. It was large, cosmopolitan city that worshipped quite a few deities. But after reasoning with the locals about the uniqueness of Jesus we're told "Jews, Greeks, and not a few women" responded in faith and were converted to Christianity. Paul then organized them into a *church*. But then persecution broke out, and Paul and his companions were run out of the city. About a year later, Paul sent Timothy back to check on them, and Timothy returned to Paul reporting the young Christians were doing fairly well, but experiencing persecution. So Paul wrote this letter to *affirm* these new Christians, but also to *challenge* them. How? By addressing essential questions, What does it mean to be a Christian? To be a church? You may be here asking the same question. It's a good place to do it. Like Paul, we welcome all kinds of people, and all kinds of doubts, questions. *But* if you want real answers, you'll need to let what Paul says, *in*, wrestle with his words, allow them to challenge you. If you're already a Christian, then it's important for you to ask yourself, fairly regularly, Am I living Christianly? Am I doing my part to contribute to my church? Paul: "[Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves](#)" (2 Cor 13:5). [So examine the word, but let the word examine you.](#) What does it mean to be a Christian? 3 Things: Word, Power, Prayer.

### Word

A Christian is someone who believes the gospel. The gospel is the essential message, *the Word that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil through his own death and resurrection, and will return to deliver us from wrath to come and make all things new.* Where do I get that? Verse 5: "[our gospel came to you, not only in word, but also in power...](#)"; verse 9-10: "[you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come](#)" (1:9-10). These men and women, Jews and Greeks, received the message that they needed deliverance from God's wrath. Wrath for what? For sin, evil. I get the *New Yorker* every week, and just about every issue has a piece addressing evils of our day: racism, MeToo, fake news. And we feel it, don't we? The evil out there. One issue posted a cartoon titled, *The Lord of All Evil*. There's a sinister king on an ominous throne, and a hero busts through the palace door saying, I've slain all your minions. And the Lord says, Man, I had 50 of em. You're saying they're all dead? Hero, Enough talk, lets fight! The Lord replies. I gotta say, [they call me the Lord of All Evil, but I never killed fifty people.](#)" What's the point? We're all innocent when we have someone to demonize, but if we stop to consider how we react to evil, out there, we'll realize we have it in here. [And here's' where you've got to examine yourself.](#) The seeds of most injustices are in *our* hearts (fake news: lying, MeToo: lust/power, racism: pride/hate). Paul is saying there is a time of testing coming, a time when every heart will laid bare before a holy and omniscient Judge. And that Judge will pass the sentence of wrath on anyone who has evil in their heart, anyone who makes themselves out to be a hero, who worships anything else. When the Thessalonians heard this they were cut to heart, confessed their evil, and turned to Jesus who suffered in their place, dying/rising triumphantly to *deliver from the wrath to come!* There's a true Hero, using his power *redemptively*. That's what the gospel is all about. Want to know if you're a

Christian? Ask yourself, have I turned from the evil in my heart, the idols I worship, and cried out to Jesus to deliver me from the wrath to come? Want to know if you're living Christianly? Do you continue to turn? Turn away from *your* evils and turn to Jesus. Now after your initial turn, it's not to escape the wrath *but to enjoy the grace*, the goodness, the glory of Jesus.

## Power

Now we're told the gospel came, "[not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.](#)" What's the **power**? Some people will tell you this is part of a two-track Christianity, one with "the Word" and another, higher level, "the power." But, the Word *is powerful* whenever it's preached (living and active sharper than double-edged sword, Heb 4:12; gospel is the power of God for salvation, Rom 1:16). Word and Power belong together, joined at the hip. The question is, where does the power come from? In both those texts, Heb and Rom, it's the Spirit at work through the Word and raising Jesus from the dead. Verse 5 says it this way, "[not only in word, but also in power in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.](#)" In the Holy Spirit. The only way the gospel is received, internalized, allowed to examine us and turn us to Jesus is *by the power of the Holy Spirit*. The Spirit takes the realities of the person and work of Jesus and makes them *real* to us. Like oxygen to fire, the Holy Spirit enflames love for Jesus *through the gospel*. He may be doing that in you *now*. Don't resist. Turn to God, from idols, to know the living Christ. That's what we'll celebrate today in our baptisms. John Mullikin who's getting baptized today wrote this, "[As an atheist, I believed we're here just by the happenstance of physics and chemistry...but then I started to have questions, pushed them down, but eventually when I realized I needed grace for my sin, I finally acknowledge my sin and accepted God as my savior and leader. From that moment I have been led with the Spirit in my heart.](#)" If you're a Christian, you have this Spirit. If you're not, you *can* have this power, this person. Why should we want him, know him? Notice the verse begins, Because our gospel came. Because means a reason, or the ground for what comes before. Two main things come before: First, [For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you](#) (1:4). The gospel coming in word and power is the reason Paul knew the Thessalonians were chosen by God. Now why would he mention that? Because, living in a pluralistic, persecuting city, it can be easy to doubt your faith *and* difficult to find true love. He goes out of his way to assure us, that even in our doubts, we can be *confident of God's electing love*. This week my kids started back to school, and when I got home after the first day, Robie said to me, "Rosamund has something she wants to tell you." Glowingly she said, "When I was at recess, we were splitting up for teams, and Bobby said, 'Rosamund, I choose you.'" I was like, that's it? And then I remembered how much it means to be chosen, to be singled out. This text tells us that we have been singled out by the love of God, that he's set his love on *you*. How do you know? The Spirit reminds you in the Gospel, Word and Power, God has chosen you in Christ. Look at what Jesus has done for you. And not just you, but your brothers and sisters, your church family.

## Prayer

What does it mean to be the church? Paul and his companions show us. They pray for the church: "[We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our](#)

prayers remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labors of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1:2). Prayer is evidence we've responded to the gospel, and are continuing to respond to the Holy Spirit. He prompts us to pray. How do they pray? With gratitude for all of you, constantly mentioning. Prayer for *everyone, all the time*. **Everyone?** All? Yes, all. We know from Acts this was a fairly small church. Think your City Group, 15-20 people, maybe? I don't know how you can be the church if you don't make some kind of commitment to a small group of people. They prayed for *all*. Yes, the quirky ones; the awkward person; the person who rubs you wrong; the person who hasn't invited over! The person who has offended or hurt you. You get on your knees and you pray for them. You thank God for them. How am I supposed to do that? Thank God (Leaders especially) for signs of faith, hope, and love. Look for their faith, their progress. For hope, in sorrow or suffering. Love for others. And thank God for it. And as you do, they way you look at others will change. You won't look at them disdainfully but through the electing love of God. We did this out loud as staff a few weeks ago, naming faith, hope, and love in people, and thanking God for you. It warmed us to you. Everyone, and, **all the time**. What does *all the time* look like? Did Paul spend hours a day in secret prayer? We know from chapter two that Paul worked quite regularly, seeking not to burden the small church's finances. So his constant prayer must have looked different. When our kids were little, they orbited us everywhere we went, and no matter how deep the conversation, or how great the party, we always had a sense of where they were. Why? Because we had an awareness of their presence. Praying constantly is an awareness of the presence of God. He's there. You're ready to turn to him in a stressful moment, thank him for a great experience, pray for someone when they come to mind. Praying for everyone, all the time. When we allow the wrath-delivering Word in, and welcome the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, how can we *not* pray for others? We've received so much! We come face to face with a love that delivers us from death at his own expense. Are you a Christian? Have you turned from evil to Jesus? If you have, are you still turning? Not from wrath but to the goodness, the grace, the glory of Christ. I hope you will.