

Contagion

Week #1

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

You hear our new sermon series title and you may wonder ... “Contagion, wow that sounds scary.”

And the word has had a scary history. Usually dealing with some kind of virus or disease being spread. And they are usually scary sounding ...

The Ebola virus; Mad cow disease; Scarlet fever; Rabies (The madness of rage)

But the word can ALSO be used to describe the spreading of a custom, idea, emotion, teaching from one person to another person.

So the BIG question to start this series is: How can **Christians** be contagious?

First of all, what is a Christian? The answer isn't as easy as you may think.

In fact American polls will tell you that 92% of all Americans believe in God, while 83% call themselves Christian.

Are 83% of Americans Christians? It's hard to say ... but I think many of us are working with a different definition of what a Christian is.

If you went to downtown Chicago this afternoon, and did an informal survey with the question, “ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?” ... my guess ... would be that you would get ALL kinds of answers:

“Of course I'm a Christian ... I WAS born in America.”

“Yes, I was raised in a Christian home.”

“Yes, I grew up in a Catholic home.”

“Yes, I go to Sugar Hills Baptist church.”

“Yes, I read my Bible daily.”

“Yes, many years ago, I said a prayer, I raised my hand or I was baptized.”

“Yes, I am a GOOD person.”

Using this kind of thinking, a Christian, is ANYONE who calls themselves a Christian.

But, we want to use BIBLICAL thinking, in our defining of what a Christian is. And that causes a little bit of a problem ... because the WORD Christian is only used **3** times in the Bible.

Acts 11:26 - *The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

Acts 26:28 - *Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*

1 Peter 4:16 - *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

Here are some other things to consider:

1. The name CHRISTIAN was not invented / or chosen by the early Christians. It was a name given to them by others.
2. Christians actually used OTHER names to describe themselves: disciples or believers mostly.
3. The word “CHRISTIAN” originally had a negative meaning. (But over time the negative aspect of the word disappeared and it became a positive).

The DICTIONARY defines Christian this way:

“1. One who professes belief in Jesus Christ or follows the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus. **2. One who lives according to the teachings of Jesus.”**

That’s actually pretty good: To be a Christian means to **Believe**, Follow and Live Jesus.

But to believe, follow and live Jesus doesn't happen by accident, or by luck. You are not BORN a Christian in other words.

It requires a heart change, a mind change ... a life change.

Today, we are going to look at a **Biblical** answer to "What is a Christian?" And we are going to do it by looking at the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians.

Some things to know before we begin:

1. 1 Thessalonians is one of the oldest books in the New Testament. Meaning it was probably written only 18 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. So what we have here is one of the earliest looks of the Christian church.
2. Most of the believers in Thessalonica would have come from an idol-worshipping background. Paul's brief stay there resulted in a small congregation of new believers.
3. Today's passage tells us how these idol-worshippers became followers of Christ. So what we have here is a bare-bones description of what it means to be a Christian, from some of the earliest Christians.

So what we are going to see is Christianity in its purest form. Stripped of century's worth of add-ons ... this is how it was when Christianity turned the world upside down.

Let's read it now.

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ 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.

⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell 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—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

One of the first things I notice is found in verse 4. ***“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you,***

We don't always remember it that way ... sometimes we may speak about “FINDING” the Lord. But maybe a better way to say that is to say, “I remember how I found that God had already found me.”

Salvation begins with God, not with us. He made the way for us to find Him.

So a Christian then, is a person who has been called and chosen by God Himself. So ... it's not something that we can brag about ourselves. No, it's always been about God's grace.

The second thing that I notice is that a CHRISTIAN is someone who **responds** to the gospel message:

because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

So first, God chose us. Then He goes about the process of letting us know that He chose us. The Thessalonians came to know of God and His grace through the

spoken word ... but those words had power because of the Holy Spirit, and caused deep conviction.

So what do Christians DO? We teach, we SHARE, we pray that people respond to Jesus Christ ... but in reality we have to depend on God to make it all happen.

This explains why 2 people can listen to the same message and respond in 2 completely different ways. One will respond and choose to CHANGE their life because of what they have heard ... the other will think, "I want nothing to do with this place."

But, in our defining of a Christian ... a Christian is someone who has been called and chosen by God and responds to the gospel message and is forever changed.

The third thing I want to talk about from our passage is this: A CHRISTIAN is someone who knows that Jesus Christ is worth suffering for.

⁶ ***You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.***

This may surprise some people, because it tells us how seriously the Thessalonians responded to the message of Christ.

Remember, that in their circumstance they were coming to Christ from a background of idol worship. They would have face BIG TIME cultural pressure ... no doubt that some face opposition from their family members who thought they were nuts leaving the wood and stone idols behind ... and choosing to become a Christian.

Notice the little phrase, "in the midst of sever suffering", it has the idea of being under the thumb of another person, really feeling the pressure.

That is followed by, "Welcoming the message with joy" ... an it has the idea of opening your home and your heart to another person. Here, it means that the Thessalonians were so glad to be saved they couldn't be stopped, not even by persecution.

You hear about this from the mission field all the time. People willing to risk everything for the opportunity to BE Christian.

Actually ... you can pray that kind of prayer for a Dominican Mission Trip (We are one week from leaving). On the island ... the Dominican people & the Haitian people do not get along. I am praying that the little community that we work with ... which is populated with both Dominicans and Haitians ... come to form a beautiful Christian community.

I am going to preach on “The Good Samaritan”. Because one of the main thrusts of Jesus’ story was that it was a Samaritan helping a Jew. The question was ... who is my neighbor? ... and Jesus answers ... EVERYONE, even the ones you think you despise.

Back to our text in 1 Thessalonians.

The 4th descriptor of a Christian is this: A Christian is someone whose life has been BIG TIME changed by knowing Jesus.

⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,

Here is the BEST way to impact others with YOUR Christianity: Show them your own changed life.

Jesus healed a man controlled by a demon in Mark 5:19, right after he told the man to, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.”

And you know, that a satisfied customer is always the best advertisement for any product.

To prove it, I bet you can guess a few of my favorite restaurants ... I think you can guess them because I talked about them plenty ... what are they?

Moes, Chick-fil-a, Texas Roadhouse.

If you want to be an ADVERTISER for Jesus Christ ... the best way is to live like Jesus, and to talk about Him. And I think if any of us REALLY begin to live like Jesus, it's going to require some changes.

Do you see the phrase, "The Lord's Message rang out"? The "rang out" part could be compared to a cymbal crashing.

So ... in a sense, as this small group of believers begin to really believe in Jesus Christ; they became like an alarm clock to the whole region.

So ... here is what we have so far in regards to a Christian being defined.

First, you receive God's Word gladly.

Then, you LIVE it on a daily basis.

And as you LIVE it ... the gospel goes out from your life ... and the people around you begin to sit up and take notice.

So a Christian is a person whose changed life begins to change others.

Once last thing we can learn from chapter one of 1st Thessalonians.

A Christian is someone who has gone "ALL IN" on Jesus.

Let's look at verses 9-10:

for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell 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—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

What do you see?

They TURNED; They SERVED; They WAITED

Again, Christianity is defined in those 6 words.

Someone turns from the old life. They now serve the living God. And as they serve they are waiting for Jesus to return.

It's actually a timeline of a Christ follower:

In the past you turned from your idols.

In the present you serve the living God.

In the future (a you serve) you also wait for Jesus to come back.

We need to realize the difference between religion and Christianity. Religion is spelled 'D-O', because it consists of the things people *do* to try to somehow gain God's forgiveness and favor.

But the problem is that you never know when you've done enough. It's like being a salesman who knows he must meet a quota but never being told what that quota is. You can never be sure that you've actually done enough. Worse yet, the Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that we *never* can do enough. We'll always fall short of God's perfect standard.

But thankfully, Christianity is spelled differently. It's spelled 'D-O-N-E', which means that what we could never do for ourselves, Christ has already done for us. He lived the perfect life we could never live, and He willingly died on the cross to pay the penalty we owed for the wrongs we've done.

To become a real Christian is to humbly receive God's gift of forgiveness and to commit to following His leadership. When we do that, He adopts us into His family, and begins to change us from the inside out.

Adoption gone right example. - Danil

So the medical staff went out to get him. It took a while because they like to put the children in fresh clothes before meeting their prospective Mama and Papa. It seemed like it took FOREVER!

But soon we heard little foot steps and a little voice. In walked Danil! Oh my goodness, he is even cuter in person! My heart melted! He sat across the table from us. He knew exactly why we were here. He smiled, he fidgeted with his hands and started talking to everyone. This little boy can T-A-L-K! He told stories, lots of stories. Kevin and I just gazed at him and smiled. The facilitator translated a little of what he was saying but he had the whole room laughing . . .and hearts were melting.

We got out our photo album to show him. The first page is a picture of the front of our house. He said "That's my house" then in the next breathe he looked at Kevin and I and said "I'm ready to go home."

He continued to look through the pictures. He saw a picture of our dog, Jasper. He said "This is my dog."

After looking at the photo album he said "Cool"

After looking at the photo album we went over to the couch to sit.

Danil looked at our facilitator and said, "I ask all the time "Find parents for me" "Find parents for me" and now they are here!"

"Everyone wants to have Mama and Papa." My heart stood still.

Danil loved the idea of being adopted ... and he was ALL READY to jump in and be an active part!

I think everyone wants a Savior ... you want to join God's family ... and that's possible because of what Jesus Christ has done for us all.