

Genuine Christianity

1 THESSALONIANS 1:8-10

Baxter T. Exum (#1534)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Most of us know that we live in a world of scams, where people are always trying some new angle to deceive us in some way. And many times, they take something that seems legitimate, but they twist it just a bit.

- Earlier this week, we got a notification on NextDoor, from an older couple in Monona. Two guys in a pickup truck claimed to be from the power company and that they needed to inspect the breaker box. Unfortunately, after they left, the homeowners discovered that a safe in the basement had been pried open and that some cash was missing from the kitchen.
- And then we have the phone scams! This one came in several years ago. At least they were being honest about it! Right there on the Caller ID, "This is a phone scam!"
- This one came in a few weeks ago, a classic. Scammers pretend to be calling from the Madison Police Department and claim to be willing to take care of \$10,000 in outstanding warrants for only 10% of that fee. Otherwise, we'll be over in a few minutes to take you to jail. Well, \$1,000 sounds like a great deal at that point, so the victim runs out to get these gift cards and shares the numbers over the phone. The next day, somebody calls again, this time claiming to be from the Wisconsin State Police, only this time, the bail is \$30,000, and we need 10% of that right away. And so it happens again. The man is scammed out of \$4,000. Notice, down at the bottom, "both of the 'officers' seemed to have southern accents."
- This one goes back to December, when a 78-year old man here in Madison was scammed out of \$900 when he gets a message, thinking it was from his pastor. Notice: Police said "the email address was similar to one that the pastor was known to use."
- I share this one, because just a few months earlier, one of our members got a suspicious message, claiming that it was from me. I'm glad he caught it and didn't get scammed. I took off the last name and email address because of the livestream, but notice how the message comes from "churchparish.1000@gmail.com." That's not exactly how we word things around here. Notice the subject line: "MANY BLESSINGS." And then the message, "Hi Josh. Are you available? I need a favor from you, email me as soon as you get my message. God bless." And then the guy signed it, "Evangelist Baxter Exum." Thankfully, all of this made Josh a bit suspicious! I would never sign an email, "Evangelist Baxter

Exum.” We thought about it, and my theory is that they got the “title” off of LinkedIn. I’m not sure how they connected me with Josh. Perhaps LinkedIn as well. I’m hoping none of you sent me thousands of dollars in gift cards back in September. But it seems that others in Madison have fallen for similar scams.

I mention all of this as a reminder that we live in a world of scams. We live in a world of counterfeits. And it often takes some research to decide what is real and what is fake. It takes some determination to tell what is legit and what is not.

Now, what is true financially is also true in spiritual matters. Only in spiritual matters, the stakes are much higher. And so, as followers of Jesus, we want to make sure that we are the real deal. We want to make sure we are not being deceived. After all, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself talks about some people going through this life thinking they are pleasing to God, but in the end, they face the judgment. In the end, they meet the Lord face to face, and his response is, ***“I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness”*** (Matthew 7:23). It is important, then, that we make sure that we are not deceiving ourselves. And if you are visiting with us this morning, if you are investigating the Christian faith, we want to be as honest and open as we can be. We want you to make a judgment concerning us as a congregation. Are we real, or are we fake? And is this something that you need to be a part of? Are we practicing genuine Christianity. Or is this all just a huge scam?

This morning, then, I want us to look at a passage in the New Testament. It’s actually in the book of 1 Thessalonians, in a passage where the apostle Paul praises a relatively new congregation, and he praises them for being examples. He praises them for being genuine. But the story really begins in Acts 17 as Paul passes through the city of Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. Thessalonica was a city roughly the size of Madison. It was a huge city in the ancient world. It was located along the Egnatian Way, the major east-west route across northern Greece.

As Paul travels through this area, you might remember (from Acts 17) that Paul comes in and teaches in the synagogue, ***“explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead.”*** Some are persuaded, but ultimately, a number of Jews become quite jealous, and they hire some wicked men to stir up the crowds. I have a good friend who loves the KJV, and I always bring this up with him, because I believe the KJV says that they got together some “lewd fellows of the baser sort.” That’s just fun to say! But the mob, motivated by these evil men, storms the house of one of the new believers, a man by the name of Jason, they are dragging people out of their homes, they demand some kind of bail money from Jason, and at this point, the brethren send Paul and Silas away by night, leaving these brand new Christians completely on their own in a large city that has become hostile to the Christian faith. Well, obviously, Paul is concerned. What will happen to these people? And so, when Paul gets down to Athens and as he moves along to Corinth, he sends Timothy back up to Thessalonica to see how they are doing, and also, to strengthen and to encourage that brand new congregation (according to 1 Thessalonians 3:2). And the report Timothy brings back to Paul is incredibly encouraging. And so, in response to the good news about how the church in Thessalonica is doing, Paul responds with the letter we now know as 1 Thessalonians. (p. 1846). In the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians, Paul praises these people. They are constantly in his prayers as he remembers (in verse 3) their ***“work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope.”*** In verse 7, he praises their ***“example,”*** and that brings us to verses 8-10 – 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10. As Paul praises this brand new congregation, this is the reason he gives in 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10,

⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

In the time we have left, I want us to notice three qualities, three characteristics proving their faith to the world around them, qualities proving that these people were genuine in their Christian faith. Notice: In verse 8, people all around the Mediterranean world are talking about this congregation, and as word gets around, these qualities make it obvious that the Christians in Thessalonica are the real deal; these people are examples.

I. And we start in the middle of verse 9, as we find that genuine Christianity involves TURNING TO GOD FROM IDOLS.

I don't want to make too big of a deal out of this, but I would at least point out something about how this is worded. Notice: Paul does not say that they turned from idols to God; but instead, he says that they turned to God from idols. I'm at least open to the idea that the emphasis is on turning to God. In other words, Paul didn't necessarily storm into Thessalonica with the message, "All of you ignorant people need to give up your idols!" Now, that might have been part of it; certainly he did speak out against idols, but it seems to me that God is the emphasis here. They turned to God from idols.

Without a doubt, turning away from idols was very, very important. It was a huge change for these people. As I understand it, Thessalonica was one of the closest cities to Mount Olympus, the "home of the gods." The worship of idols, then, was a huge part of the culture in ancient Thessalonica. And yet when Paul came in with a message about Jesus, "***explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead***" (Acts 17:3), many people believed that message and turned to God. And in turning to God, they turned away from idols. Their lives changed direction. It was a change the people around them could see. It was evidence of a genuine change that had taken place in their lives. They repent. They have a change of mind, and this change of mind or change of heart impacts the way they are living. No longer do they go to the pagan temples to offer sacrifices. No longer do they trust in these idols to keep them safe on their travels, or whatever. But now, they put their trust in God, the living and true God. And notice how different God is from those idols. He's not dead, but he's living. He's not fake, but he's true. They turn from darkness to light.

When we believe in God, we turn. Our lives change direction. What we believe has a way of changing the way we live. We do a U-turn. We don't just add Jesus to whatever we are already doing, but we turn away from the old life. We leave certain things behind. And it's a continual process. There's never a time in our lives when we can say that we are done repenting. We're always learning and adjusting pointing ourselves back towards God.

Of course, some of us might be tempted to think that we've never worshiped idols. I think I've shared this here before, but when I was a kid, we had a missionary from Papua, New Guinea, come stay at our house a time or two. We would pick him up at O'Hare Airport as he came back to the states to make his reports. And one time he brought me an idol. Of course, we don't attach any significance to this. We certainly don't worship it. But it hangs in our bedroom as a reminder of brother John Murphy, and the good work that he did for much of his life. He taught me how to tie my shoes when I was about 5 years old. I'm sure my parents had been working with me on that, but on one of those trips back from O'Hare, that's when it clicked for the first time. But the point is: This is an idol. But most of us have never bowed down to something like this. Most of us have never

offered a sacrifice to anything like this. But we also know that turning to God from idols might not involve any actual idols. An idol is anything that takes the place of God in our lives. Netflix might be an idol to us. Gaming might be an idol to us. Our families might be an idol to us. Anything that interferes with our relationship to God. Any sin that comes between us and God. As Paul will go on to say in Ephesians 5:5, ***“For this you know with certainty, that no sexually immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”*** When we turn to God, then, we turn away from sexual immorality, we turn away from impurity, we turn away from covetousness. These things are in one direction; God is in the other direction. When we turn to him, we turn away from everything else. Money can be an idol. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Genuine Christians, then, will turn to God and away from anything that competes for first place in our lives. And this is how those in the ancient world could see that these people in Thessalonica had genuine faith: They turned to God from idols.

II. As we return to our text, we have the other side of this, as we find (also in verse 9) that genuine Christians will actually SERVE A TRUE AND LIVING GOD.

So, there is a TURNING, but there is also a SERVING that takes place, and it's continual, a lifetime of service to God. So, we not only turn to God from a former way of life, but our new life is a life of continual service to God. We serve a new master. Our allegiance moves to a new king. And it's not that we just give him a few hours here and there, but we serve him constantly. Everything we do is now motivated by this service – as we work, as we go to school, as we love our families at home – everything we do we do in service to God. His will is our will. Our prayer to God is, “Use me in whatever way is most helpful to your kingdom.” If it means taking food to a neighbor, I'll do it. If it means caring for a sick child or an aging parent or spouse, I'll do it. If it means writing a note to a prisoner, I'll do it. Whatever the Lord needs, we are here to serve.

Paul addresses this change of allegiance in Romans 6:16-18, where he says,

16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

If we claim to be Christians, but if we are not serving God, our claim is bogus, and we are worse than those who trick the elderly into giving up their life's savings. But to be genuine Christians, our lives are characterized by service to God. And that's the way it was with the Christians in Thessalonica. It was obvious, and word got around very quickly, 1.) that they had turned to God from idols, and 2.) that they were truly serving a true and living God.

III. As we come to the end of this passage, we find another characteristic of genuine Christianity as we find that those in Thessalonica were WAITING FOR GOD'S SON WHO WOULD RETURN FROM HEAVEN TO RESCUE THEM FROM THE WRATH TO COME.

There's quite a bit in those words, but it seems the emphasis here is that it's obvious that these people had something to live for. They were eagerly anticipating the return of Christ, Christ Jesus, who was raised from the dead. They had a sense of focus and purpose in life. They had a goal in mind. They were waiting, but they were waiting for someone who was worth waiting for. Usually we don't like waiting. But we don't mind quite as much if we're waiting for something important. And here, these people are waiting to be rescued from the wrath of God. Perhaps some of you have been rescued from something. We know how much we appreciate being rescued.

My sister had an interesting rescue a few weeks ago. Most of you know that she volunteers for the Search and Rescue team out on the Olympic Peninsula, about two hours past Seattle. Usually, they are looking for people (and people are the priority), but sometimes they rescue dogs, because they've found that if they rescue dogs, they end up rescuing fewer people; otherwise, people do some very risky things they are not trained to do. So, a few weeks ago, they got a call about Max, an Airedale Terrier, who decided to take a dive off a bluff, where he got stuck on a ledge, 50 feet down. Max was completely stuck and had no hope of getting out of that on his own. And that's when my sister's team was called in. They've trained for this, they've done it before, so they geared up, rappelled down the cliff, got Max in a harness, and hauled him back up. I've seen a few pictures from the local paper out there, but Max is one happy dog! And here is one of the crew after they got everything wrapped up. Max is the furry one in the front there, and my sister is right behind him (in the red helmet). I share this to illustrate this idea of a rescue. We appreciate being rescued. We appreciate those who do the rescuing.

Most people in the world around us, though, will pretty much laugh at the idea of being rescued from any kind of a coming judgment. But it is coming, and Jesus is coming first, to save us from it, to save us from the wrath of God. We know from scripture that our sins have separated us from God, we know that Jesus came to this earth to live a perfect life and to die in our place, he was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and now we wait for him to come back. This wait is described for us in Hebrews 9:27-28, as Jim read it for us earlier, where the text tells us that, ***"...just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."*** We certainly don't sit around and do nothing, but we use this time to prepare, to get ready. We live each day, knowing that today might be the day, and we look forward to it. So, the Christians in Thessalonica were eagerly waiting for the Lord's return. They were waiting to be rescued.

Conclusion:

We started this morning by looking at some scams out there, some fakes, people who pretend to be who they aren't for the purpose of deceiving. We don't want to do that. As God's people, we want to be genuine. We want to be like those Christians in Thessalonica – turning to God from idols, serving a living God, and eagerly waiting to be rescued by God's Son. For us, today is something of a checkup, an encouragement. And this goes for all of us. So, as we wrap it up, let's ask:

- Have we made that turn toward God? Are we turning away from the sins of our past? Have we turned to God from idols? Have we turned to God, away from the passing pleasures of sin, away from the love of money, away from selfishness?
- And then, are we truly serving God from the heart? Do we see ourselves as servants of God? Are we serving in his kingdom, the church? Are we serving this community in his name?
- And then also, are we eagerly waiting to be rescued by God's Son? Are we truly looking forward to that? When he returns, I want to be like Max on that narrow ledge. I want that intensity right now. And with

that intensity, if I could know that he was coming back next week, is there anything I might need to change or get done today?

If so, why not go ahead and do it? ***“Now why do you delay”*** as Ananias says to Paul in Acts 22:16, ***“Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”*** Turn, serve, and wait. If we can help in any way, we invite you to investigate. We’re all in this together. If we can help in any way, talk to one of the shepherds after worship today. But if you are ready to obey the good news immediately, we hope you’ll let us know right now as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com