

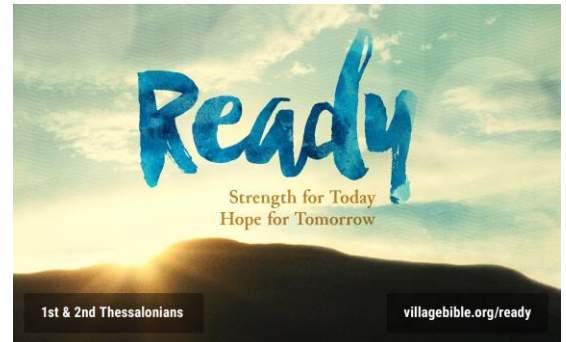


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

God's Top Churches

Ready: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow | Part 12

Tim Badal | April 3, 2016 | 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5

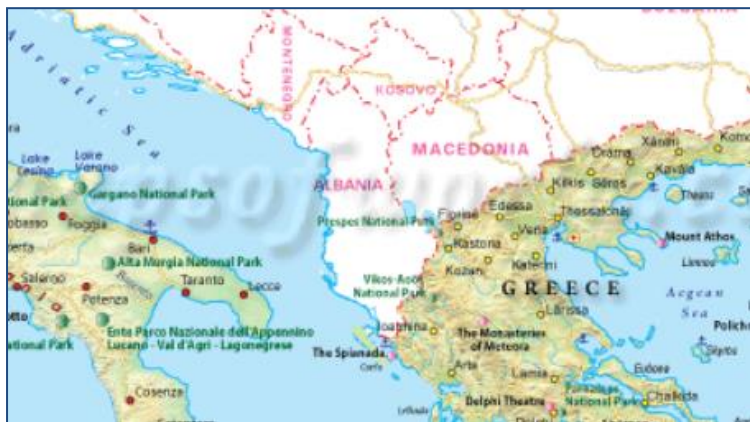


Since the beginning of this year we have focused our time and attention on Paul's letters to the Thessalonian church. We're now done with his first letter, having been trained by it in some very practical ways. But as James warns, we might be tempted to hear God's Word as it is shared with us and then walk away with no change in our lives. James says we must not simply be hearers of the Word, but we must be doers as well (James 1:22). My hope is that we would take what we hear seriously and not simply become "experts" with head knowledge about the life and times of the people in Thessalonica. That we would not perhaps just memorize some of Paul's instructions. While knowledge is important and God-given, my prayer is that we would take the truths we've learned during the first three months of this year and begin to do what we've been taught.

We're now going to spend the next five weeks in 2 Thessalonians, and again my desire is that we would not only learn more about this church and the impact they had in their community, but also draw from their example, imitating their model ourselves in the weeks to come.

To begin, I want to remind you of who these people to whom we are devoting a large portion of our teaching ministry this year are. Who were the Thessalonians? What were their lives like? It's important that we realize that what we read is not mythological. These were real people who lived in real places during a real time, and Paul was giving them—and us—real instructions on how to follow Jesus Christ.

Thessalonica was a first century city, but it is also still alive and well today in northern Greece. On this modern-day map, you can



see Italy on the left, along with Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania. Nestled as a harbor city on the Aegean Sea is Thessalonica. It has a metropolitan population of about a million people, and about 250,000–300,000 people in the town proper. So it's about the size of Aurora and Naperville combined.

One of the leading European travel magazines says that the city of Thessalonica is "the hippest city in all of Greece." It's known for its night life, its food and its social gatherings and festivals. That's what it's like today. You can travel there—from O'Hare to Thessalonica, Greece—and see many of the places we will be talking about in our text.

But in the first century—and maybe even today—Thessalonica was driven by the idea that there were many gods, as you may know if you've studied Greek mythology. Paraphrasing Paul's words in Acts 17, the Greeks had a god for every season, every star, every scenario and situation. In fact, when Paul visited the city of Athens, which is probably near the time he was writing his letters to Thessalonica, he said, "I see you're a very religious people and you have many gods. And I noticed that you have a statue 'to the unknown god,' just to be sure you've covered all your bases." According to Greek mythology, the gods were a sinful

bunch of beings, involving themselves in all manner of sins. They were capricious and fickle. People believed they could never know where they stood with these gods and that they could make life very difficult.

But in A.D. 51—about 18 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection—three men entered Thessalonica. I doubt there were any parades for them. In fact, very few people probably knew they were there. Their names were Paul, the great apostle, Timothy, a young pastor, and Sylvanus, a wonderful servant of the Lord. Over a period of time, these men preached the name of Jesus Christ—not as just another god, but as the one and only Savior, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This created a real dilemma for the people of Thessalonica. If they bowed their knee to this Jesus, they would be turning away from the other gods—thereby affirming that all the other gods were worthless idols in comparison to the God Paul and his friends were preaching about. If they followed this God, they would also have to stop living the way they used to live, and start living and serving the way this God required.

What did the people do? The Bible says they were changed. Not multitudes of them, but a small group who were serious about having a relationship with God. They turned from their old ways and old gods, giving their lives over to the cause of Christ. As Paul taught them, they learned how to treat each other, how to seek personal holiness—even involving their sexuality, as we’ve studied. They learned to honor and serve others in the church. Essentially their new faith redirected everything they did as they served the one *“living and true God”* (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

As the people obeyed these teachings, their lives were changed. The same is true for us today. When we give our lives over to Jesus, change is inevitable. When God produces new life in us, it creates a new trajectory that is very different from our old ways. So when that small group of people stopped going with the culture, those around them did not stand up and applaud. There were no awards given to them for turning away from all the gods to follow this new God. Rather, affliction and persecution began to break out.

One of the reasons Paul himself had to quickly leave Thessalonica was that a group who hated Christ and the growth of the Christian community stirred up a mob to run him out of town. They told Paul and his two friends never to come back. Most scholars believe he was given a warning that if he returned, the church he loved would be in harm’s way. So wisely, to protect those who were new in the faith, Paul decided he would not return. But he did the next best thing: he sent his trusted associate Timothy to check on them. “We left in such a hurry. Who has been teaching you? How are you doing? Are you growing in your relationship with Jesus Christ? Are you honoring and serving Him? Are you ready for all God is going to send your way? Are you ready to live the holy life? Are you ready for the Second Coming of Christ? Are you ready to endure tribulation and persecution?”

Paul, who was in Athens, Greece, at the time, received word from Timothy that not only had the people stayed true to the faith, but they were growing greatly. They were seeing more and more people come to know Christ. The name of Christ was being spread to other communities around Thessalonica. The people of God were proving to be ready in every way. So his first letter was written in response to Timothy’s report, to tell the people, “You’re doing a good job! Are there things you could do better? Of course. But keep doing what you’re doing, and do them in greater ways in the days to come.”

As we’ve walked through the previous five chapters, we’ve learned that the transforming power of God is still alive and well today. Now as we open Paul’s second letter, some of this is going to be similar. Just as it was when Paul wrote it, so this letter will be a reminder to us of things we need to think about today. These are things that should become a way of life to us. But we’ll also learn some new things, as well as review some things that were brought up in the first letter but then Paul felt needed to be repeated and expanded. So over the next few weeks, we’ll devote ourselves to looking at the “rest of the story” of this great Thessalonian church, seeing how they finished strong in the work God had started among them. It’s our prayer that our story would be the same.

So let’s look at 2 Thessalonians 1:1–5:

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. ⁵ This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.

Every month this church gets a magazine called *Outreach* magazine, which is dedicated to helping churches become better at reaching lost people for Christ. It discusses different outreach approaches, such as how to reach people who aren't interested in coming to church. Once a year—in what is probably its biggest issue of the year—*Outreach* magazine gives awards to the top 100 churches based on two categories. First, they identify the top 100 churches based on church attendance. Using their criteria, they end up not just with the megachurches, but with the “Who’s Who” of the megachurch ministries.

Village Bible Church is a pretty big church, if you consider that the average size of American churches is about 75 people. Our campus at Sugar Grove is tenfold that number. But while we may feel pretty big in that context, to be considered in the 100 top churches they must have an attendance of over 7,500. So we’re nowhere near that size. And the top ten churches have memberships of 25,000 or more. Only two churches in Illinois meet the criterion of attendance over 7,500. One of the largest in the top five is of course Willow Creek Community Church that boasts a figure of about 27,500 in weekly attendance.

The second award category in the magazine looks for the 100 churches which are experiencing the fastest growth in America. Some of the numbers are astronomical. One church in the top ten saw a 150% growth from one year to the next. In that church, that amounted to 5,600 new members. Think about that for a moment: 150% growth in one year. We at the Sugar Grove campus have a weekly attendance of about 650 people. If I’m doing my math right, 100% growth would mean we would have about 1,300 next April. Then add another 50% to that and we’d go from a church of 650 to 1,950 in one year. You think it’s hard to find parking now? We would need to take over the Jewel parking lot to accommodate all these people.

What we see in this report is that some churches in our country are seeing absolutely phenomenal growth, possibly reaching people who have never come to church before. Some of you are thinking, “He’s going to start badgering us to do that, too.” I’m not here to do that at all. In fact, a couple of my closest pastor friends find themselves on this list. I know they have great churches; churches that are doing the hard things to serve and honor God. I’m also not disparaging *Outreach* magazine for giving these awards. It may be good to highlight places where it seems God is doing wonderful things.

But herein lies the problem. When I read a magazine article like that, I am quick to evaluate my church and my ministry. I don’t know about you, but that seems to be human nature—especially when you know some of the people on that list. You start asking, “What are we not doing right? Are we missing something? Are we not trained or not gifted enough? Is there something lacking in the leadership?” After all, don’t we all want to be recognized for the work God is doing among us—especially in a wonderful publication like *Outreach* magazine?

But when we begin to do that, we reveal our motives for ministry instead of God’s motives. Larry Osborne, pastor of North Coast Church in San Diego, California, is a dear friend of mine. His church is #36 on the largest churches list, and #90 on the fastest growing churches list. He was interviewed because his church placed in both categories. Something he wrote has encouraged me.

We all know the drill. Faithfulness isn’t measured by the size of our church. It’s foolish to compare ourselves with others. A big church isn’t necessarily a healthy church. A small church can have a big impact. And so on.

Easy to say. Easy to write.

But it’s not so easy to take root in our soul. I know firsthand. In my first three years at North Coast Church, not much that we tried worked. Church growth was nonexistent. It was a season of significant depression.

Then suddenly, everything changed.

It wasn’t because of a turnaround in our ministry. It wasn’t a new facility or new people.

My depression started to lift after a spiritual kick in the gut. All I remember is a sudden and intense awareness that God was not pleased with the way I was evaluating my “lack of ministry success” and the church’s lack of growth.

He showed me that the thought process leading to my depression (our church isn’t growing; it’s all my fault; I must be a bad person and pastor) was the same thinking that would produce arrogance if we ever experienced rapid evangelistic growth (our church is growing; it’s all my doing; I must be a lot better than those who are struggling).

It shook me to the core. It was one thing to feel like I was coming up short of my ministry potential; it was another to realize that I had a deep-seated spirit of arrogance and haughtiness masked only by my lack of outward success...

I discovered I really could find my identity in Christ, not the size of my church. I could savor the incredible privilege of ministry, even when times were tough and fruit was sparse. Best of all, I found myself inching closer to a goal

my mentor was constantly putting in front of me: "Jesus wants you to get to the place where you have nothing to prove and no one to impress."

I'm not there yet. Maybe I never will be. But I am a lot closer.

[From "Four Hard Lessons for Measuring Ministry Success," at www.churchleaders.com/pastors]

I wonder if the reason Paul wrote what he did here is that the Thessalonians had heard about some other churches, maybe that other churches were doing bigger and better things. Maybe the church was doing great—maybe they were growing like gangbusters. We don't know.

But my message today doesn't come because we are getting smaller. Last Sunday was the highest recorded attendance in Village Bible Church history. If our numbers are right, almost 1,400 were in attendance in our services. It is easy for us to think, "Wow, we're doing something great. Look at the people who are coming." It's easy for us as pastors and staff to pat ourselves on the back and think we've arrived.

Our text today is a remedy against the two-headed monster of doing ministry for the applause of men and for the arrogance of our own hearts. For those who can get depressed and wonder if we're doing enough, this is a great reminder that it is not our doing, but God's doing, which produces results. If we get arrogant about Kingdom growth, we should be reminded and rebuked, realizing this is about God and His Kingdom—not about our own.

Paul says to the Thessalonian church and to Village Bible Church, "If you want to be great, if you want to see God bless this community of believers, then your goal should not be inclusion in a magazine's top 100 churches." Not that that's bad. I don't have any disparaging words for them whatsoever. But that's not our end goal. While it's wonderful to be recognized and known for great things, it is far better to ask, "Are we on God's approved list?"—not, "Are we on *Outreach* magazine's top 100 list?" Are we doing what our Father in heaven wants us to do? How do we know if we're on His list? How do we know if we're even in contention?

Paul gives us five things that will put us on God's top list, and moves us to God's definition of greatness and success, not our own. What do God's top churches look like?

1. God's top churches are centered on the right things (1:1-2).

Paul starts his letter this way: "*Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,*" the men who are writing the letter, "*To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" We can too easily run by these introductions without thinking about what they say. Note he calls them, "the church of the Thessalonians." Why? We could think this is only a mailing address for this letter. But it helps us to understand that God is uniquely and intimately aware of the affairs of a church like that in Thessalonica. He is also aware of and concerned about the inner workings of Village Bible Church of Sugar Grove.

You see, we think of God as being so involved in the cosmic affairs of the universe that He isn't that concerned about us. But we're reminded that not only is God concerned about churches; He's concerned about us as individuals. He knows the number of hairs on our heads. He knows our struggles. He wants us to share our anxieties with Him. He wants us to praise and adore Him. He uniquely cares when one wandering sheep returns. Heaven rejoices when one person repents and is brought into the Kingdom of God. He knows you and the details of your life. He knows where you live, where you work or go to school, who you've married and who your children are. And not just in an informational sense, but He is directly involved in the affairs of your life.

So it is for the church. God cares about what's happening here. He has brought you here for whatever reasons He might have. He knows why you're here in this moment, in this service. In the opening of this letter, He's saying, "Your church is important to Me. This is an important place." Why? Because we've been told that Christ went to the cross for His church. He died and ransomed the church back to Himself, which He does by bringing people into the body of Christ through personal salvation, then joining them to the corporate family of God.

The church must be God-centered.

Notice that Paul tells the church they must be centered on the right things. “You’re uniquely placed in Thessalonica, and I want you to have two priorities. First, I want you to be God-centered” (verse one). What does that mean? Everything in the church should begin with and be based on Him. Its processes, programs and praise should all be centered on the Person of God. We are the Church of Village Bible, just as they were the church of the Thessalonians, *“in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Notice that six times in the first five verses the deity of the Triune God is mentioned by name—either Lord Jesus Christ or God the Father:

- Verse two, *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*
- Verse three, *“We ought always to give thanks to God.”*
- Verse four, *“We ourselves boast about you in the churches of God.”*
- Verse five, *“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God.”*

Let me broaden that out a bit. Combining 1 and 2 Thessalonians there are eight chapters, about five pages in your Bible. In those pages there are more than 80 references to God. You might think that is just something one does to sell books—having God written everywhere. But to truly be God-centered means to recognize the things about Him that make Him most important.

Every few months since I’ve been pastoring, it seems this statement comes up: “We do not serve you—the members or guests of Village Bible Church. We do not serve the pastors or staff of Village Bible Church. We serve an audience of One.” That doesn’t mean we don’t care about you. It just means you’re secondary to the primary focus of this church. It’s great when you applaud what we do. It helps our self-esteem. But more importantly, when we’re done with an activity or worship service or missions trip, it’s nice to hear that we’re a great church, but it’s more important to know that God from His throne says, “Well done, good and faithful servants.”

To be God-centered is to be driven by the realization that it’s not what people think about me or about our church, but what God thinks about us. Why is that important? Paul tells us that our work should be centered on the work of God our Father. The idea of Father here implies that He is the Originator of all we do. We would not be here if it wasn’t for our heavenly Father. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for my earthly mother and father.

The little group of people who gathered some 45 years ago in a house in Sugar Grove would never have had the impetus to start something like this had it not been for God. Listen, Village Bible Church was not started out of the will or decision or vision of a man, but it was started through the heart of God. We need to recognize that because He’s our Founder, He has definable rights regarding what happens in this place.

The idea of father also helps us understand what we should look like, our character and what people should see in us. I can’t tell you how many people who know my dad will tell me, “You’re a chip off the old block. You sound like him. You have mannerisms like his.” The older I get, the more I look like him. I used to mock my dad for gross things like hair growing out of his nose and ears. I always point that out with abandon. Now, I’m approaching 40 and I’m the one being mocked. I’m recognizing that the things I would point out in him, my own children are pointing out in me. Why? Because I am a DNA carrier of my dad. This is what my response is—and it’s a good response for you who are parents: When your children mock you for something that is age-related, remind them that 50% of that DNA is also in them. It’s going to happen to them someday too. It’s the great equalizer.

Seriously, this means that, as a church, we should look like God. We should be reflecting the character God. When people see Village Bible Church do ministry, they shouldn’t say, “Wow, they have followed their pastoral staff. Just like them.” No, when people look at us they should see God.

Recently a woman started coming to our church who told us, “The reason I came to Village Bible Church was because I have a son whose classmates attend this church. I watched how those children acted. I saw how their families treated them and how they acted in our community. And I said, ‘If that’s what Jesus brings to a family, I want to be there.’” What a testimony! We can tip our hats to those people and say, “Well done! You’re doing exactly what you’re supposed to be doing.” Your life and ministry and DNA reflect—not a great church—but a great Father in heaven. You’re a chip off the old block.

Paul doesn’t end with God the Father, but twice adds the phrase, *“...the Lord Jesus Christ.”* He doesn’t simply use the saving name of Jesus, or the Messiah label of Jesus. Jesus means Jehovah saves; Christ means the anointed One, the One Whom God would

send. Paul deliberately adds, “the Lord” which Lord means the King, the preeminent One, the One Who is in control. He’s the CEO, the Boss.

Why would Paul remind the Thessalonians—and Village Bible Church—that Jesus Christ is in charge? Because if we forget, we will start thinking we’re in charge. We’ll start thinking we can set the rules. In the Badal house, Mom and Dad are in charge. Herein lies the problem for the three Badal boys. When Mom and Dad are gone, there’s a power struggle for who’s going to be in charge. We’ll hear things like, “You’re not the boss of me.” There can be chaos. Why? Because the ones who are really in charge are absent, so everybody else thinks they can take charge.

Listen to me. If we take Jesus Christ *the Lord* out of Village Bible Church, there will be an insurgency in our ranks. So Paul says a church that is centered on God is a church that realizes the elders are not in charge, the pastors are not in charge, the small group leaders are not in charge, the Sunday school teachers are not in charge, the parking ministry is not in charge, the Welcome Center is not in charge. Who’s in charge? Jesus Christ the Lord. He’s our CEO. He’s our Commanding Officer. He’s the One Who tells us what to do, where to go, what to be part of and how to do it. He is the preeminent One. He is in charge.

The church must be gospel-centered.

So the church that is centered on God understands where it came from—Who its Daddy is—and also recognizes that Christ is the One who leads the charge. As we sometimes sing here, “Christ alone—Cornerstone.” He’s the One. But we also need to be gospel-centered. Where’s the gospel? Verse two says, “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Here’s our message. Here’s our ministry. Our job is to share the grace and peace of God in our lives.

How do we do that? First, we ourselves must recognize that without the grace and peace of God we would be lost and on our way to hell. If being God-centered means to know God’s place in our lives, then to be gospel-centered is to realize that apart from the saving work of Christ we would be lost. We will not find grace and peace until we find it at the foot of the cross. But once we find it there, a gospel-centered church knows all arrogance and pride are to be put away. We’re all sinners at the foot of the cross. Without Christ giving us grace and peace, hour by hour, we would be broken and dead.

But then we experience the love, grace and mercy that God showers down. Oh, the love He has lavished on His children, as we read in 1 John 3:1, “*that we should be called children of God.*” As the church in Thessalonica began to understand the gospel and its work in their lives, they realized how broken and dead they had previously been in their trespasses and sins and how sick their lives and decisions had been. Then God, out of His love, rescued them. And what do people who have been rescued from sin do? They go and tell other people that they too need to be rescued.

How did they communicate this? By extending grace and peace in abundance to all those with whom they came into contact. To be a church on God’s top list begins with being a church that is centered on the right things. Are we a God-centered church? Are we a gospel-centered church? It’s a question each of us should ask ourselves as well.

2. God’s top churches are challenged to grow spiritually (1:3a).

Verse three, “*We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly.*” The phrase “abundantly growing” is literally “super-growing” in the Greek text. It gives the picture of a tree that is experiencing an abnormal rate of growth. I’m watching my children grow, and especially my oldest, Noah, is growing like a beanstalk. We see another inch almost every day. We’re amazed at his growth and how our other children grow and grow. We say, “Of course. That’s what happens when you’re a teenager. It’s part of the human growth pattern.” But as we grow older, we’re not supposed to grow. I haven’t grown an inch in a long time. I finished growing when I was around 18. Yet Paul says this Thessalonian church was growing at an abnormal rate of speed. It was amazing to see how people were recognizing their growth. “Last time I saw you, you were here spiritually—and now I’m looking up to you, spiritually speaking. What’s going on?”

How can a church be challenged to spiritual growth? How can we become an incubator for this growth? Our staff has dedicated this past year—especially at our most recent staff retreat a couple weeks ago—to the question of how to develop an environment for this sort of “super-growth” to take place. Here are the four ideas we came up with as to what a growing believer should look like and how it might be measured.

Are they growing in their relationship with Christ and His church?

In other words, are the people growing in their relationship with the Savior of their souls and are they living in obedience to Him in growing ways? Have they seen growth in their spiritual walk, so they know and experience Jesus in ways they didn't six months or a year ago? What about their relationship with Christ's bride, the church? Are they engaged with the church, not simply in activities, but in such a way as to understand their unique role in the body?

Are they utilizing their God-given gifts?

If we're growing in our relationship with Christ, then every day we are becoming more like Him, including in the development of the gifts God has freely given us. These gifts are ways in which we are able to show Who God is. Right now, as I'm using my gift of preaching and teaching, I'm radiating the gift of our powerful preaching and teaching God. I'm not God, because I don't have all the spiritual gifts. I don't have anywhere close to all the gifts.

The reason we want to become more engaged as a church is that God tells us He's building the church into a group of people who all have different gifts and roles, who by ourselves are incomplete, but who—with Christ as our Head—begin to show the full glory of Who God is and what He's all about. We want people to radiate the glory of God in their lives by living out their gifts—knowing what those gifts are and using them.

So it's not like you serve in the children's ministry reluctantly: "I guess so. If you can't find anybody else, then I'll do it." That's not using your gift. Rather, it's recognizing that you love children. "I'm not sure why I love kids. At times they can be aggravating and I could find other things to do. But I am drawn to watching kids learn about Jesus." Or you might say, "I am drawn to share the good news with teenagers. I'm drawn to leading and shepherding a group of people through the teaching of God's Word and through fellowship and prayer. I'm going to give of myself, sacrificing for these people, so that through my gifts I can show them Who God is in my life."

Are they living a life characterized by generosity?

"For God so loved the world that he gave..." (John 3:16). If we are fully developed followers of Jesus Christ, we will give. Now, I don't mean simply the giving of tithes and offerings, although that is included. If you say, "I'm a child of God," but you realize you are only taking, taking, taking, but never giving of your time, talents, treasure and testimony, then it begs the question of whether you're the devoted follower of Jesus Christ you think you are.

The one who loves the world as Christ loves the world is the one who gives himself—and not just a little. It does not say, "For God so loved the world that He gave an angel. Or He gave a prophet. Or He gave an organization." *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."* What does a life of generosity look like? A sacrificial generosity that says, "I will not give the scraps. I will not give the leftovers. I will not give what's left on my calendar. I will give the best of the best." We want to develop Christians whose first thought is, "What can I give to the world, because my God in heaven and my Lord Jesus Christ gave the best of what They had? Being a follower of Christ, I want to do the same thing."

Do they have a God-centered vision?

Practically speaking, this means that we are able to say, "God, my life is in Your hands. I place myself on Your throne. I'm not going to conform myself to the ways of this world anymore. I'm going to be transformed and I will lay my life down, allowing You to be the One Who leads and guides me. You will evaluate what I do. When I spend my money or time, when I'm at work or school or at home, in my marriage and family—is what I'm doing pleasing and honoring to You?" We believe that when the people of this church are positioned in this way, we will—by the Spirit's help and empowerment—see people growing in abnormally quick ways. That's what we want.

3. God's top churches are connected to each other in loving relationships (3b).

Paul adds another reason a church makes God's list of great churches: they're connected to one another in loving relationships. Verse three says, *"We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing."* The word "increasing" gives a picture of a creek or river that is overflowing its banks. It's at flood stage. So when Paul says their love is increasing, it means their love has gone "outside its banks." It's spilling over.

This implies three things. First, the reason it overflows is that it has collected more rain than it can contain within its banks. So when you see a river overflow, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to tell us it's rained a lot. Paul says, "The reason your love has grown and overflowed is because God has lavished His love upon you." When that happens, you can't contain it. As it overflows, it will reach places it's never reached before. When a river reaches flood stage, it becomes wider than it's ever been before. If we've experienced God's love in the ways He wants us to, we'll know by our own ability to love an ever-growing group of people. The width of our love will be greater than it was before.

So ask yourself: as this church is growing in its relationship with Jesus Christ, are we loving more people than we did before? I don't just mean numbers—I mean are we willing to go to places that we weren't willing to go before? That jerk at your workplace, who you think nobody should love—are you willing to love him? Are you willing to love that family member who drives you nuts? Are you willing to love that spouse who's unlovable, that child who drives you crazy? When we are inundated by the love of God, it will compel us to love even the unlovable and the unlovely. That's because we're reminded that we too are recipients of God's love and grace when we were unlovable and unlovely.

The second thing that happens when a river overflows its banks is its width increases—yes—but so does its depth. Paul is telling the people, "Not only has your reach gotten wider, but the way you show love has gotten deeper." We don't just love in simple, casual ways, but we are willing to sacrificially go beyond the call of duty, doing all we can to meet the deep needs of people.

As the church grows in its relationship with God, do we see ourselves growing in the depth of our love? Not only who we love but how we love? Paul says a church on God's top list is a church overflowing its banks of love.

4. God's top churches are case studies for other churches to follow (4).

Verse four says, *"Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring."* Is Paul saying, "We boast about you, Thessalonians, because you've got the best church around. Your building is second to none. Look at your AV equipment—it's awesome, especially for the first century! Your pastor—that Badal character—he's really great"? Right? No! He doesn't say anything about the pastor or staff. He doesn't say anything about the building or multiplicity of services and programs offered. He doesn't talk about having the best Vacation Bible School in the community or any of the other things we think are important. What does he say? The reason we boast is because of *"your steadfastness and faith..."* But also notice it was their *"steadfastness and faith in persecutions and in afflictions..."*

We will become a model church for others when they see us, not in our triumphs but in our trials and tragedies. Boasting about churches is okay; Paul was not sinning when he boasted about the Thessalonian church. But if Village Bible Church is going to be boasted about, there are two things to remember: there's a reality that if others are watching and pointing at what we're doing, the devil is doing it as well so we need to be ready. Paul is saying, "We boast about you but be ready because you're a marked church. The devil is going to come at you through persecution and affliction. He's coming your way."

Second, when you become an example that other churches look at, there is a responsibility, so you better stay on the straight and narrow because people are counting on you. As Paul was telling the Thessalonians that he was talking about them to other churches, the worst thing that could have happened was that they could have blown it and made a mockery of God's name. Two ministries that have cast big shadows and were on the list of "Top 10 Churches" two years ago have had major leadership issues. One church, once boasting a population of almost 20,000 people, has completely dissolved. Another church that was about 15,000 to 18,000 in its heyday is now not much bigger than our church. When we build on the wrong things or we start boasting and highlighting certain people's ministries and we don't live up to the gospel that we're preaching, it will create great downfall and turmoil for people that are following. It's a great responsibility. Paul says, "You're doing a great job, but be alert. Watch out! Recognize the responsibility there."

5. God's top churches are consumed with a Kingdom mindset (5).

Paul finishes verse five, "...that you may be considered worthy of the Kingdom of God." How do we know if we're worthy of the Kingdom of God? Paul says, "You've already been considered worthy. We don't have to earn it. What we have to do is live in light of it. So if we recognize that God is in control, and that God has the best for us yet to come, then live in light of it. Have the

mindset that we are winners, not losers; that the Kingdom of God has established itself in the “already but not yet.” While God has not made it manifest to us, Christ is seated on His throne, His enemies are His footstool, and we, the Church of the Living God, are on the march—Christian soldiers ready to win the battle that’s already been won for us. So we’re consumed by that. We’ve already won the battle, we’ve already won the war, and we fight from a place of victory, not defeat.

The church is a group of people who recognize that to be great in God’s eyes is to take the mantle of growing His Kingdom—not our own.; to make His name great—not our own; to make His gifts seen by all—not our own. It’s then and only then, when people boast of us, they’re not boasting of us, they’re boasting of the Lord. Because it is Christ and His Spirit that is living and working and having His being in us. Brothers and sisters, we’re along for the ride. Are we a church that is part of God’s top churches? I hope so. I hope that one day when we stand before God and He speaks to us as a collective church, he may say of all of us individually, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” So to that end we work, we serve, we praise, we pray, we devote ourselves to that undying, uncompromising truth that is it God whom we serve. To Him be the glory forever.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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