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Marks of a Healthy Church - Part 2

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott shows how it is sometimes possible to avoid 'speaking truth to power' if it means receiving less opposition. He explains that there must be steadfastness in adherence to what the Bible says regardless of the cost.

Transcript

The church that is uncompromising in its loyalty to Jesus Christ, both in what it believes and in the standards of its conduct, will always provoke opposition from the world. And I have no doubt that if we compromise less as churches, we would suffer more. Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott.

Time magazine ranked John Stott as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. During his lifetime he impacted the evangelical church on every continent and was all the author of the landmark Lausanne Covenant on Evangelism. John Stott's ministry was centered on five priorities, prayer, expository preaching, regular evangelism, careful follow-up and systematic training of new leaders.

But for all his global influence, he had an unassuming demeanor preferring to be known as Uncle John and living in a small apartment above a garage of a rectory in London. Indeed, the rectory of all souls laying in place which was his home church for almost 60 years. We are privileged to be marking John Stott's centenary by bringing you just some of his timeless teaching.

Last week we looked at the subject of renewal in the church and John Stott showed us how for this to happen the church must be a healthy church. This is indicated by that trio of faith, hope and love, faith in Christ, love for him and one another and hope which as we saw in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 is described as steadfastness in the face of persecution. You will find it helpful to have your Bible open to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 as John summarizes the marks of a healthy church.

New Thessalonians are evident in persecution which are physical and afflictions which

are more general pressures were increasing. But their steadfastness and faith, that is their believing constancy in enduring this increasing pressure, was increasing also. Our suffering is the third mark of a healthy church who may be surprised to hear.

But a church that is uncompromising in its loyal tittages of Christ, both in what it believes and in the standards of its conduct, will always provoke opposition from the world. And I have no doubt that if we compromise less as churches we would suffer more. Yet if suffering is a mark of a healthy church, so is the steadfastness and the believing endurance with which we bear that suffering.

Well there then is Paul's description of a healthy church. The central to this healthy church is faith, love and steadfastness. Faith that is aware of the reality of God trusts him, comes together on the Lord's day to worship him.

And once incidentally to share the faith with others, faith, love in the fellowship, steadfastness as pilgrims as we suffer for the Lord on earth. Not only are there three marks of the healthy church, but all three are growing. Your faith is growing abundantly, the love of every one of you for one another is increasing and so your steadfastness and faith in the midst of persecution.

But as I meditated on this passage, I've been struck by something else that I believe is dominant in this passage. More striking than Paul's description of the church is his perspective in describing it. And in particular the godliness of his perspective, as he looks at their spiritual growth from God's point of view.

So let's move on from his description to his perspective. Paul cannot think of the church without thinking of God, whose church it is. He cannot think of the health of the church without thinking of the health giver.

In verse 4 he refers to the church as the church of God and a number of local churches as the churches of God. No doubt he was thinking of the church in Athens and the church in Corinth and the church in Birell, etc. Churches of God in these different cities.

But in verse 1 he reverses it and talks of the church of the Thessalonians in God. And in the Lord Jesus Christ, thus Paul recognizes that every church has two habitats. One is the town in which it's situated, Thessalonica, Corinth, Athens, New York, Sydney, Australia, London.

That's one habitat in which we live. But the other habitat in which the church lives is God. It's the church of the Thessalians in God.

Here you see every church can be described either as the church of God in Thessalonica or as the church of the Thessalonians in God. Thus Paul sees God at work in the Christian community and he refers to this divine work in two particular ways. Firstly he sees their faith, love and steadfastness and the growth of all three virtues as evidence of the

righteous judgment of God.

Now it's very surprising when we first read it and we may wonder what on earth it means. Well look if you will at verse 5 where Paul says it, this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God. J.B. Phillips what said these qualities, faith, love and steadfastness show how justly the judgment of God works out in your case.

True God was allowing the persecutors of the church a certain rope but it was in Thessalonian Christians that God was at work causing their faith, love and steadfastness to grow and so preparing them for his eternal kingdom. That's what he says, doesn't he? In verse 5 it's evidence of the righteous judgment of God that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God. You remember don't you how Jesus constantly taught that the road to glory is suffering.

Suffering with the road to glory in his own case he wasn't glorified until he'd suffered and died and he said it would be the same in the case of his followers. And the apostles picked it up. Paul said on his first missionary journey to the Galatians he said it's only through much tribulation that you will enter the kingdom of God.

When we come to the description of the redeemed company gathered round God's throne they are described not only as having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb but as having come out of the great tribulation which I believe refers to the whole Christian life. It's the great tribulation. So suffering and glory, tribulation and the eternal kingdom of God belong together.

Suffering refines our Christian character. Suffering is God's way of fitting us for his kingdom. I think probably the revised standard version is wrong in translating the phrase at the end of verse 2 that he might make you worthy of his kingdom.

Because we can never be worthy of his kingdom in the sense of deserving it. The kingdom of God is a free gift and we are never worthy of entering into God's kingdom. But we can be counted worthy in the sense of being made fit by God to enter into his kingdom.

And then when Christ comes as he goes on to say in verses 6 and 7 he is going to reverse the fortunes of these two groups of people, the Christians and their persecutors. He will repay with affliction the afflictors and he will grant rest or respite from affliction to those who have been afflicted. In other words he will grant the kingdom of God to those who have been prepared for it by their sufferings.

Now you know it takes a good degree of spiritual discernment to see in a situation of persecution evidence of the righteous judgment of God. Our habit is to see only surface appearances and so we make very superficial comments on the state of the church. When it's persecuted we see the malice and the cruelty and the power of evil men who

oppose the church.

And we see the sufferings of the people of God who are opposed and ridiculed and who are harassed and tortured and driven underground etc. In other words what we see is injustice. We see the wicked flourishing and the righteous suffering.

And we attempt it to complain against God because of this miscarriage of justice. We say why doesn't God do something? God's answer is he is doing something but you haven't seen it and he's going to do something more. At the moment he is allowing his people to suffer in order to fit them for his eternal kingdom.

And at the moment he's allowing wicked people to flourish. But its only temporary and his just retribution is going to fall upon them. And Paul sees evidence of the righteous judgment of God in the very situation in which we might only see injustice.

Evidence of the righteous judgment of God. The Paul sees God at work in another way, second way this is all part of his perspective and that is he sees evidence of the grace of God. Now of course Paul's hortology was a theology of grace.

He knows himself to be a trophy of God's grace that is his free and undeserved favor. Paul never forgot the Damascus road. He never forgot his persecution of the church that led up to it and how Jesus Christ broke from heaven and intervened in his situation and had mercy upon him and was gracious to towards him.

Paul lost no opportunity to magnify the grace of God. So his letters are full of grace. He begins this letter in verse 2, "Grace be to you in peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He ends it in chapter 3, verse 18, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." And in particular, without mentioning the word "grace" here, he attributes the health of the Thessalonians church to grace, to God's grace, his gracious activity within them.

And we know that because instead of congratulating them on their spiritual healthiness, instead of congratulating them on their growing faith and increasing love and abiding steadfastness, whenever he does, he thanks God for it. He says, "We are bound to thank God for these things as is fitting." Why did he feel this obligation to thank God? Why did he say it was fitting to be full of thanksgiving to God? Well, there's only one answer to that question. It's because their faith, love, and steadfastness were evidence of God's grace, evidence of God at work in them by the Holy Spirit causing their faith, love, and steadfastness to grow.

It's quite true as an observant student of the text of whom I'm sure there are many this morning. We'll have noticed something else in verse 4, and there is a detail of some candidly, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God. And at first sight, this introduces a jarring note because thanksgiving and boasting appear to be incompatible

with one another.

Thanksgiving is credit to God. Basting gives credit to man. So you might say, "If we're thanking God for something, we can't simultaneously boast of it.

And if we're boasting of something, we can't simultaneously thank God for it." So there you are, Paul, we've caught you out. You're not as consistent or logical as we always thought you were. In fact, we always suspected that you might have, if not feet of clay, at least in Achilles' heel.

But wait a minute. You have to give Paul a little credit for consistency of thought. What I've said about boasting is true of most kinds of boasting, but there is one kind of boasting of which it is not true.

There is one kind of boasting that is absolutely compatible with thanksgiving, and is in reality another version of thanksgiving. You know what it's called? "Boasting in the Lord." Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. It's not boasting of our achievement.

It's boasting of his achievement, rejoicing in it, and giving thanks for it. Now in this sense, thanking and boasting, thanking the Lord and boasting in the Lord are two sides of the same coin. When we're talking to the Lord, we thank him for his grace.

When we're talking to other people, we boast of his grace in other people. Now I believe there's a very important lesson for us to learn here. What should be our attitude to people who are doing well in the Christian life or Christian service? Some Christians are very free in expressions of congratulation.

I think you're just marvelous, we say to somebody. I'm proud of you. You're great.

Other people aren't very comfortable about this language because we know that this spiritual growth and service are due to the grace of God and he ought to be given credit for it. So these Christians feel there's something a little bit incongruous about congratulation. It borders on flattery.

It also promotes pride and it doesn't help people in their battle for humility. So these people, although they thank God in prayer, sometimes go to the opposite extreme from flattery and say nothing. Blessed they should defend their good theology or damage the spiritual life of the person concerned.

But silence doesn't seem right either. Any more than flattery. So discouraging to people if you never say anything about how well they're doing, so is there a third way? Is there an alternative to flattery on the one hand and silence on the other? Is there a way of affirming people without flattering them? The answer is there is.

He exemplifies it beautifully in our passage. For he not only thanks God for them,

recognizing his grace at work within them, but he tells them so. He says, "I'm thanking God for you." And he not only bursts to others of the same grace of God, he tells them so.

We ourselves boast of you to others. We're bound to give thanks for you as he's fitting and we burst of you. Now can't we learn to do the same? We must give credit where credit is due.

We have to thank God for the evidence of his grace in the lives of his people and both of the grace of God in the lives of others. But let's not be afraid of telling people that we're doing so. Then when somebody's growing in the Christian life and showing every evidence of God's grace within them, we don't congratulate them.

But nor do we remain silent. We affirm them. We encourage them in the most Christian of all ways.

We say, "I thank God for you, my brother or sister. I thank God for your gifts. I thank God for his grace that I see in your life.

I thank him for what I see in you of the meekness and gentleness of Christ. This attitude is affirming without being fluttering and it's encouraging but it doesn't puff people up." So I conclude. I marvel at the apostle Paul's spiritual perspective.

I'm more impressed, or should I say I'm less impressed by his emphasis on growing faith, growing love, growing steadfastness than I am in his perspective in describing these things. His discernment. He didn't just see the Thessalonian church, its health, its faith, its love, its steadfastness in the midst of persecution.

He looked beyond the Christian church to the God whose church it was. The God and Father of all, Jesus Christ, at work within them, giving evidence both of his righteous judgment and of his sanctifying grace. And what Paul saw profoundly affect his attitude towards them and their situation.

I think my brothers and sisters, we really need to pray for more spiritual discernment. We need to pray, I know I do, for a more godly perspective when looking at the church and the Christian people. Then we shall see below the surface of things, or beyond people.

And we shall see God at work in every situation, in judgment or in grace or birth. And in consequence we shall repent of our sub-Christian attitudes. When there is suffering, let's not complain, let's praise God, its evidence of his righteous judgment, preparing us for his eternal kingdom.

When there is success, let's not flatter or become proud, let's praise God for his grace, not be afraid to tell others that we are doing so. May God give us, in every situation,

spiritual discernment, a godly perspective and Christian attitudes to other people. Let's pray for a moment together now.

Just a moment of silence in which we can think about faith, love and steadfastness and whether they are growing in us. And then a moment to think of the perspective, whether our attitudes to people are right and we are praising God and encouraging people by telling them so. Moment of thought, reflection, prayer.

For Jesus, head of the church, we pray for ourselves and for one another. We pray that our faith may grow abundantly, and the love of every one of us for one another may increase and that we may be steadfast and believing and trusting and constant in affliction. But we pray beyond that that you will help us to see you at work in these situations, especially your grace, and that we may learn to thank you for one another and encourage one another in this way.

We ask it for the glory of your great and worthy name. Amen. Well spiritual discernment, a godly perspective and Christian attitudes to other people, faith, love and steadfastness.

We've been listening to the conclusion of the message by John Stott or what makes a healthy church. This message is just one of the series that John gave it all souls on how things will be for the church in the end times. It's a fascinating series which you can enjoy by visiting their website.

Many of John Stott's sermons were the basis of commentaries, he wrote, that form the highly acclaimed The Bible Speaks Today commentary series. The Selenians which we've been studying today, being one of those. You can find details of this and also videos of John Stott preaching by visiting premierchristenradio.com/JohnStott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world.

Today Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries John Stott founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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