

Manifestations of Discipleship

*“Remembering
without ceasing
your work of faith,
and labour of love,
and patience of
hope in our Lord
Jesus Christ, in the
sight of God and
our Father.”*

*—I Thessalonians
1:3*

Disciples of Christ are those who have accepted Jesus as their Redeemer. Additionally, they have dedicated their lives to the divine cause represented in him by accepting his invitation to take up their cross and follow in his footsteps, even unto death. (Matt. 16:24) The word “disciple” means “a learner or pupil,” and the disciples of Christ receive their teaching from Jesus, whom they accept as their Master and whose instructions reflect the will of their Heavenly Father.

Jesus said of Nathanael, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47) This implies that there were those in Jesus’ day who were looked upon as Israelites, but who in reality were not, in that their lives were not sufficiently in tune with the will of the God of Israel. Because of this, they did not accept Jesus as their promised Messiah. The same is true with respect to spiritual

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Israel at the present time, made up of the disciples of Christ. There are disciples “indeed.” However, there are also those professing to be followers of Jesus, but who are disciples in name only, inasmuch as they do not comply with the teachings of the Master.

Sincerity of heart is one of the basic qualifications for true discipleship. Those who are sincere will endeavor to manifest their professions not by mere words, but also by deeds. The Apostle John wrote, “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.”—I John 3:18,19

The brethren at Thessalonica, to whom our opening text is addressed, were evidently very faithful “in deed and in truth” demonstrating the genuineness of their professions as disciples. Paul commended them for their work of faith, labor of love, and their patience of hope. Every true disciple of Christ must possess a mountain-moving faith, be filled with love, and be patient and longsuffering in service to the Lord, the Truth, and the brethren.

Work of Faith

Paul commended the brethren at Thessalonica for their “work of faith.” This is a very fitting expression, for where true faith exists there will inevitably be works associated with it. James summed this up very nicely, when he wrote, “Faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.” (James 2:17,18) The illustration

which James used was the case of a poor brother or sister coming into our fellowship. (James 2:15,16) If the individual is ignored, it reveals a lack of the works that should proceed out of a true faith.

There are many ways in which faith works. In his letter to the Hebrew brethren, Paul mentions many of these. Quoting portions of this account, we read: "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain; ... By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; ... By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; ... Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age; ... By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac; ... By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; ... By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones; ... By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."—Heb. 11:4-25

These are but some of the manifestations of faith Paul gleaned from the lives of many Old Testament characters. Then he adds, "What shall I more say? for time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,

Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.”—vss. 32-35

Here Paul mentions the works of faith in cases where the Lord rewarded the faithful in ways that demonstrated his pleasure with them. Then he continues: “Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”—vss. 36-38

As shown here, many had experiences of trial and persecution because, through their faith, they stood for the Lord’s cause and would not compromise with the powers of evil by which they were surrounded. A good illustration in point is the case of Daniel’s three friends, who refused to bow down to the image which had been set up at the order of Nebuchadnezzar. Those who refused to worship this image were to be cast into a fiery furnace and destroyed. (Dan. 3:1-12) When given a second chance, and after a warning from Nebuchadnezzar, these faithful stalwarts said, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”—vss. 17,18

Here the work of faith was the refusal to worship the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar had set up. These three Hebrews had faith to believe that their God was able to deliver them from a cruel death in a fiery furnace. On the other hand, they did not know whether or not this would be his will for them. However, faith worked to give them victory over temptation regardless of what the outcome might be. They had faith to believe that, if they died, it was because their God saw that this would be best. Their real hope was deliverance in “a better resurrection.”—Heb. 11:35

Love Labors

There are many ways in which love labors. To the Hebrew brethren, Paul wrote, “God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.” (Heb. 6:10) Here the “labour of love” referred to is on behalf of the brethren. This is in keeping with the Master’s instruction that we should love one another as he loved us. His love for us induced him to lay down his life on our behalf. Thus, in his admonition, John wrote that we should be filled with love: “We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”—I John 3:16

The labor of love is voluntary. One may be constrained by love but not compelled. Love is based on unselfishness and is of God. In God, we have the superlative example of love. All of his creative works are from one standpoint evidences of his love. He did not need the things he created. They were for the benefit of his creation. The most outstanding

demonstration of God's love is in the gift of his only begotten Son to be the Redeemer and Savior of the world. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."—John 3:16

In a number of instances in the New Testament, the Greek word *agape*—meaning love—is translated "charity." While most students of the Bible prefer the word "love" rather than "charity," yet pure charity comes closer in meaning to what the Scriptures indicate divine love to be. Charity is the act of giving to those from whom there can be no hope of a return. This was true in God's gift of his Son. In accepting this gift, it is with the understanding that there is nothing we can do to repay. All we can do is to express our appreciation by accepting the gift and devoting our lives wholeheartedly to the one who gave it.

Love labors, love gives, and thus love manifests itself in the service of the Lord, the Truth, and the brethren—all with "no strings attached." Where love fills the heart there will be labors of love. There will be daily sacrifices on behalf of others, especially the brethren. There will be a burning zeal to serve the Lord and to show forth his praises. When there are no such manifestations, it simply means that love is lacking. As John asked, "How dwelleth the love of God" in such a one?—I John 3:17

Paul mentions other labors of love which are to be in the hearts and lives of the Lord's disciples. "Charity [love] suffereth long, and is kind; ... envieth not; ... vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is

not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity [love] never faileth.” (I Cor. 13:4-8) It is not to be expected that in our fallen flesh we can be so filled with love as to measure up perfectly to these various qualities. However, if we have the heart desire to do so, they will be manifest to a large extent in our association with one another and also toward those with whom we come into contact in the world.

Patiently Hoping

Paul also commends the Thessalonian brethren’s “patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” In another place he wrote, “We are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?” (Rom. 8:24) As disciples of Christ, we hope for the things which the Lord has promised, the things which we do not yet see. Chief among these in the Early Church was the setting up of Christ’s kingdom in which they hoped to live and reign with him. (Rev. 20:6) We rejoice to realize that we are living ever closer to that time, but we are still waiting for the fulfillment of the hope of living and reigning with Christ. We, like the disciples in the Early Church, continue to need the “patience of hope.”

This waiting requires patience and endurance, because while we are waiting there are trials to endure. Paul again wrote, “We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of

God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us.”—Rom. 5:3-5

In the Book of Hebrews, we read concerning the promised return of Christ that is directly associated with the disciples’ need of patience. “Ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.” (Heb. 10:36-38) From the Apostle James, we read, “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming [Greek: presence] of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming [presence] of the Lord draweth nigh.”—James 5:7,8

In the Lord’s providence, he has often permitted his people to suppose that developments in the outworking of his plan were closer at hand than they have often turned out to be. This is particularly true with respect to the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom. Many of the disciples in the Early Church believed that Christ’s return was very near. Yet Peter, and others, were able to see before they finished their course that it would not take place in their day. It is doubtful, however, if any realized that so many centuries would elapse before this outstanding development in God’s plan would take place.

Even so, this glorious hope was so precious that every day they waited for its realization by the exercise of patience and endurance. It was thus so

with the brethren at Thessalonica and, judging from Paul's observation in our featured text, they patiently waited for the fulfillment of their hope in the proper way by continuing to be active in the Lord's service. They actively waited.

Proclaiming the Message

In our featured scripture, when the Apostle Paul commended the Thessalonian brethren for their work of faith, he was referring in particular to their activity in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. This comes to light in the context of the apostle's words. In the ensuing verses we read, "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing."—I Thess. 1:5-8

Here Paul speaks of the manner in which he witnessed the Gospel to those who had become disciples in Thessalonica. His zeal and faithfulness had been manifested to them. He mentions that they had become followers of him even as he was of Christ, emulating his missionary zeal in proclaiming the good tidings. Because of this, they in turn had become ensamples "to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia." Then he explains why: "For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in

Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad.” These are remarkable statements!

Jesus, our Master and Teacher, whose disciples we profess to be, left instructions that we should be his witnesses throughout the earth. (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8) If we have faith in him and in his leadership, we will obey his instructions. A failure to wholeheartedly obey would be evidence of a lack of faith, for this particular work of faith would be absent from our daily lives. Let us be rather like the Thessalonian brethren, who sounded forth the Word of the Lord far and wide. Thus, they gave evidence of their faithfulness in following the example set for them by Paul. They followed him as he followed Jesus, who himself also was faithful in proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom.—Matt. 4:17; Luke 4:43

The Same Test Today

We, at the present time, are in a much more knowledgeable position with respect to the outworking of God’s plan than were those in the Early Church. Nevertheless, the test of patiently enduring is upon us also. We would all like to see a speedy realization of our kingdom hopes, but we have no assurance as to just when this will be. Like the brethren in Paul’s day, we are also instructed to continue laying down our lives in the service of the Lord without knowing how much longer we will be called upon thus to serve, sacrifice, and suffer.

This is why we need the patient endurance of hope. It is this patience that will enable us to maintain our hope regardless of how long the waiting

time might be, and no matter how severe our experiences in the Lord's service may be while we are actively waiting. This is indeed a test of endurance. Let us not lose our initial enthusiasm for the Truth and its service simply because there is a seeming delay in the fruition of our hopes. God is a perfect timekeeper, and every detail of his plan is working out exactly when he has decreed that it should. If to us the vision seems to tarry, let us realize that this is not actually the case. (Hab. 2:3; Heb. 10:37) Rather, the Lord is testing our patience of hope and watching to see how zealous in his service we will continue to be regardless of how long the wait may seem.

When Paul assured the Hebrew brethren that God was not unrighteous to forget their labor of love, he added, "We desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end." (Heb. 6:10,11) It is not enough that our work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope continue either for a brief time or for many years. The test of true discipleship is faithfulness to the very end of the narrow way, even unto death. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."—Rev. 2:10

In explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus said, "The parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns

are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.”—Luke 8:11-15

The seed which fell among thorns holds a special warning to all of the Lord’s disciples. We need to be on the alert lest the cares of this life unduly interfere with our work of faith and labor of love. “Patient continuance in well doing” is the best safeguard against this danger, together with prayer for unfailing strength to continue laboring until our course is finished.—Rom. 2:7

Finally, concerning the servant who used the Lord’s goods faithfully, we read in the parable of the talents: “His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.” (Matt. 25:21) May we each faithfully continue our work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope, “in the sight of God and our Father,” until the end of our earthly sojourn. ■

