

The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; Matthew 22:15-22; I Thess. 1:1-10

The scriptures that form the lectionary for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time all deal with the church's engagement in public life. The key to understanding these scriptures is to begin with Matthew 22:15-22.

Matthew 22:15-22 is the first of three conflict stories between Jesus and the political, economic and religious leaders of Israel – the pharisees, sadducees and priests. This first conflict story is the famed account of their asking Jesus, “Is it lawful (that is legal under the Jewish law) to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” This is a “trick question”, in which (in the opinion of those who posed it to Jesus), any answer that Jesus gave would get him into trouble. The tax that they were referring to was the hated poll tax because every time every Jew paid it, it was a stabbing reminder of their helpless submission to Rome. If Jesus advocated the paying of that tax, he would alienate the people from himself, and thus destroy his own power base (which, in turn, would either alienate him from the people or make him far more vulnerable to the efforts of the Jewish aristocracy to eliminate him). If, on the other hand, Jesus would encourage nonpayment of the tax, he could be accused of treason, thus facing execution by Rome. Jesus, however, outsmarted them by turning the question into a deeper issue of where ultimate allegiance of a Jew should belong.

Challenged by Israel's religious and political leadership in such a way that it seems almost impossible for Jesus not to condemn himself before Rome or the people, Jesus asks “Show me the coin used for the tax”. He is handed a denarius by one of those seeking to defame him. The denarius was a specialized coin, minted by Rome primarily for paying the poll tax; it was not normally used in other cash exchanges. It is worth noting, therefore, that Jesus wasn't carrying the coin that was despised by so many Jews -- but one of the people questioning Jesus was carrying that coin! They hadn't considered the possibility that their very carrying of the poll tax coin indicated how hypocritical they were – for here they were questioning Jesus as to whether they should pay taxes to Caesar, but doing so at the very same time they have that coin in their possession ready in case it is demanded! By asking for a denarius because he doesn't have one, Jesus gave testimony without a word being spoken by him that he was more resistant to Caesar's abuse of power than were his detractors – in spite of all their theological huffing-and-puffing!

Jesus holds up the coin for the inspection of the crowd. And he asks the question, “Whose head is this and whose title?” They all knew the answer to this question. The denarius had imprinted on it a bust of Caesar Tiberius in relief. And around it were printed the words, “Ti(berius) Caesar Divi Aug(usti) F(ilius) Augustus” – “Tiberius, Caesar, worshipful son of the divine Augustus”.

In other words, by its very identity of what was printed on this coin, it was blasphemous! The coin claimed far too much for itself, and for the state that it represented. The coin was nothing more than the instrument by which the people would pay their taxes. But Rome had decreed divinity upon the person whose bust was engraved upon that coin (as if they had the power to do such a thing). This coin was thus a portable idol! Thus, by its very existence, this coin declared two facts about Rome that made it so despised and hated. It was a portable idol, declaring the

state as God. And in that hated tax, the coin was the clearest symbol of Rome's oppression of the people of Israel!

Thus Jesus holds up that coin with the profile of Caesar carved upon it, and responds, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). But that's not exactly what he said, according to Matthew. Matthew's actual quote of Jesus does not say "give" (*dote*). Instead, Matthew has Jesus say *apodote* – or in other words, "give back". Give back to Caesar whatever is legally owed to him – but nothing more! Do not give to Caesar what Caesar has no right to demand – divinity, sinlessness, idolatry. But do give him what he is rightfully owed – the taxes to which your country has agreed to pay.

Thus, the saying that appears on a first reading to be equal ("Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; give to God what is God's") is not equal at all. Because what is owed to Caesar? Taxes – and nothing more! And what is owed to God? Why, it is the totality of your being – your living as a part of God's people, working for the kingdom that will someday supercede Rome. You owe everything to God. So give your "everything" to that One – and only that One – who deserves it!

Jesus' answer was an extremely astute answer, because everyone present would know that there was not an equal division of authority between Caesar and God. The paying of taxes is never an indicator of support of government policy (in this case, Rome), but only of compliance. However, disciples of Jesus are loyal to God alone (22:37-39) and are committed to building an alternate empire that will someday destroy Rome (24:27-31). In the meantime, disciples live an alternative existence, "in" but not "of" this Roman world, but rather faithfully and non-violently resisting the ethics, morals and policies of Rome. Jesus made here a profoundly revolutionary statement, which the Jewish leaders quickly recognized (22:22).

In this statement, Jesus both presents the privileges of the state and the limitations of the state. We are to render to the state the respect that is appropriate for it to receive. But we are to render to the state not one whit more than what it is appropriate for the state to receive.

And what is appropriate for the state to receive? It is the task of the state to order the life of its society and its citizens. It orders that corporate life by its laws, its legislation, its military, its maintaining of the nation's or city's infrastructure, even its collection of garbage! For that, it is to be honored.

But the state is not to make claims about itself that are not its prerogatives to make, or to take upon itself the power to destroy the conscience, convictions and freedom of its people. When it perceives itself as encompassing all of life, when it takes upon itself the demand for total commitment, unquestioning obedience or uncriticized allegiance, when it claims divinity for its emperor, then it has ceased to play "state" and has begun to play God! And for that, it is to be condemned and it is to be opposed!

This is beautifully stated in the words of the Barmen Declaration, written on May 29-31, 1934 by representatives of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany to protest the policies and actions of Hitler and to state their theological grounds for doing so. Among six propositions that make up this declaration, those gathered in Barmen wrote,

“Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. It fulfills this task by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God’s commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things.”

But then it boldly continued, “We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church’s vocation as well”.¹

Thus, by his statement, Jesus claims legitimate respect for the state, but also its limitations. Instead, Jesus propounds the ultimate respect and the total allegiance that must go to God. This is the legitimate “tax” that every person ought to gratefully “pay”, because all that we have and are and will be we owe to God – even God’s forgiveness and embrace of us, far beyond anything we deserve.

The present-day tragedy of this passage, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”, is the way it is so terribly abused. This passage is misused in order to enunciate a policy of compliance and subservience to the state rather than Jesus’ clearly-intended purpose for it. That misuse is most voiced in Mark’s statement of Jesus’ pronouncement: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mk. 12:17). This is most often given voice in the United States through our misinterpretation of our founders’ concept of the separation of church and state.

The Bible does not teach separation of church and state. In fact, it teaches the exact opposite. The doctrine of separation of church and state was a doctrine propounded by those who drew up the Constitution of the United States. And they propounded it, not to protect the state from the church but *to protect the church from the state!*

When the Constitution was written, the church in most European nations was a state church. And this was most profoundly true in Great Britain. The Anglican Church owed the right of its existence to the willingness of the king and parliament to allow it to exist. In fact, the king was the head of the English church! That meant, that rather than the church having the independence from the state that would allow it to stand over against the state and call it to accountability, the church was the religious “mouth-piece” of the state, promulgating only what the state permitted the church to proclaim.

The framers of the Constitution recognized that if democracy were to work, it would require three distinct and independent sectors of society: the political system (or public sector), the economic system (or private entrepreneurial sector) and the “convictional” or “voluntary” sector (congregations, religious communities, secular or religious voluntary associations) that could

¹ *The Book of Confessions*, “The Declaration of Barmen” (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, The Presbyterian Church USA: 1999), 8.22, 8:23; p. 250.

hold the other sectors accountable. Only the equal participation of all three sectors would make the democratic process work and would keep special interests from dominating the decision-making process. Therefore, it was imperative that the church be constituted as independent of the government, so that it could pursue its religious interests free of government influence and remain capable of holding both government and the economic system accountable.

The tragedy of the American experiment, however, is that since the close of the Second World War, there has been a significant retreat in the involvement of the volunteer sector from public life. That, in turn, has permitted the political and economic sectors to increasingly assume responsibility for the exclusive shaping of public life unchecked and without accountability. In turn, this retreat of the voluntary sector from public life into privatization threatens the continuance of democracy.

The concept of the separation of church and state cannot be defended biblically. The passage most used to attempt such a defense is Jesus' statement, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk 12:17). But to interpret this passage as promoting the separation of church and state is to thoroughly misunderstand the passage and Jesus' intentions.

Matthew 22:21 is most often interpreted as declaring that politics are of no concern to God, and therefore should be of no concern to the church. However, no Jew of Jesus' time would have made that conclusion because it was taken for granted that God's Law applied to all of life – including the political.

Nor is Jesus suggesting that there is an inherent, irreconcilable tension between the two (i.e., "politics and religion don't mix"). Again, that perspective was outside Jewish thinking (cf. I Chron. 26:30, 32; II Chron. 19:11).

What Jesus was saying in this statement is that God's claims upon us are so comprehensive that our relationship to Caesar must be subsumed under our calling to advance God's kingdom, justice and righteousness. Therefore, our involvement as the church in public life is not an activity extraneous to faith. It is an integral part of our obedient response to God! In other words, involvement in public life is our calling, our vocation. That's where Christians should be and what Christians should be about!

Exodus 33:12-23 tells about Moses' intercession with God, following the incident of Israel's worship of the golden calf. Although God has decided because of Moses' pleading not to destroy Israel, God wishes to take his leave of them. That would also mean taking leave of Moses. Thus, Moses asks for God's presence and a better knowledge of God's will for his nation, including that he might personally see God (vss. 15, 17). God responds, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'Yahweh', and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (vs. 19).

It is first of all intriguing to note in this passage that Moses specifically asks that God not simply go with him but with the entire people of Israel, sinners though they be (vs. 15). He argues that

if God does not go with them, it would be useless for Israel to enter into the Promised Land. What good would it be to have a land of “milk and honey” (that is, of economic abundance and political autonomy) if it is a land divorced of God’s indwelling with God’s people?

Second, Moses argues that it is useless to form a nation unless both it and he are in intimate relationship with God. There is no future for a nation, Moses argues, unless the people and the nation’s systems know God well enough that they know what God stands for (grace, justice and mercy – vs. 19). Otherwise, those values will not permeate that society. Only as the leadership of God’s people holds up to society those godly values will that society be able to order its corporate life (i.e., its politics) and the creation and disbursement of its wealth (i.e., its economic life). Only then will that society have a “future and a hope”. And only then will God’s people be fulfilling the purpose to which they have been called by God. This is the powerful argument of this passage as it demonstrates the unique role the church must play in public life.

God’s answer to Moses’ plea is pure grace. God responds, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name. I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘Yahweh’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (vss. 17, 19).

God’s essential attribute is graciousness and mercy. He will call to accountability and even punish his people, but that is precisely done out of love for them in order to correct them and to motivate them to follow Yahweh and to love each other in a response of love and mercy. The word “gracious” is the Hebrew *chanan* which means “to find favor”. In the scriptures, it is used in two ways: with a person’s relationships with others and with a person’s relationship with God. Thus, a person “finds favor” with one who is his superior or from whom he receives a concession (e.g., Ruth 2:2). And one “finds favor” with God, who accepts and loves him or her, not because of that person’s merit but because God is a God of love; thus, the word has about it the sense of “grace” or “love”.

The word “mercy” is the Hebrew *racham*, which means “to love” or “to pity”. What is intriguing about this word is that it is built upon the Hebrew word *recham* or “womb”! That is, God’s mercy toward us is comparable to a mother’s love for her child, and our mercy toward each other is the love of one sibling for another because you both come from the same source (Ps. 103:13; Isa. 49:15; 63:15-16; Jer. 31:20).

When one considers the depth of meaning of these two Hebrew words translated into the English “gracious” and “mercy”, one realizes that the use of both words in tandem to one another is not presenting two distinctive characteristics of God – “graciousness” and “mercy”. Rather, the writer is using the Hebrew poetic device of parallel construction. “Yahweh said, ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy’” (33:19). God, in this passage, is emphasizing God’s primary characteristic by stating it twice, for the words “graciousness” and “mercy” are saying essentially the same thing!

God’s love for us is “from the womb”. We find favor with God because we are part of God’s covenantal community. It is God’s covenant which God has already established with God’s

chosen people at Mount Sinai (and, for Christians, at Calvary) that cause us to be embraced by God. And that embrace is lived out through our embrace of the world and humanity around us with the graciousness and mercy of God manifested through us, as we seek to work for the transformation of the world.

The Old Testament lesson for this 28th Sunday of Ordinary Time then ends with God's manifestation of his mercy by acceding to Moses' request to see God. So Yahweh says to Moses, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen" (vss. 21-23).

Thus, the stories of salvation history that began with Moses' meeting with God at the burning bush have come full circle with Moses seeing the back of God as the procession of God through his life comes to its denouement. Moses has confronted pharaoh, has won the freedom of the Hebrew people, has brought them through the Reed Sea, has withstood their abuse in the desert, has brought them back to Mount Sinai, has delivered to them the Ten Commandments, has punished them for spiritually returning to Egypt, and now has the distinct privilege of seeing God. The transition is now completed. Moses has finished his calling of bringing Israel out of Egypt. Now the new task has begun – of getting Egypt out of the Israelites as they begin their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness where their captive spirit will be exorcised and a new nation will be built.

At the conclusion of these events at Mount Sinai -- from golden calf to Ten Commandments to God's promise of graciousness and mercy – Israel set forth from Mount Sinai. They headed north toward the land earlier promised to them by God. They arrived at Kadesh-barnea, which is immediately south of Canaan. There, they made plans to invade Canaan. They sent out scouts who returned with reports of giant men and vast, fortified cities. True to form, the people panicked and refused to invade the land. Such a reaction, of course, continued to repudiate God and indicated the people's lack of trust in Him. In anger, Yahweh ordered Israel back into the desert, where they were to remain for forty years.

While camping in the Sinai Desert, the Israelites built the foundations for their national life. Using the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant as a base, they developed their initial agreements for worship of God and responsibility toward one another. Some of these initial agreements underlie portions of Exodus, Numbers and Leviticus and ultimately received final articulation in the book of Deuteronomy. The Hebrews spent the next twelve hundred years refining those codes and the Ten Commandments into the exact laws which now make up the Torah and the Israelite law-books. While in the desert, the Israelites also trained the army which would so effectively invade Canaan, and set up an early pre-monarchical form of government which avoided centralization and allowed substantial freedom to the original tribes. Finally, in the desert the initial rubrics and liturgy for the worship of Yahweh evolved, the tabernacle was created, and the symbols of the faith (the tablets of the Law, the Ark of the Covenant, etc.) first appeared. This period of exile, therefore, was not an unprofitable stay in the desert, for in the additional time given to them the Israelites solidified themselves as a people and as a religion.

Forty years later, by command of God, the Israelites again resumed their march. Rather than invade the southern borders of Canaan (as was their original plan of invasion), the Israelites decided to attack Canaan from the east by crossing the Jordan River. Their plan was to drive through the center of Canaan, cutting off the southern Canaanite cities from the north and thus destroying any attempts by the Canaanites to build a coalition. Unwilling to battle either the nations of Edom or Moab which bordered the Dead Sea on the south and east, the marching Israelites skirted them. In order to reach the Jordan River from the east, however, the Israelites had to invade the country of Sihon which lay between them and the Jordan. They easily defeated Sihon and marched to the Jordan River. There in sight of the Promised Land to which he had led his people, the greatest Israelite of them all died. Joshua, a young general, became Moses' hand-picked successor, ready to lead Israel into the land promised to them by Yahweh.

The nation of Israel, its formerly-enslaved generation replaced by a generation of desert-hardened survivors, stood poised on the banks of the Jordan River, ready to enter the Promised Land. Behind them lay the most extraordinary origin any nation had ever known. God had revealed his true identity to Israel. God had proven himself the Lord of nature and history through his defeat of Amon-Re. He had rescued Israel from almost certain annihilation at the Reed Sea; he had brought a nation into existence where there had been only frightened slaves. God had met with Israel on the sacred mountain and had covenanted with them. In his call to them to be a nation of priests, and his treaty with them detailing their responsibilities to God and to the world, God had developed the basis upon which humanity could be returned to him and to the existence for which they had been created. God's way of redemption for the world had now been made clear to humanity. One more act was yet needed; Yahweh had to aid Israel in securing a country in which they would dwell and in which they could develop "the kingdom of God". The conquest of Canaan still lay ahead!

Psalm 99 begins, "The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!"

Once again, justice, being in a right relationship with God and people, and the holiness of God are all integrated. The praise, worship and enjoyment of God is directly related to our acting justly, equitably sharing wealth and being in a right relationship with people. How the Church can ignore the justice dimension in what is clearly meant as a trilogy throughout scripture is hard to understand. But there is none so blind as those who will not see!

The poem, having laid out the trilogy of a right relationship with God and one another, acting justly toward all and respecting the holiness of God now moves from a concept to the actions of specific people. "Moses and Aaron were among his priests. Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them. He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them" (vss. 6-7). The Psalmist now returns to the specific incidents: God's meeting with Israel on Mount Sinai and giving them his Law, and their ignoring of that Law through their love of debauchery and greed. Therefore,

the problem with the ignoring of the justice and right relationship sides of God's call to humanity is not peculiar to the church. It was the frequent temptation and sometimes the outright actions of Israel!

What, then, was God to do in the face of such rebellion? "O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. Extol the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy" (vss. 8-9). God loves and God forgives. But God holds people accountable for their actions against each other and against God, as well. Thus, sin cannot be overlooked, but retribution must occur. And why? "Because the Lord our God is holy!"

I Thessalonians 1:1-10 constitutes the opening of the letter to the church in Thessalonica. Because it was a letter, it opened in the traditional style that included the appropriate greetings (1:1) and the traditional thanksgiving that an author gave to those whom he was addressing (1:2-10). But in this case, Paul puts an unusual twist on this standard form of beginning a letter. And he does so in two ways.

First, this letter to the Thessalonian Church is apparently the first letter Paul wrote to any of his churches. It is certainly the oldest extant piece of Christian writing both in the Bible and in the world! And it is in this earliest of all Christian writings that Jesus is called both "Lord" and "Christ" ("To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" 1:1b). We have come to accept as commonplace the title and name, "the Lord Jesus Christ". But this is the first time it is ever used in print. And the title is astounding. For in it, Jesus of Nazareth is being given the titles "Christ" and "Lord". The word "Christ", of course, was a Greek translation of the Hebrew word, *mashiah* or *messiah*, the "anointed one". This title was used for the successor to King David who would come to free Israel from its oppressors and build the new Davidic Empire.

Given the church's claims about Jesus, one would have expected Paul to affix this Jewish title to Jesus. But what no one would expect him to do would be to use the title of "Lord". The truly shocking title that Paul used of Jesus was "Lord" (*kyrios*). We tend to think of the title "Lord" as being used exclusively for God. But at the time that Paul first used it of Jesus, it wasn't used that way. The word *kyrios* was the Greek term used exclusively for the deified Roman emperor! It was not used of anyone else, even God! For Paul to call Jesus "*kyrios*" was for him to proclaim that Jesus was not only the king of the Jews, but the authentic emperor of the Roman Empire! There could be no more revolutionary statement than this – a politically revolutionary statement and a religious revolutionary statement, as well.

Second, the primary thrust of this passage is not to proclaim Jesus as the authentic Roman emperor, however. It is to congratulate the Thessalonian church for their amazing effectiveness in reaching out to the people of the city of Thessalonica with the gospel, both bringing many to Christ and the church, but also impacting the Thessalonian society. He describes the work that this church has done in intriguing words: "your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 3). "Faith, hope and love" is a triad used throughout the New Testament as descriptive of the Godly church (Rom. 5:2-5; I Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5,6; Col.

1:4-5; I Thess. 5:8; Heb. 6:10-12; 10:22-24; I Pet. 1:3-8, 21, 22). But Paul places an unusual twist on the use of his traditional triad in this scripture.

He states, “your *work* of faith and *labor* of love and *steadfastness* of hope”. That is, he notes that the Thessalonian Church’s faith is a faith in action, that their love is manifested in their work, and that their hope is steadfast in difficult circumstances. That is, these are not passive words, but extremely active. Their faith, hope and love are impacting the Thessalonian society in ways that are bringing about significant change. That society is being remade by the church’s faith, hope and love.

How, then, should a church call political, economic and religious systems to accountability? It is not by making official denominational pronouncements or by profound theological statements. Change occurs only with sleeves rolled up as the church is up to its arm-pits in the pain and struggle and issues of its time. Change is brought about by the church active in its society, engaged in its political and economic life, but engaged in it for Christ and for Christ’s kingdom. The church changes society by acting out of its faith, filled with an optimistic hope that the world will indeed become the kingdom of the Christ, and working for society’s transformation out of the deepest compassion and love for humankind!

But Paul makes two observances about the Thessalonian Church’s engagement in the public life of its city and province that is particularly important to note. He points out that they received the gospel and now carry out their calling “in spite of persecution” that “imitates” those who brought the gospel to them (vss. 6-7). That is, engaging the world for Christ and His Kingdom is not guaranteed either to be successful or to be positive. Society will not necessarily welcome with open arms the involvement of the church in its political, social or economic life. And the reason why is, if the church is being faithful to the gospel, the church will often be critical of society. The values of society are inevitably centered in structures building their own power, acting out of greed and seeking to dominate and control. The church, at its best, will inevitably march to a different drummer. If it authentically follows Christ, then it will operate out of standards of justice for all (but particularly the weakest and most vulnerable in that society), an equitable sharing of wealth and of prizing loving and trusting relationships (with God and others) over anything else. If the church presses that agenda, the systems, the powerful and even the marginalized will often feel themselves thwarted in their respective agendas, and thus they will oppose the church. As the Old Testament prophets accepted the reality that they would be both persecuted and prosecuted by “the powers that be” (Heb. 11), so must the Church when it is faithful to its task.

The second observance Paul makes about the church’s engagement in public life is that it must be expectant (vss. 8-10). The Thessalonian implementation of the gospel has not only impacted the city of Thessalonica, but throughout Greece and in fact the entire Hellenistic world. It was the message of how the Thessalonians had turned from “idol worship” (i.e., commitment to unilateral power, accumulation of wealth, domination of others) to the service of God. But it was the expectancy of the Thessalonian Church that has particularly impacted the world, for they are centered on “waiting for God’s Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (vs. 10).

That is, what Paul is stressing here is that the power of the Thessalonian Church's engagement in the public life of the Hellenistic world is their expectancy. They are expecting something to happen! They are expecting their work to bear results! They are expecting God to move through Christ because of their willingness to engage the world! It is easy, when the church seeks to impact the world, to approach that task either reluctantly or pessimistically. We can approach that mission with the sense, "It'll never work!" We can express the attitude, "Well, society really isn't going to change because of what we say or do. But we need to be faithful to that call. So we'll go ahead and do it anyway, knowing we'll be overwhelmed and defeated". But that very attitude brings death with it. What made the Thessalonian engagement of its city for Christ and His Kingdom so powerful was that they actually expected something to happen! They really felt they could make a difference!

So, first, Paul reminds the Thessalonian Church that the authentication of their faith in Christ is expressed through their action. It is the fact that they are seeking to engage their society to form it increasingly into a city of justice, equity, and relationality that is the true witness that their faith is authentically Christian. But the second point that Paul makes is that *how* they carry out that mission is every bit as important as *what* they do. And they carry out that mission both with a realism that accepts persecution as the result of forceful action but also with an expectancy that believes that God truly can work through them to contribute to the formation of the city of Thessalonica into a city of God!

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