

How Do You Spot a Christian?

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[0 : 00] Well, folks, maybe you want to grab your Bibles at this point and turn to Acts chapter 17. And as we mentioned this morning, we're starting a new series looking at the book of 1 Thessalonians.

Maybe, Johnny, you could chuck the PowerPoint on the screen. Acts 17. We went on holiday a few years ago with a company called Jet2. Has anyone ever flown with Jet2? Yeah?

Getting to that stage of life where it's all about the package holiday. Love about Jet2. So we went on holiday with Jet2. And at that time, I made the mistake of ticking the box that said, I would love to receive future notifications and emails.

Someone never fallen for that one before. Thank goodness for GDPR. I'll tell you that. So there we are. So I'm hearing from Jet2 all throughout the last couple of years. And I find out last summer that Jet2 have now got a flight route from Edinburgh to this city in Greece called Thessalonica.

Now, why should I go there on my holidays, you're asking? Well, let me, this is what they say on their website. If you haven't got summer plans, Thessalonica, okay, this is what they write. Greece's second biggest city is a cultural treasure trove of ancient delights and modern entertainment.

[1 : 13] You can see shimmering Macedonian gold and Byzantine works in world-famous museums. Immerse yourself in the atmosphere at historic districts dotted with inventive restaurants and arty cafes.

Fancy that one? No? Thessalonica? Well, tonight we're going to meet some people who travelled to Thessalonica. Paul, Silas and Timothy travelled to this city roughly 50 AD.

Thessalonica back then was a very different place to what it is today. Very different place. In the context of Acts, with your Bibles open there, chapter 17, we're on Paul's second missionary journey.

God's spirit, remember the driving force behind the proclamation of the risen Jesus to the world. The spirit has taken Paul and his companions into Europe.

And praise God that that was true at that point, because we wouldn't be here if it wasn't. Firstly, they go to Philippi. And having spent some time there and having seen God do some incredible things through the gospel message as it was proclaimed from the lips of Paul and his companions, they've left Philippi and they've made the 100 mile trip south.

[2 : 25] And you'll see it there along the Ignatian Way, which is the superhighway connecting the east to the west. And they've arrived at this city called Thessalonica. Now, three things to know about this city in 50 AD.

In fact, four things to know about this city in 50 AD. Here's the first thing. It's a large city. Paul's day, you're looking at well over 100,000 people. In fact, if you read some commentators, they'll tell you, some historians, they'll tell you that it was maybe even closer to 200,000 in this city in 50 AD.

Now, that's a lot of people. A lot of people. Put that into context. Dundee has a population of 130,000 people. So this is no backwater village that Paul and his companions have hit.

It's a major city, a large city. And the reason that it's going to be a large city is because it's an affluent city. We see it there on the map. It's a city that sits on the coastline of the Aegean Sea on an important trading route.

So people all around the region are coming to Thessalonica to do business because there's money and there's fame to be made in Thessalonica. Because of that influx of people.

[3 : 34] Thirdly, it's a diverse city. Many different people from many different places, each bringing with them many different cultures, many different ideas, many different philosophies.

It's a diverse city. And lastly, it's a religious city. A mixture of Greco-Roman religions. A mixture of people who are loyal to Rome, everything of Rome and to Caesar.

And in this city, you've got a sizable Jewish population. Big enough that it justifies having a synagogue in this city. And of course, that's when, sorry, that's where Paul and his traveling companions head straight forward when they get to this city.

That's Thessalonica in a nutshell. 50 AD. Large, affluent, diverse, religious. And God births a church in this city.

Through Paul's preaching of the gospel of the risen Jesus, God births a church as this message takes root in the hearts of men and women as people are saved.

[4 : 42] Now that gives me at this point, I don't know about you, but it gives us great confidence as we think about our city. That even when we think we're up against it, even when it's so hard that we think God couldn't do that, yes he could.

God births a church in this city. So if you've got your Bibles there, let's turn to Acts 17 and let's see what happened when the gospel hit Thessalonica.

And as we read it through, and Brenna's going to come in just a minute and read it to us, I want you to look for the two different reactions that we see to Paul's message. Two different reactions that we see all the way through.

And I'll invite Brenna up at this point to read it to us. Acts 17. Well folks, if you have your Bibles there, then let's continue the story.

Let's read 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and the first 10 verses. Maybe you want to turn there just now. Glorious message of Acts 17.

[5 : 38] The gospel has hit Thessalonica. And through his word, despite great opposition, did you notice it, God has birthed this church. And Paul, having been forced to leave this city after only such a short time, wonder you've got that in Acts 17 as well, something between two to four weeks.

He's desperate to hear, desperate to hear that these Christians are still standing. So desperate, in fact, that he sent Timothy, his traveling companion, back to them to find out how they're getting on.

And Timothy's returned to Paul, who's most likely at this point in the story in Corinth. And he's brought with him encouraging news about these Thessalonian Christians that although there are a few issues, that although it is hard, that these guys are still going strong.

And that news has thrilled Paul's heart. And he pens this affectionate letter back to his beloved Thessalonians. And we pick it up from verse one of chapter one.

Here's the heart of Pastor Paul, as I've got to know him this week. Here's where he writes. Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace and peace to you.

[6 : 58] We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath.

[8 : 27] Amen. And we trust that God would bless the reading of his word to us this evening. Well, I wonder if you were like me when you were young. Did you read these books? Remember these books?

Where's Wally? I used to love these books when I was young. Here's a question for you really simply. How did you spot Wally? How did you spot him? The first hat.

Okay. Anything else? Come on. His glasses, okay. I'm looking for an answer here. What else was he wearing? The stripy top to put out your misery.

Here he is. Okay. He was the one wearing the red and white stripy top. That's how you spotted Wally. Now here's my question for you this evening and this is going to be the question we're going to try and answer this evening in the next 20, 25 minutes or so.

How do you spot a Christian? How do you spot one? Park the question and we're going to move through and see if we can answer it by the end of tonight.

[9 : 25] How do you spot a Christian? Because here's how this works out in my everyday life. This is my walk to the office every morning. I walk George Street, Princess Street, Royal Mile, Meadows, Brunsfield.

That's my walk every morning and I see hundreds of people on that walk and I can spot the workers and I can spot the students and I can spot the football fans and I can spot the mums, I can spot the dads, I can spot the Jehovah's Witnesses and I can spot the Mormons.

I was really up for a chat this week and I went towards two groups of Mormons walking through the Meadows and they both beelined me. I couldn't believe it. Really up for a talk. I can spot all those kinds of groups of people on my walk to work each morning.

Here's the question. How do you spot the Christians? How do you spot a Christian? These verses are going to help us answer this question. You'll spot a question not by what they're wearing.

You'll spot a Christian by how they're living. I love Luke's account in Acts of what happened when the gospel hit Thessalonica. What happened there?

[10 : 31] I wonder if you've noticed that the two reactions as the gospel hit. It's kind of the same reaction as you see all the way through the book of Acts, is it not? And it's kind of the same reaction that you see today when you tell people about Jesus.

Revival or riot? Yeah? Revival or riot? Or as Rico Tice puts it in his book Honest Evangelism, hunger or hostility? It's the same thing.

Hunger or hostility. That's the pattern. Here is a church that's been birthed in a pressure cooker. I think it's fair to say that. They didn't get eased into Christian life, did they?

It wasn't like they got a honeymoon period. They are straight in and they are straight up against it. Now, try and get into their shoes at this point in the story. Paul's only been there for what?

Between two to four weeks? Three Sabbath days? That's a short amount of time. You think how quickly three weeks goes in your life. Would it not be such an easy thing to do for these jealous Jews to come along to these new Thessalonian Christians and begin to attack Paul and his message?

[11 : 37] Can you really trust what Paul said? Is Jesus really the Messiah? Have you got it wrong? Would it not be the easiest thing for these Thessalonian Christians to think in their mind? Have we been duped? Have we got it all? Do we understand it? No one likes being conned, do they?

Nobody likes being conned. I think about it all the time when I find out that somebody's paying less a month on their mobile phone contract than me. Nobody likes finding out that they've been conned. It'd be the easiest thing in the world for these new believers to ask themselves, are we really Christians?

To doubt it in their minds. Have we really got it? Well, this letter, Paul writes from his heart to let them know that from what he knows about them, from what he's heard about them, he writes this letter with great words of assurance as if to say, I look at you guys and I spot Christians.

As we'll journey through these verses, we'll come on to see that Paul looks at them and there's three things that he sees, three marks of a real deal Christian. And verse four, I think, is the key for us to understand what's going on here.

[12 : 53] What does Paul say as he thinks about these people? I think you might be Christians. I'm pretty confident of it. No, he says, we know. Get a certainty in his language there.

We know. Know what? That God chose you. That you were, spiritually speaking, in the dark. You were separated from the God who made you.

You had no interest in him. You preferred the darkness. And God, moved by nothing other than his sheer grace and love. Moved into your life by his spirit.

He reached into your hearts and if you like, he flicked on the light. He turned on the light. And in that moment, he took you in the palm of his hand and he declared over you, you are mine.

Isn't it how often we think that being a Christian is a small thing? Here is Paul saying to these Christians, it is a big thing that the Lord has done in your life. He chose you.

[13 : 53] He chose you. How do you know that, Paul? How do you know that? Well, two reasons, verse six. Here's the first one. You welcomed. You welcomed the message.

So in that moment when you heard the message about what God had done for you in sending his son to die for your sin and the son whom he raised to life to demonstrate to the world that he is my king, this Jesus who will return as we heard this morning to judge the world.

When you heard this message, it didn't just make sense to you. It became wonderful to you. It hit you. Get the language of what he's writing here. It hit you with what?

Deep conviction. Deep conviction. As if to say through the power of the Holy Spirit working in you, you knew deep down in your gut all of you you knew it was true.

What the scriptures say about God, what the scriptures say about the world, what the scriptures say about you. You knew it was true. Isn't that? I was reflecting on it this week.

[14 : 57] Remember the gospel made sense to me for the first time. It's true. It's just true. Deep conviction. And these guys did it.

And I find this so encouraging. They did it even when it didn't make sense to do it. Because when they put their hands up and declared to the world that Jesus is my king, it cost them big time.

Not just a few raised eyebrows. What does he say? Severe suffering. Severe suffering. I mean, think back to the character Jason that we met in Acts 17. Did you get him?

Jason. People banging on his door. People dragging him out to face trial. Why would you keep on going? There is no other explanation for that other than the work of God in your life helping you to understand that in Jesus Christ you have something that's worth standing for and something that's far greater than any fleeting pleasure of the world that you used to chase after.

That's what we were singing at the start, wasn't it? Lord, there's none like you. There is none like you. There's a Christian man called Augustine. Prominent in the church in the third century and in his previous life by his own admission he was anti-God.

[16 : 18] Anti-God. Didn't want to hear about it. In fact, reveled in his sin. Shoved it in God's face. Loathed the very mention of God's name. He was, as he writes about himself, he was a pleasure seeker.

And here is what he writes in his little book called The Confessions which if you haven't read it can I encourage you to do it? Really just his spiritual autobiography of what happened when he became a Christian. Here's what he writes and here is this language.

This is what the gospel felt to him like when he first heard it. How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I once feared to lose.

And here's his prayer. You drove them from me, Lord. You who are the true and the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and get this and you took their place.

Oh Lord my God, my light, my wealth and my salvation. So what Augustine is saying there that in God he found a greater joy.

[17 : 22] A far superior joy than anything that he was previously basing his life upon and chasing. That's what's been true about these Thessalonian believers. This message of the risen Jesus it became to them life and they welcomed the message.

You welcomed, secondly you became. Became what? Imitators. You see that word in the passage here? Imitators. Greek word, mimitai. Now you see that's where we get our English word mimic from.

So you saw something and you copied something. Now my colleagues here at the church and I'm not going to look at them at this point. They'll tell you that one of my most annoying traits is that when I get excited about something I do the clap and rub.

Does anyone else do the clap and rub when they get excited? Do you know where I learnt that from? I learnt it from my dad. Okay? And my brother does exactly the same thing. In fact it's a sight when we get together at Christmas time and we go to watch a football game and see when our team is looking like it's doing well the three of us sitting next to each other.

It's a sight to behold. But I learnt it from my dad. I mimicked my dad. That's what Paul is saying here about these Christians. They began to mimic their family.

[18 : 42] They began to copy the family traits. They started copying Paul. And Paul is saying here that's incredible because do you know where we learnt it from? Do you know who we're trying to copy?

The Lord Jesus Christ. This is who we are living for. This is who we are copying. Together we are heading for him. Friends, is it not a beautiful little example right here?

And we'll think more about this next week so I'm conscious of not stepping on toes for next week. Is it not a lovely biblical example of what discipleship looks like? Seeing and copying.

Seeing and copying. Just as a little side, we'll come into the lay-by here. A little side from my heart at the minute. I wonder if you're so encouraged when you look around this church at the minute, this church family and we see so many young people.

So many young people. What a privilege it is to be able to have so many kids as part of this church family. But with that privilege, does it not come an incredible responsibility to take seriously modelling the Christian life to these young minds?

[19 : 50] Saying, do you know what? Do you want to see what the Christian life looks like? Do you want to see what pursuing righteousness looks like? Do you want to see what it looks like to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?

Do you want to see what a life lived in love and in service of the Lord Jesus looks like? Then look to us. Look to me. Copy me. I think about, I just think about my little girls growing up in the world, the world that they're growing up in.

And the truth is, if we're not discipling these children, the world will be discipling these children. What an incredible responsibility we have to these young minds to say, do you want to see what real authentic Christian faith looks like?

Watch us as we model it. Watch us as we model it. Sharing word and heart, sharing gospel and life, being disciples that seek to make disciples, passing this on, mimicking the Lord Jesus Christ, seeking to imitate those who are also running this race of faith.

Because Paul looks at these Thessalonians, he looks at the way they welcome, he looks at the way they imitate, and look what he writes at verse 7. This is incredible. Other people in the surrounding regions, people that they've never met, people that they never will meet, they've heard about them.

[21 : 12] Is that not encouraging? How encouraging must that have been for these Thessalonians to hear? So presumably Paul, as he continues to travel around speaking to others about Jesus, he hears that people have heard about what God has done in the lives of these Thessalonian Christians.

He's heard about it. The Lord's message has rang out. See the language he's using? Through you, the bell was sounded. God shouted his message loud and creel and people heard.

God has used you and through you he's used it to spread the gospel message and encourage people around the world to live for him. Now I find that an incredible thought.

I find it incredible hearing how God is at work in Barcelona through people that I will never meet. To have an example of this in my life this week, I came to our Wednesday night prayer meetings.

I love our Wednesday night prayer meetings. Love them. Becky was telling us a bit about Sudan, the country of Sudan and particularly how we can pray for that country and pray for the Christians there.

[22 : 18] And Becky told us that in Sudan the government there are seeking to create a country with one culture, one language, one religion and it's not Christianity. So for anybody who wants to convert from Islam to Christianity, the death penalty is a serious possibility for you.

And I heard that and I thought, wow, wonder if anybody's becoming a Christian. But despite that threat, people are still becoming Christians in Sudan.

Isn't it encouraging to hear that they have weighed up the cost of following Jesus and it's worth it. God has been at work in the lives of those people there.

People that I will never meet in this life. But people who I think it will be a joy to say to when I meet them in glory, all of God's people worshipping are three in one God together. I'll be able to say to them, see the way that you welcomed that message.

See the way that you imitated Jesus Christ in such severe suffering. I heard about it around the other side of the globe and let me tell you what encouragement it was to hear about your faith.

[23 : 28] Friends, how do you spot a Christian? Look at what the people in Macedonia and Achaia are saying about these Thessalonian Christians at the second half of verse 9 and verse 10 and here's where we come to our three marks of the real deal Christian.

What is it people are saying about them? Here's the first thing that they've turned. They've turned. They were heading one way and now because God has so graciously acted to transform them, now they're heading another way.

From what? Idols. Maybe physical idols. The false gods of the culture that people up and down that land, up and down their city are bowing to. Maybe just the values and dreams of the world that they chase along with everyone else.

Money, comfort, sex, power, fame. Tim Keller in his book Counterfeit Gods, another one of you looking for a summer read to kind of recommend that one.

He defines an idol like this. What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God and anything you seek to give, anything you seek to give you what only God alone can give.

[24 : 45] Well, these Thessalonians, they used to live for these things, but they've turned and now they're living for what? The living and true God.

Living and true God. Paul said, you've turned to worship and serve what? The substance, the reality, the giver of life, the God who speaks and lives and acts in this world and the God who acts to save, to forgive, to restore, to give life by His Spirit to His people through the message about His Son.

That's the God who you serve now. The living God. It's a wonder if you're here tonight and you're still living for idols, longing for the things of the world that you think will give you purpose in life.

The things that will be here one day and they will be gone tomorrow. Well, God beckons you in His Word tonight to come to Him. To come to Him, the living and the true God.

The one who is eternally the same yesterday, today and forever. To come to Him and to have life in His name. To become a worshiper of this living and true God.

[26 : 06] The reason that you were made in the first place. These Thessalonians are known for their turning. Secondly, they are known for their serving. Not themselves.

but the living and true God. Because they've got hearts that have been grasped by God's grace, they now serve Him. It is not a duty, it's a delight.

His purposes are their purposes. Their money is His money. His mission is their mission. Their possessions are His possessions. And together, they have become the people of the living God.

and these Christians have become known for their loving service. And not just how they serve, but who they serve.

Let me ask you this evening, think about the people that you work with. Think about the people that you rub shoulders with every day. Family, friends, people that live in your stairwell. If we were to ask them tonight as they look into our lives, we had to ask them, who do you think that they serve?

[27 : 17] I wonder what they would say. Friends, to quote Bob Dylan, you're going to have to serve somebody. I was almost singing it there, I'm not going to sing it.

Indeed, you're going to have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're going to have to serve somebody. What do people, as they look into our lives, who is it that they see that we serve?

See, the watching world was in no doubt as to who these Thessalonian Christians serve. No doubt whatsoever. The question is, who do people think that we serve?

Remember when I used to work in law, I had a good friend, Christian friend who I worked with, we were at the same firm for a couple of years. And I moved on from that company, went to work down in Bristol for a while. We moved back a couple of years later and I met him in the street when I was out and about in Edinburgh when I first moved back.

I said, mate, great to see you. And you can imagine the first question I asked him, you still at that firm? You still at that firm? And he said, no, I've moved on from that firm, I've got another job.

[28 : 22] I said, why did you leave your job? And he said to me, I had to move on because it got to the point that the hours they were asking me to work, they were just getting in the way. I said, what do you mean?

And he said, well, in the midst of other things, the hours they were asking me to work, do you know what? It was stopping me ever going to the prayer meeting. That's what he said.

It was stopping me ever going to the prayer meeting. And the application of that is not give up your job. The application of that is to look at somebody and know who they serve.

I was in no doubt as to who that brother of mine served when I heard him say that. Friends, do people know who we serve? These Thessalonians are known for their serving of the living and true God.

Second mark, they serve. Third mark, they wait. For who? Jesus. The son of the living God to return. The same Jesus, do you see in the verses there?

[29 : 24] That God raised from the dead? Says Paul is at the underscore the certainty of his return. That is now the event that should shape your life. That is now the moment that should be fixed on your horizons.

And they longingly wait for Jesus to return. In fact, as we're going to journey through this letter together over the summer, that we'll see that waiting for Jesus to come back is such a prominent theme in this letter.

And Paul wants them to be in no doubt that it's going to happen. Because he realizes, and it's true in the Christian life, isn't it? To be focused and to be certain on that day finds it affects our every day.

And waiting while is not a matter of resting nor is it a matter of hesitating. It's a matter of anticipating. Waiting is not a matter of twiddling your thumbs, wondering whether it's going to happen.

Waiting is not a matter of crossing your fingers, hoping that it might one day happen. Waiting is a matter of lifting our hands in worship and using our hands in service, knowing the truth and living in the truth that one day is going to happen.

[30 : 28] Jesus will return. And what will he do? When he comes, he will deliver us from the wrath to come. He will save us from God's righteous judgment of all things.

It's amazing there in the English. We don't quite get the sense of the full justice of the Greek word there. Jesus, literally the one delivering us from the wrath to come.

As if to say, not only will he deliver us that day, but even now, in some small measures we were saying earlier, as God transforms us by his spirit more into the image of Christ, even now, friends, we're being delivered for the things that used to dominate our lives.

And one day God will judge. Even now, God is, through Jesus, delivering us. And until he does, friends, we would devote ourselves to his service to be met one day with those words, well done, good and faithful servant.

You waited well. Somebody once asked John Wesley what you would be doing today if he knew that Jesus would be returning tomorrow. And he looked at his diary, he looked at what he had on today and he said, I would be doing just that.

[31 : 41] Just that. Friends, do we model that same kind of readiness? These Thessalonians are known for their waiting. What does Paul see in them?

Verse 3, his famous triad that you see all the way through his letters, faith, love, and hope. What do people know about them? That they've turned, that they serve, that they wait.

Of course, the two sets of three are intrinsically linked, aren't they? Faith, how is that faith manifesting itself? How has it manifested itself? In their turning. Love, how is that love manifesting itself for the Lord, for their fellow brothers and sisters, for the people of the world in their serving?

And hope, remember, not clutching at straws, hope based on the facts about God. How is that hope manifesting itself? In their waiting.

Turn, serve, wait. Turn, serve, wait. Turn, serve, wait. Friends, as we close, how do you spot a Christian?

[32 : 49] Not by what they're wearing, but by how they're living. Three marks of a real dull Christian. Someone who's turned. Someone who serves.

Someone who weighs. Acts 17. These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here and Jason has welcomed them into his house.

They're all defying Caesar's decrees saying that there is another king, one called Jesus. And I was thinking in my head just as we close, I was thinking in my head when this first, when this group of Christians, when they first met together, can you imagine that meeting?

Can you imagine that meeting the first time they got together? Looking at each other, thinking, why are we here? Why are we here? Oh, I know why we were here. What's the first song we're going to sing? What's the first hymn that we're going to sing in this very first meeting of this church in Thessalonica?

Jesus is Lord. Yet from his throne eternal, in flesh he came to die in pain on Calvary's tree. Jesus is Lord. From him all life proceeding, yet gave his life a ransom, thus setting us free.

[33 : 57] Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord. Praise him with hallelujahs for Jesus is Lord. Mears.

The First