

Well-Integrated Faith

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Faith; Works; Life / 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A well-integrated life—What would that be? Let’s suggest that it would be a life in which all different aspects of one’s being are in harmony, working together. Let’s say family, work or school, leisure activities, friendships, beliefs, and values.

Stan “The Man” Musial. For baseball fans, the name is synonymous with world-class performance. Twenty-two years with the St. Louis Cardinals, widely considered one of baseball’s all-time great hitters with over 3,600 hits and 475 home runs. Three MVP awards, 24 consecutive All-Star selection. Known around baseball as “Stan the Man.”

But in addition to being a baseball hero—an icon on the diamond—Stan also became well-known for who he was off the diamond: humanitarian, fan favorite, known throughout St. Louis as the man who would sign autographs during dinner at a local restaurant. The man who would play, “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” on his harmonica. The man who would show tricks children. The man who would tell simple jokes with a wink and a smile. The man you’d never hear of speaking an off-color word or a disrespectful comment. He was the professional’s professional, through and through. The man who many, many years ago had captured the admiration and respect of athletes, politicians, and world leaders. *Captured* their respect. He didn’t “earn” their respect, as if he walked out of his house each day eager to prove something or to gain something from others. He *captured* their respect, simply by being who he was, baseball’s perfect knight.

When Stan died in January 2013 at the age of 92, thousands of people lined the St. Louis streets to show their respects to this gentle giant and folk hero as his

casket passed by. They paid homage to this man who integrated world-class athleticism and humble graciousness with immeasurable class. And as those onlookers lining the streets considered the moment passing before their eyes, the indelible impression of this well-integrated persona left many speechless.

Especially for us as Christians, Paul teaches us in our text, something like this is to be greatly desired!

A Well-Integrated Faith with Life is such a gift of God!...

That it can preach a sermon loud and clear to those around us, maybe even one that leaves them speechless.

A number of classic distinctions have become true hallmarks of our Lutheran heritage: Law and Gospel. Faith and Works. Justification and sanctification. What God has done for us through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ and what we do in response to God's action and by the power of the Holy Spirit to love God and serve each other. To be sure, these are significant, vital to our core identity as Christians and as Lutherans.

But while it's important to keep these distinctions clear in our minds and hearts, it's also important to embody the integrated tension that exists between them. What I mean is that when it comes to my life—life in these shoes—while I need to *understand* and *believe* the distinction between faith and works, sometimes the dividing line between *what is faith* and *what is works* is much more difficult to define clearly. Or, to put this more positively, sometimes the Holy Spirit integrates faith and life in our shoes with such beauty, such harmony, such clarity, that when you think about it for a few moments and see it in action, it leaves you absolutely speechless.

Such is the case with our Epistle this morning from 1 Thessalonians. The Apostle Paul begins this letter with a great statement of thanksgiving—a thanksgiving that depicts this beautiful, harmonious integration:

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2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice the integration Paul sees: of work initiated by faith, of labor sparked by love, of endurance brought to life by hope in our Savior, Jesus. Again, it's important to note the distinction between these categories. Paul celebrates these three attributes—work, labor, and steadfastness—but also notes that these attributes are grounded somewhere—in faith, in love, in hope, and ultimately in our identity as people who are loved and chosen by God. In other words, our identity as baptized children of God not only provides each of us with the forgiveness of our sins, with the Holy Spirit, with the promise and assurance of our eternal adoption as God's Children, but it also provides the fuel for the Holy Spirit to do some amazing things in our lives: to spark specific actions that stem from our faith. And as Paul sees these actions—these works of faith, these labors of love, this endurance brought to life by hope in Jesus—he is absolutely speechless. He is overwhelmed with thanksgiving.

Throughout this text, Paul continues to pour out his prayer of thanksgiving, for these Thessalonians are living out their faith in all kinds of ways. They are demonstrating what it means to serve the true and living God. Paul talks about how these Christians imitated him and other Church leaders, even imitated God, and even through severe suffering.

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you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

Even in suffering, they welcomed the Gospel with the joy of the Holy Spirit! Paul says they had become models of faith for other believers nearby and faraway, so much so that news about their well-integrated faith had been spreading like wildfire:

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7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.
8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

You get the sense that Paul is reflecting on the well-integrated faith of these Thessalonian Christians, he is absolutely speechless: "We need not say anything."

For Paul has witnessed how the Holy Spirit has worked in the hearts of these men, women, and children - who had once worshipped idols-and had called them to faith, enlightened them, equipped them, and given them everything they needed to be well-integrated Christians. Paul's heart erupts with thanksgiving at the thought.

I'd like to take a few moments this morning and ask you to do some self-reflection on these verses, to take a little inventory of your ponder the following questions:

- How is your faith?
- How well-integrated is your faith in Jesus Christ with your day-to-day life?
- Are these two distinct areas **so** distinct from each other that they've become disconnected?
- Are there specific areas in your life where there are gaps between your faith and your life?
- In your relationships?
- In your personal decisions?
- In your private time?
- Who are you imitating?
- Are there other Christians you're spending time with for the specific purpose of growing in your faith - of applying the lessons of faith they've learned in their life (whether in person or virtually?)
- How do you respond when things get challenging (Covid times)?
- How do you respond when your life isn't the way you wanted it to be? (whose life is right now?)
- How do you respond when your life isn't the way that God wants it to be?
- How do you respond when temptations or faults or failures or fears or dysfunctions grab hold of you?

- How do you respond when you aren't the model of faith that others will follow and talk about?
- How do you respond when your faith in God fails to turn into faithfulness to God?

As we reflect on these verses and these questions, all of us know where we stand. We are sinners in need of a Savior. We have failed God in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We have not loved God with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not demonstrated this well-integrated, mature faith throughout every aspect of our lives.

But this is the precise point at which Jesus meets us. He meets us with his perfect life—where life and faith are perfectly integrated and woven together. He meets us with his innocent death. He meets us with his blood, shed on the cross. He meets us with his powerful, victorious resurrection. He meets us in the waters of Baptism! He meets us in the Body and Blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion. And as he meets us, he exchanges his perfectly integrated faith with our imperfection. He brings his forgiveness, his faith, his love, and his endurance into our lives. And he places us in a position to serve a living and true God with a well-integrated, faith-and-life-working-together-to-serve-God kind of faith. And when this happens—when the Holy Spirit integrates faith and life in our shoes with such beauty, such harmony, such clarity—when you stop to think about it for a few moments and see it in action, it leaves you absolutely speechless.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.