

Churches Nearer Heaven Thessalonica—Building a Godly Reputation

Intro: Does it matter to you what people think when they hear your name? Of course it does!

A good name is to be more desired than great riches, favor is better than silver and gold. (Proverbs 22:1)

In the same way, it surely matters to us what people think when they hear the name “Perry Heights church of Christ”.

If it is important to build a godly reputation as an individual, it is equally important to build a godly reputation as a church. And it is sad to read the words of Jesus to the church at Sardis in Rev. 3:

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. (Revelation 3:1)

Imagine what it would be like to have the Lord say, “Your reputation for spiritual life is false!

However, there was a church in the NT that can teach us about the importance and the way to building a godly reputation—the church at Thessalonica.

The Establishment of the church in Thessalonica

Luke reports how the church at Thessalonica was established by Paul and Silas on the second missionary journey.

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. (Acts 17:1-4)

The Opposition to the church in Thessalonica

However, this great beginning was to be met with strong opposition by the unbelieving Jewish community.

But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. (Acts 17:5-9)

The historical background helps us a lot here:

There had already been riots in Rome due to Jewish opposition to Jesus Christ in Rome. Roman historian Suetonius in his “Lives of the Twelve Caesars” reports that Claudius had ordered the Jews out of the city to remedy the problem: *Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome. (Suetonius, Lives of the Twelve Caesars, Claudius: 25.4)* (Luke also mentions this event in Ac. 18:1.)

Though not a Roman colony, it appears the worship of deceased emperors as gods in temples was common and the city of Thessalonica was benefiting from Roman assistance. So the city officials in Thessalonica would have been quite sensitive to disruption of the peace by conflicts involving the Jews and the questioning of the lordship of the Caesar.

As a result Paul was forced to leave the city, leaving behind this newly formed band of disciples. We could imagine that the hostility would not let up for those left behind after his departure; but that the Jews would continue to find ways to pressure these new Christians to give up their new faith.

The weeks and months that followed were a time of great concern for Paul. Would these new disciples stand the test of persecution? Would their faith endure? Later Paul would get the facts directly from Silas and Timothy who would report to him about their condition. Not only had the church at Thessalonica continued to be faithful, it had already gained a reputation that extended far beyond its borders.

The Reputation of the church at Thessalonica

Paul describes this godly reputation in this way:

...in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:8-10)

Unlike Sardis, who had a name but was dead, the Thessalonian church had developed in a relatively short time a real reputation for spiritual vitality and godliness. That reputation had reached to both the cities of Macedonia and Achaia. But in addition, Paul even goes so far as to say “in every place” (where he had visited?) there were those who already had heard about the Thessalonians’ faith. Paul didn’t have to tell them about it; they were telling Paul about it! What a joy that must have been to Paul to know that the godly reputation of Thessalonica was reaching people many miles away. But we must also ask:

How Was That Godly Reputation Achieved?

Not by slick marketing campaigns, PR stunts, and congregational “horn tooting”.

Today churches often resort to such things as a way of getting the attention of the media and the community.

However, contrived reputations are deceptive and vain. Somehow the church at Sardis had convinced others that there was real spiritual life and vitality in them; but Jesus knew the truth and could see that their “deeds” did not match their “name”. This is a sad commentary on any church; but an important insight into how real reputation is created. Godly reputation is not achieved by words (not by smoke and mirrors) but by real deeds. In Paul’s letter we can see the “deeds” by which the church gained a godly reputation.

By experiencing real life-changing repentance

For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9)

The Thessalonians had made a real and dramatic change, abandoning the worship of idols for the true God.

By cultivating real godly character

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

The Thessalonians were demonstrating that their repentance resulted in godly spiritual character, showing in their lives the evidence of faith, hope, and love.

By faithfully enduring real tribulation

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

Ironically, the Thessalonians’ reputation was regarded quite differently among the unbelievers of Thessalonica. They were forced endure persecution for their decision at hands of those who did not appreciate their new life; yet they faithfully endured this affliction.

By engaging in real gospel proclamation

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. (1 Thessalonians 1:8)

In spite of difficulties, the church wanted others to hear the “good news” that they had received and they were eagerly seeking ways to share it in other places.

By these things the Thessalonians were gaining a godly reputation among those who respected God, while at the same time enduring the disdain of those who did not respect Him. They are a great example for us!

Conclusion: What image comes to mind when people hear the expression “Perry Heights church of Christ”. What kind of reputation have we cultivated? If the name of Perry Heights brings disdain and disgust to those who are hardened in the practice of sin, then so be it; but let us do everything in our power to assure a real godly reputation among those who fear God. Let’s all do our part to practice the “deeds” that result in a godly reputation. If so, we’ll be...a church nearer heaven.