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RENEGADES 1 Thessalonians

Recently Jeep aired some commercials on television for the Renegade, their small SUV, which featured a really catchy tune. They picked the particular tune not only because it sticks in your head, but also because it was called *Renegades*. It's by a group known as the X Ambassadors. I mention this because I think that song could, at least in part, be our song.

I called our study of 1 Thessalonians "Alien Race," because the people this letter was written to became aliens, foreigners, in their own culture. As they followed Jesus they became so markedly different than their friends, family members and their own community that they were ostracized, discriminated against and even abused by some of them. People tend to be suspicious of and hostile toward anything different. Humans often resemble the body's immune system. It recognizes things that aren't part of the system and attacks them, trying to eliminate them. So when the Thessalonians no longer resembled the local system they were attacked.

The song *Renegades* goes, "Long live the pioneers, rebels and mutineers. Go forth and have no fear, come close and lend an ear. And I say hey, hey, hey, hey, living like we're renegades." That could have been the theme song for the Thessalonians. They were renegades, pioneers, rebels who didn't live by the system. They didn't fight the system of their culture. They just refused to be pressured into its mold. That song should also fit us today. Romans 12:2 commands believers in Jesus to "not conform to the pattern of this world." It tells us to have no fear, to be renegades, pioneers who reject the status quo and launch out into the unknown. We should be noticeably different, not fitting the pattern of our world. Sadly, it has been common for Christians historically to pick the wrong ways to be different. They have often focused on trivia, tried to be different in some unimportant external forms, while being much the same as the world around them in heart. Though the world of the Thessalonians was radically different than ours people are much the same no matter what era or what place. Today I want us to see in what ways the Thessalonian Christians were renegades, and then follow their model. In 1:7 Paul said they were a model for all believers, so let's learn from them.

THEY DID NOT WORSHIP THEIR CULTURE'S IDOLS

In 1:9 Paul said they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." In their culture everyone worshiped idols. Their culture was not much different

than the one Paul encountered in Athens. Acts 17:16 tells us that while he was there he “was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” In Acts 17:22-23 Paul said to the wise men of Athens, “I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To An Unknown God.”

In that culture worshiping idols was as common as watching television today. Rare indeed was the person who did not worship idols. There is a significant difference though between our watching television and their idol worship. In their culture not only was idolatry accepted, it was promoted. It was seen as a good thing that everyone ought to do. If you didn’t worship idols not only were you different, you were viewed in a negative light.

Being a renegade is always going to be difficult. You’re going against the flow. There’s another car commercial on television in which a young man is sitting in his father’s study and it is clear they are having a confrontation. The son tells the father he has always been different, and the father responds, “But not this different.” The son says, “Be honest, Dad, haven’t you ever wanted to try...” His dad cuts him off and says, “That’s enough.” He doesn’t want to hear about his son’s betrayal of the family’s ways and values. In the ad scenario the big point of contention is the son has chosen to drive an Audi rather than the BMW that has always been the family’s tradition. That’s pretty silly, but it smacks of a scenario that it is not hard to envision where a member of the family departs from a cherished tradition or value and it creates conflicted or even broken relationships. That’s exactly what happened to the Thessalonians. They rejected the traditions of their culture to put their faith in Jesus.

There was a big cost that went with their decision. This is depicted in 1:6, which says, “you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” Their faith caused them to have opponents. Their decision had financial implications. Some lost jobs, were cut out of family businesses, or found that their business was boycotted by neighbors and former friends. They lost friendships and may have even had family members reject them. They were ostracized in their community. In some cases they were physically threatened or abused. But they stood firm and served the living God instead of doing the expedient thing, going along to maintain the status quo.

There are places in our world where it is common to worship idols, but not so much here. We think there is no cost with not being an idol worshiper in America so we might easily think this aspect of the renegade life doesn’t really apply to us.

At least we could think that as long as we didn't notice Colossians 3:5. It says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." That verse claims that greed is worship of an idol! The exact same message is found in Ephesians 5:5 where Paul says that a greedy person is an idolater.

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible says, "In the New Testament idolatry was extended to mean obsession with anything to the degree that it took the place of devotion to God." Do people in our culture obsess over anything to the degree that it takes the place of devotion to God? Let me count the ways. At the individual level idolatry takes a myriad of forms. If Paul was distressed in Athens when he saw that the city was full of idols, he'd be tied up in knots over our society because we have idols all over the landscape. We have our own personal household gods that we need to turn from. But there are some that are pervasive in our society. I will point out 3.

Money

This one is obvious in our culture. People are obsessed with money, with having more. The American Psychological Association does an annual survey on Stress in America. The number 1 cause of stress for Americans every year is money. On HGTV they have a show about tiny houses. That's not the trend. In 1950 the average American home was 983 square feet and had 3.37 people in it. In 2009 the average home was 2700 square feet and held 2.57 people. That's a change from 292 square feet per person to 1050 per person. We want more. More space, more comfort, more money to obtain it for us, and there is no end to it.

Money is a tough one because you must have it to survive. I wish money were not a factor, but we need it to buy food, have a place to live, have clothes to wear, be able to see a doctor and get medicine if we become ill. Furthermore it cannot be denied that having money makes life much less stressful and more enjoyable. I mentioned that earlier this year we had an appliance rebellion at our house led by the washing machine. When it died we bought one to replace it, one we like better. For quite a few years the washer dying would have been a crisis for us. We didn't have money to deal with such a loss because we lived right on the edge. I remember a time about 20 years ago when we were excited about a vacation we planned to take as a family. We had saved up a little money so we could go on this trip. It wasn't an extravagant vacation. We were going to visit family in Florida. But before we could buy the tickets our water heater died. We had to use our vacation money to replace the water heater. It was no fun at all. It is nice to have money to replace an appliance without a crisis.

In our country the bottom line is the bottom line. If you have money you have power and you are to be envied. People are convinced that money solves everything. If they had enough money they'd be happy. So that is what they pursue.

Success

A related idol is success. Part of the allure here is money, but there is another aspect to it. Our society continually holds up celebrities, successful athletes or entertainers as models. When you check out at the supermarket you are assailed by magazines featuring stories about the details of the lives of various Hollywood types. There is this pressure to *be somebody*. The message is the top athletes and actors are the most fortunate, but if you can't be one of those do something that other people will notice. Gain some position or achieve something that other people will notice and approve of. At stake is our very sense of identity and worth. You have to do something that others will approve of, maybe even envy, to really have worth.

1 Corinthians 8:4 says "an idol is nothing at all in the world." Isaiah 44: 15 depicts a man who cuts down a tree. It says, "It is used as fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it." In verse 17 Isaiah says of this man "he prays to it and says, 'Save me! You are my god!'" He goes on in verse 19 to say no one stops to think, "Hey, half of that wood I used to bake bread, shall I bow down to a block of wood?" Money and success are as manmade as that idol fashioned out of wood, and they have the exact same power to bring life as does that stupid little god made out of wood. They have zero power!

In February 2014 *Forbes* magazine published an article about a man named Sam Polk. He made millions of dollars as a trader on Wall Street at the young age of 25. But he was continually consumed by the desire for more money. He went to work for a hedge fund where he was rubbing elbows with billionaires and his obsession got worse. He said he became a "fireball of greed." One year he got angry over a \$3.6 million bonus because it wasn't big enough. He had a drive to be the most successful, important or powerful person in the room wherever he went. They wrote an article about him because he walked away from it all. He said, "I learned...no matter how much money I made, the money was never going to do it." He was obsessed with our society's gods of money and success and they never gave him freedom. They enslaved him. He said when he left he got dozens of calls from friends on Wall Street who said they wanted to leave, but couldn't.

Judd Apatow, the successful Hollywood actor, producer and director, said in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, “There is a great distraction in thinking when I get to the top of the hill it’s all going to be awesome. And then when you get to the top of the hill you’re like, ‘Oh, I guess now I have to really deal with my problems, because that didn’t work at all.’”

Self

The truth about idols is they always have been about self. Again I will quote *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. It said, “Idols were really expressions of self-worship.” Ancient people made idols and went through all manner of rituals and sacrifices in the attempt to persuade these supposed gods to use their power to serve the worshiper’s self interest. It was always about getting something for me. And that’s what our culture elevates today. You have to love yourself first. You have to believe in yourself. Be true to yourself. You have to be happy, so do whatever is necessary to make you happy.

In their book, *Good Faith*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons noted a Barna Research Group survey last year that revealed Americans totally believe life is about self. “The morality of self-fulfillment is everywhere, like the air we breathe. Much of the time we don’t even notice we are being bombarded with messages of self-fulfillment.” It is this that is behind the tectonic shifts in marriage, sex and “sexual identity,” for instance. All that matters is that I be happy or feel good about myself, that I get what I think I want. This is now the religion of America. That is our idol.

The average person in Thessalonica continued on in pursuit of idols in the hopes that somehow they could provide what they were missing and needing. The Thessalonian Christians realized the idols were a dead end. They could never provide peace, hope, joy and life. They believed in Jesus and served the living God because that was the only place they could find peace, hope and joy. They became renegades, suffering being outcasts, because it was worth it. They had finally found something real. The question for us is will we be renegades in our culture? Will we reject our culture’s idols and refuse to serve them?

THEY LET GOD RULE

There is an important statement in 1 Thessalonians 1:9. Not only did they turn from idols, but they chose to serve the living and true God. I want you to think about the words in that last clause. First think about the idea that he is the true God. God is not some figment of someone’s imagination. He is not a product of people’s

reflection on life and the universe. He is a real being that we can know only because he has revealed himself in history in Jesus Christ. He has shown that he is just, he is good, he is love, he is full of grace and he is all mighty. Nothing is too great for him, and because he is good throughout his being, nothing can stop him from doing good. This means he is always worthy of our trust. Even when we don't understand what is happening in our lives we can trust him because the motive behind everything he is and does is love and good. Most of all he has shown that unlike some hunk of wood or metal idol he is *real*.

He is the living God. He is not a myth. He is alive and real, and he is present with us every moment. Throughout the book of 1 Thessalonians you see Paul giving thanks to God for what was happening in the Thessalonians' lives, because God was the one who was active. God was bringing it about. God was at work in their world and their circumstances. That's why Paul told them at the end of the book to pray always and to give thanks in everything. No matter what happened, God was present, active, working for their good.

This has some huge implications for how one should live. I was thinking about how much we are like our granddaughter, Ella, from God's perspective. She is pretty much helpless in this world. She controls nothing. She has no real power. She can barely control a few of her own actions. She is totally dependent on others to feed her, clean her, dress her. Without the constant aid of other people she would die. She has learned to completely trust the people who love her. She never seems to even question their love and trustworthiness. Sometimes when you hold her she will lean over and hang upside down without a single care that you might drop her on her head. You pick her up and hold her up in the air where she is totally vulnerable and she just laughs. She is completely in your hands and at your mercy, and she is totally at peace with that.

Because we are all grown up, intelligent, competent, able to do so many things we tend to bristle at being compared to a helpless baby. But how much do you actually control in life? We do not control other people. We don't control our own genetics. We can't control the forces of nature that could bring disaster on us in an instant. We don't control whether we could be struck with a sudden brain aneurysm or find out we have terminal cancer or ALS or some hideous disease. We don't control the government or the economy.

We are utterly dependent upon God to sustain us. It is God who sees to it that we continue to exist for another day. It is God who keeps the world spinning on its axis and our hearts beating. It is God who keeps us from being victims of our spiritual enemy. We are all going to go through some hard times in this world, but

if we live as people who are serving the living and true God we will be very different than the world around us. We will live in light of his character of love, goodness, grace, justice and mercy. When he seems to raise us up to some frighteningly vulnerable position we will just laugh and smile like little Ella, for we know he cares for us and can be trusted.

Notice the word “serve.” They served the living and true God. This is the opposite of what human nature wants. Our nature is self-focused, and what we want is for God to serve us. That is what superstition, the occult and idolatry are all about. How do we get God to serve us? That’s how the world thinks. I’ve encountered many examples of people who have decided God is not real simply because he didn’t give them what they wanted. They were disappointed because they expected him to serve them and he didn’t do it, at least not in the way they wanted. The Thessalonians understood that it should be the other way around. They understood that they should serve God. In 4:1 Paul said, “we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living.” They decided that what mattered when it came to their sexuality was pleasing God, not pleasing themselves.

The Thessalonians followed in the footsteps of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They refused to worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s idol. He threatened to throw them into a blast furnace to be burned. In Daniel 3:17-18 they said, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God who we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” They would serve God even if doing so came at the highest price to themselves. In Daniel 6 Daniel’s commitment to serve God resulted in him being given the extraordinary privilege of spending a night in the lion’s enclosure at the zoo, but the lions hadn’t been fed. The king responsible for putting him there felt horrible about it and in the early morning he showed up. Verse 20 says he called out, “Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?” Daniel served God continually. That’s what he was known for. He served him even if it meant becoming lion bait. This is what renegades are like. More than anything they are known for having a God who is real and alive, and serving that God always.

That was the Thessalonians’ whole approach to life. It was about pleasing God. It was about serving him. What a radically different life that is, because everyone else is trying to please themselves. I had some friends once who went on a vacation to Hawaii with another couple. They thought their trip with their friends was going to be terrific fun. It didn’t work out quite that way. The wife of the other couple

was quite the planner. She liked to have an itinerary and a plan for everything. So she created one. She planned what restaurants they would go to for dinner and when they would go and scheduled activities for each day pretty much all day long. Some of the activities were things my friends might choose to do and some of the restaurants were places they might like to eat. But they were not happy that this person had taken it upon herself to decide what they were going to do and when. Unfortunately they also knew that to resist the plan was to create tension and ruin the vacation and possibly the friendship. They just wanted to be able to do whatever they chose to do on vacation and did not want someone else deciding for them.

That's human nature, and that's how we feel about our whole lives. I don't want somebody telling me what to do and when to do it. Yet if we are actually serving God we are saying to him, "I stand here waiting to do whatever you want me to do." Have you noticed that because of the mindless insistence on gender neutral words we no longer have waiters and waitresses? We have servers. What is their job? Serve the customer. They used to be called waiters because their job was to wait on them, meaning to stand and wait until given a request from the customer then to fulfill that request. Imagine you order a steak at a restaurant and the server says "I'm vegetarian and seeing that meat on a plate is upsetting for me, so I can't do that for you. How about some couscous instead?" Is that person doing the job of a server? No. If we are going to serve God we are servers, waiters. We wait on him. We get up in the morning and say, "My agenda today, Lord, is to do whatever you want me to do in the way you want me to do it."

I would like my life to be full of love, include lots of victories and precious few defeats, to have success in my chosen endeavors, to have my loved ones' lives be as smooth as silk. That's just fine to desire that, but if we are serving God what we most care about is that we do whatever he commands in the way he wants it done. If we do his will then our lives are successes, whatever the circumstances. That is truly a renegade's way of living.

THEY HAD HOPE

In 1 Thessalonians 1:3 Paul wrote of the Thessalonians "endurance inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ." Those people had hope, and that hope was what enabled them to persevere in the face of painful opposition and suffering. Later in 4:13 Paul said, "we do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." One characteristic of the human race is it really has no hope, but renegades in Jesus do have hope.

In 1 Peter 3:15 the apostle wrote something having to do with sharing the good news with others, which most Christians find hard to do. This is a model all of us can follow. “In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” You want to obey God in regard to telling others about Jesus? Revere Christ as Lord. Make him the Lord of your life. If he really is the Lord of your life you are going to have hope every moment of your life in every situation. So all you need to do is be yourself, let that hope shine through and be ready to explain that it’s there because of Jesus.

We have the hope of being forgiven and loved by God through his grace given to us by Jesus Christ. Because of that hope we have hope in the face of death. We know it is not the end. Death is inevitable and it is scary, but its sting has been removed by the resurrection and the hope we have in Jesus. That hope, that real world proven hope, can be found nowhere else.

We also know that God in his love is with us every moment. That means we have the hope that we are never alone, and that even the worst moments of our lives are being used for some good purpose. We have hope in everything that happens! Not hope that nothing bad will occur, but hope that God has meaning in it for us and he will use it to produce something good.

Who has that kind of hope? Only those who know Jesus as Lord. That changes every single thing that happens in our lives. Years ago I once decided that I wanted to try to learn how to play the drums. Playing drums is a particular skill that requires not just rhythm, but great coordination. Some people just can’t do it. I considered it possible that I might be in that group, but I wanted to give it a try. I didn’t run right out and buy a drum set. I got some drumsticks and looked up drum lessons on the internet. I would practice at home using books to hit instead of drums so I wouldn’t make a horrendous racket. One problem I quickly encountered was our dog, Luke. It turned out that he was a music critic. When I started practicing he would just go ape. He would bark loudly and without stopping. Nothing could calm him down when I was doing my drumming. However, I ran into a bigger problem. It was me. I just couldn’t seem to keep everything going the way it was supposed to go. Drumming is kind of the extreme version of patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time. I quickly began to lose hope that I would ever master it. Guess what happens when you lose hope. I quit.

All around us are people desperate, feeling like giving up, because they have no hope. They seek to still their desperation by using drugs, sex, alcohol, money, entertainment, maybe even the rush of extreme sports, but what they need is hope. We renegades in Christ have that hope. When we live in the reality of it, it will be noticeable.

THEY LOVED

In 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 Paul wrote, “Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God’s family throughout Macedonia.” This is a clear identifying mark of a follower of Jesus.

You and I are supposed to have a badge that identifies us as Jesus Renegades. That badge is love. 1 John 4:7-8 says, “Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” John puts it in black and white. If you don’t love, you don’t know God.

Jesus said above all else what will mark people who really know him and follow him is that they love others. Paul said in the end the only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love. The world around us has some sense that love is the most important thing in life. They know they are desperate to be loved and they have an inkling that the only hope humans have of ever living in peace is through love. But there’s one big problem. They can’t seem to love each other.

When I was in college my baseball coaches identified a problem in my batting swing. They had me work on it in practice. We would do these drills where a buddy would just toss a ball in front of you from a few feet away so you could work on the mechanics of the swing. We’d do hundreds of swings a week like that, and I’d work on correcting my flaw. We’d take batting practice off pitching machines and I’d work more on my swing. I’d get it down where I was doing it just right. Then I’d get in a game against live pitching, and I’d go right back to my bad habit. It was frustrating. One time in a game somehow I did it right. I just crushed a pitch doing it just like you’re supposed to and hit a screaming line drive off the left field wall for a double. Man that felt good. The coach was all over it. He yelled, “That’s the way to go, Myatt! You got it!” Here’s the bad news. That was the only time I was able to do it in a game. I knew what I was supposed to do, I knew what I was doing wrong, I worked on correcting it, and I could never fix it.

And that is just like the predicament of the human race. We know we need to love. We tell ourselves we're going to love. We beat ourselves up when we fail to love. We determine to try harder, then when the heat is on we fail to love consistently. Every now and then we hit one out of the park, but then we go right back to our old bad habit. That's why the world is the way it is. But the Thessalonians loved with the love of Jesus. They were filled with love for a Savior who loved unconditionally to the point where he suffered beyond measure to love people who at best were indifferent to him. The Thessalonians weren't perfect. But in them people could see a love they didn't see anywhere else. They excelled at love.

Wouldn't it be amazing to excel at love? Five years ago 12 year old Ian McMillan was at an Arizona Diamondbacks baseball game. A player tossed a ball into the stands near Ian and a younger boy. They didn't catch it but an usher got it and handed it to Ian, who was thrilled that he got the ball. He celebrated as he returned to his seat, but then noticed the other boy was disconsolate over missing out on the ball. He walked down to the other boy and handed him the baseball. He didn't know that TV cameras caught the entire episode, and the announcers were blown away at Ian's sacrificial kindness. What amazed me was that the incident became national news. What does that tell you? Sacrificial love is so unusual a small act of it makes national news because people are desperate to see that it actually exists. To excel at loving sacrificially is truly renegade, and it is hugely powerful.

CONCLUSION

How can I be a renegade? You have to want it. You want it because you see that the choice is really between life and death, truth and a lie. You will have to choose the renegade life because it is contrary to both what our human nature will produce and the current of our culture. Imagine that you are at the beach and you got knocked off your surfboard. But your leash broke and somehow your board is now out beyond the breakers and you are on the beach. Your best board is out there so you either have to swim out to get it or say goodbye to it. It is much too valuable to just lose, so the choice is obvious.

You won't reach your goal by doing nothing. You have to decide to go after it and you have to exert effort. The waves will continually push you back. If you just relax and float they will send you back to the beach. That is like being a renegade in our world. It is much too valuable as a goal to just say goodbye to it. But it requires that you expend effort to reach it. If you relax and do nothing at any point the waves of the world and human nature will push you away from the goal. The goal is to be a renegade by refusing to pursue our culture's idols, by having a real and living God you serve continually, by living every moment in the hope God has

given you, by loving others with God's unfailing, unconditional love. It won't always be easy, but if you will make the effort you can get to that goal of being a Jesus renegade, and the result will be you will bring glory to God, you will bring hope, love and life to other people, and you will experience real life yourself.