

June 14, 2020
Fluent in the Faith
1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

I am SO thankful I learned English as my mother tongue. When you learn your mother tongue, you learn by osmosis – by the age of three or four you are properly conjugating verbs, correctly using prepositions, and forming complex sentences without thinking about it.

But learning a second language is much more difficult. For instance, starting in grade 8, I took French. But learning a language, for 50 minutes 3 times a week in school in BC, was not nearly as effective as being immersed in a family where the language is spoken all the time. I loved French. But I struggled to memorize vocabulary. I wrestled with the grammar. One teacher had a cool mnemonic device, MRS VAN DER TRAMP to help us remember which verbs took être as opposed to avoir in the passé composé.

I loved French, but, never living in a French-speaking environment, it never really became “part of me.” When you are fluent in a language, you don’t have to think about which words you know, how the grammar works, whether the verb takes être or avoir. It just comes naturally. You don’t even think about it. I never got to that point. When we went to Quebec and France, I would speak French – I did OK talking, because I could control my vocabulary and I could speak very slowly and deliberately. But I couldn’t understand the answers, because people would respond much more quickly and with words (I assume) I didn’t know.

One of the things my language teachers always impressed on us was that learning a language was more than just learning the words and the grammar. A language is part of a living, breathing beautiful culture, so to really learn the language, you have to learn the culture too. There is a lot of truth to this. The culture in Quebec – and certainly in France – is very different than that in southern Alberta. Language and culture – the whole way of living – are totally interrelated and interconnected.

The Language and Culture of Faith in Jesus

Paul wants the new believers in Thessalonica to understand that when they came to faith in Jesus it’s like we have to learn a whole new language and a whole new culture as well. The same is true when WE come to faith in Jesus – our culture, language, and experience change. The goal is to become so fluent in the language of faith and the culture of the Kingdom of God, that we don’t even think about it. We just naturally live as God’s people.

For many of us, who have grown up in Christian families and the church, hopefully that has been our experience. One of the noble goals for us as Christian parents and as the church is to model a consistent and attractive faith that just naturally invites our children to be people of God as well. They learn the language of faith, what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and what that actually looks like in practice, as they grow up in our homes and community.

But for others of us – like the new believers in Thessalonica – believing in, following, and living for Jesus is not something that is going to come naturally. Like me learning French,

this is something all new, which they will have to learn in the same way I had to learn a new language. Ideally, the goal of learning French is you never think about grammar. To the extent that you have to process everything by first translating into English and then formulate your response in English and translate that into French, you aren't fluent yet. But the more you practice – the more you immerse yourself in that language and that culture – the more listening, thinking, and speaking in French just becomes second nature.

This is also the aim of learning the new language of faith, of following Jesus. The ideal, of course, is that we all should have the new language of Christian belief and behaviour written on our hearts. When we listen to the news, have a conversation with a friend, or make ethical decisions, we naturally act and react as Jesus would if He were in our situation, because our lives are "fluent" in the language of faith. This is part of "growing in faith" and becoming more and more mature as a follower of Jesus.

But it doesn't happen overnight. It takes learning. Ideally it includes immersion in a family or a community of people who are fluent in the language of God's love and faith. It takes hard work. It takes time so we get used to living, thinking, and behaving in Christian ways. It's pretty much impossible to learn any language fluently on your own.

God's Spirit is at work within us, helping us learn this new language of faith. Paul, in this passage, helps the Thessalonians – and us – see three different ways His Spirit helps inform, form, and transform us (see March 24 sermon).

The first is through careful teaching and leadership (5:12-13)

I was fortunate to have some excellent French teachers. They knew their subject. They cared about their students. They could communicate well. And they tried to make it interesting. I wanted to learn French because of them.

All of us need good teachers – whether we are learning French or the language and lifestyle of following Jesus. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to *"take note of those who work among you and exercise leadership over you in the Lord, those who give you instruction."*

The best teachers of course, know their subject well, really care about their students, can communicate reasonably well, and try to keep in engaging.

Some of these are more difficult than others in these challenging times. But we are still trying to teach the Bible faithfully. Some teachers seem more enamoured with their own wisdom or certain human authors than with God's Word.

We want to be faithful in teaching the Scriptures. We're trying our best to make it engaging and interesting in an online environment (Lego seems to work particularly well 😊), but it's a challenge "preaching" to your phone!

By the way – we (the pastoral staff) are all committed to lifelong learning, too. I think each of us always has multiple books on the go or are taking courses or listening to podcasts. You

know we take this growing in knowledge seriously, too.

We do really, really care about all of you! It's hard, of course, to communicate that so clearly when we don't physically see each other so much. But I want you to know I'm like a Dad who really, really wants to see all his kids (kind of like Paul wanting to see the Thessalonians), and being frustrated because "Satan blocks the way" (2:18).

The second is through the life of the community (5:14-15)

We learn faith, first, through careful teaching and leadership. But the people who I know who have learned French fluently have lived in French communities for extended periods of time. They have had to survive speaking French. They've been immersed in French culture. They have learned French expressions and French ways. They think like French people think.

Paul encourages us to immerse ourselves in Kingdom of God culture, too. *"Live in peace with each other. Warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else."*

Living these ways doesn't necessarily come naturally or easily. We know people – some who claim to be Christians – who don't live at peace with others, but criticize, insult, and tear down. We know people who are disruptive. We know people who seem to think they have a gift of "discouragement" (there is NO such gift). We know people who are not patient. We know people who not only pay back wrong for wrong, but do it 10X over, to squash their enemies. We know people who divide, rather than strive for the good of everyone else.

When we surround ourselves with those people – or they are our role models – we are NOT going to become more and more like Jesus. We will become someone quite different.

Our challenge is to find authentic spiritual friends, who model for us the language, lifestyle, mission, and fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Because when we live in authentic Christian community, we WILL become more and more like Jesus. We will act and react in ways that model the great commandments (to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself).

This is a bit challenging these days without being able to meet physically regularly. But we can still keep in touch with these kinds of godly role models – through phone calls, Skype, Zoom, letters, and other means. We need the conversations, prayers, and support of other followers of Jesus to help us become the people God wants us to be.

Third is the grammar – the how to's – of following Jesus (5:16-22)

First teaching. Second community. Third, there are mechanics of how a language works that we just have to learn. Eventually these do become second nature, but we have to spend time just learning how to conjugate verbs and use the right article (le or la) with the right

noun. In time, these just become automatic. But at first it's all new – it's tough slogging.

Paul recognizes that we may need some of these basic lessons, too. So he gives us some of the "rules": *"Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all. Hold on to what is good. Reject every kind of evil."*

Paul seems to have designed this list for easy memorization – short, pithy statements of basic principles. His idea being that, once we memorize them, they shape who we are. We think, act, and make choices automatically, based on the fluency we have in the language of faith. We think like Christian people think. We act like Christian people act. We react like Christian people react. When we read the news about the suffering of black people or indigenous people we are moved to compassion, to listen, and to love, as Jesus did.

Just like learning a language, these sound easy. It can be very hard to become fluent.

- It's tough to "rejoice always." It takes practice. We fail and make mistakes. But we keep trying to put it into practice – and practice again – until it becomes who we are.
- It's tough to "pray continually." It takes practice. When I first discovered Jesus, I could go days without praying. Then I disciplined myself to pray more often. And more often. Until, my life becomes something of an ongoing dialogue with the Lord.
- It's tough to "give thanks in all circumstances." But the more I practice an "attitude of gratitude" the more thankfulness becomes ingrained in my character. I find it easier and easier to be thankful.
- It's tough to "hold on to what is good and reject every kind of evil." That means we have to learn what is good and to recognize what is evil. This brings us full circle back to wise teaching/Scripture and godly community. This is how we learn these truths.

It's interesting that this list isn't nearly as dry and dreary as learning French verbs. This is a list about joy, about faith, about thanksgiving, about goodness and light, about being positive, loving, gracious Kingdom of God people, making the world a better place.

I want to be more and more fluent in the language of the Kingdom of God. I want to be more and more like Jesus. That means I have to keep learning. I have to keep reading Scripture. I need godly friends and a supportive community. And I just need to do some of the hard work of working at some of the disciplines of faith, including working at rejoicing always, praying continually, and giving thanks in all circumstances.

What do you need to do to keep growing? Learning? Becoming more like Jesus?

Copyright ©2020 by Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net