

This morning I am in the second week of my sermon series through the New Testament book known as 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD.

Last week we looked at chapter 1 of this 5-chapter letter, focusing on the message that Paul brought to them, the gospel that Jesus Christ died for our sins so that we might have the opportunity to be right with God and have eternal life. Specifically, we looked at how God is the initiator of our faith: He chose us, He gave us spiritual life by giving us His Holy Spirit, and is the power for our ongoing spiritual growth. Our role is to respond to his offer by repenting – turning from our idols, the things of this world that we trust in for our salvation and comfort and joy - and turn in faith and trust to Jesus. If you want to understand all that more, you can listen to last week's sermon.

This week I want to look at what we learn about the relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians in chapter 1 and some of chapter 2 and what relevance it has for us today. Let's read chapter 1 again:

*1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 - Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. <sup>2</sup> We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup> We continually 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. <sup>4</sup> For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. <sup>7</sup> And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. <sup>8</sup> 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, <sup>9</sup> for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

*1 Thessalonians 2:6-12 - We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, <sup>7</sup> but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. <sup>8</sup> We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but*

*our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. <sup>9</sup> Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we **preached the gospel of God to you.** <sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. <sup>11</sup> For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, <sup>12</sup> encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

I see in this section a beautiful vision of what the church community is meant to be when it comes to our relationships, and I want to emphasize two features in particular that I see here:

### **1) Be genuinely concerned about the welfare of others**

Look at the language again that Paul uses to communicate the genuine concern and love that he, Silas, and Timothy had for the Thessalonians:

*<sup>2</sup> We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup> We continually 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.*

***1 Thessalonians 2:6-12** - We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, <sup>7</sup> but we were **gentle** among you, **like a mother caring for her little children.** <sup>8</sup> We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. <sup>9</sup> Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we **preached the gospel of God to you.** <sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. <sup>11</sup> For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, <sup>12</sup> encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

God's vision for His church is that it would be a place where you find people with a genuine concern for your welfare – first and foremost leaders like pastors and elders and other mentors and leaders, and then the other members.

One of the horrible ironies of the past 20 years is that we live in the age of social media, where it is possible for you to connect with just about anyone in the world

in a minute. And yet according to no less than the Surgeon General, there is an epidemic of loneliness in our country. At the same time, it is possible to have 1000 friends on Facebook and still have no one who really knows you, not one person who you feel you can call when you are depressed who will listen, love, and care for you. You can have 200 people who will like a picture of you and yet no one who likes you enough to be there when you are in need.

We have seen this in Fight Club, our Wednesday night men's group, where over the years we have had men come who truly feel they have no one else to share with, no other men who will listen to them or care about them, nowhere else to unburden their troubles.

There is an epidemic of loneliness. And so, more than ever, there is a desperate need for genuine community, and a tremendous opportunity for the church to be what God has designed it to be: a place full of people who are genuinely concerned about the welfare of others. Listen again to 1 Thessalonians 2:8 -

*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*

Yes, we are all about the gospel. First and foremost, we want you to know God and be connected to Him. We are not a social club; our existence is inextricably linked to the gospel, the good news that Jesus died for our sins to create a community reconciled to God and each other. But the church is meant to be about more than just the message. We are about love. We are about community. This is why we emphasize community groups. Get involved where you can meet others, find people who have a genuine concern for your welfare, and where you can develop a genuine concern for the welfare of others. As Jesus said:

***John 15:12-13 - My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*** <sup>13</sup>  
*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*

Love as Jesus loved you. Jesus' love was not just affection, but sacrificial love, love that is willing to suffer for another, bear each other's burdens, disadvantage oneself in order to elevate others. Jesus says, "I am laying down my life for you, looking out for you, so you do not have to be so self-centered. You can look out for each other. I will care for you, so you can care for each other."

Paul put it this way:

**Philippians 2:3-8** - Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

This is not primarily a program; it is an orientation of the heart brought about by the gospel of what Jesus has done for us. It is a response to Jesus' self-giving love for us that compels us to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. In fact, Jesus goes even further than to instruct us to love others as He loved us:

**Matthew 25:31-46** - "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. <sup>34</sup> "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' <sup>37</sup> "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' <sup>40</sup> "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' <sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' <sup>44</sup> "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' <sup>45</sup> "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Whatever you do or don't do for the least of these brothers of mine, you do to Jesus. He gets very specific here – welcome the stranger. Give clothes to those who

need them. Feed the hungry. Look after the sick or imprisoned. I can add to this list:

Welcome someone who is new

Sit with someone who is alone or invite someone to sit with you

Arrive early, ready to greet, welcome, pray, or prepare your heart to meet with God

Invite someone to lunch afterwards.

Offer to pray with those who might need prayer

Pay attention to who is not there and reach out to let them know they were missed and to see how they are

Ask people about themselves and listen to their story

Give to someone in need

Care for families by serving in the Children's Church or nursery

Visit, call, share a meal, invite people over

**John 13:34-35** "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Be genuinely concerned about the welfare of others.

## 2) Live a life worthy of imitation, and follow others worthy of imitation

*You know how we lived among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup> You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. <sup>7</sup> And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. <sup>8</sup> The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia-- your faith in God has become known everywhere.*

God's vision for the church is not just a place where people are genuinely concerned for the welfare of others, but where there is discipleship happening, where we follow those worthy of imitation and live a life that invites others to imitate us. Remember that this was a central part of Jesus' parting message:

**Matthew 28:18-20** - *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Discipleship. Set an example for others to follow of what it looks like to follow Jesus. And follow others who are setting an example. Paul writes to the Thessalonians that they imitated him, and then they themselves became a model to believers everywhere else. He says something similar to Timothy, who he considered a son in the faith:

*2 Timothy 2:2 - And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*

The things I have said, you entrust them to reliable men who can teach others. That is four generations. The church is not just about care but discipleship, about showing others with word and with your life what it looks like to follow Jesus.

As DL Moody put it, “*Out of 100 men, 1 will read the Bible, and 99 will read the Christian.*”

Once again, the church has a unique opportunity in our cultural moment. Just as there is an epidemic of loneliness, there has also been a significant increase in deaths of despair – suicide, drug overdose, deaths from liver disease. There is a serious crisis of meaning and purpose that has led to many people giving up on life, not knowing what this is all for or what direction to take. But Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and God has created each of us for a purpose. We have an opportunity to show people a way of living that is full of purpose and meaning and leads to everlasting joy beyond this life.

Live a life worthy of imitation, and follow others worthy of imitation. Do you have in your life a Paul that you can imitate, a Barnabas who walks alongside you and is concerned for your welfare, and a Timothy who you can bring up in the faith?

At its heart, discipleship involves helping someone follow Jesus. It means taking responsibility for the spiritual growth of another person. It includes having spiritually meaningful conversations, teaching and correcting, helping someone see how the Bible applies to their life circumstances. It involves modeling what it looks like to follow Jesus. It means spending time with another person. Invite someone over. Reading or listening to something spiritual with them. Pray for them. Spend time with each other. Share the Word.

I don't feel worthy of imitation. Then begin by finding someone worthy of imitation to follow, to spend time with, to learn from.

This is God's vision for his church family – that we would be genuinely concerned about the welfare of others, and that we would live lives worthy of imitation, and follow others worthy of imitation.