

Again, that's 1 Thessalonians chapter one, reading verse one through verse three. This is sort of an exciting time. We're entering a new series now, walking through the book of First Thessalonians. It's going to be a bit of a shift. We were in Old Testament narrative all the way back at the exile, and now we're jumping forward to the New Testament, and particularly to the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

Now, some of you probably know a few things about Thessalonica, the city to which Paul wrote this letter, particularly the church in Thessalonica. But for those of you that don't, Thessalonica was a port city along the Aegean Sea. It's in a region known as Macedonia, which is north of Athens, north of Greece that we would think of. As a Greek-speaking world, Thessalonica was a very prosperous city.

Under the Roman Empire was one of those cities that really flourished, really came into its own and enjoyed the protection, the stability the Roman Empire offered. In fact, they exhibited so much loyalty to the Roman Empire and sort of played their cards right during Caesar Augustus' rise to power that they received a preferred status known as a free city. While other cities and other city-states within the Roman Empire had to have a Roman governor and were subject to Roman law, free cities were allowed a large degree of self-government. They could have their own officers. They could rule the city in their own way as long as they kept the peace and paid their taxes.

So Thessalonica was a privileged city. It was also a bit of a crossroads city. Like most trade cities, there was a lot of diversity there, particularly religiously. This is fascinating stuff. Of course, there was lots of Greek religion there. Dionysus is one of the chief deities. There was also a lot of Egyptian deities worshipped there, interestingly enough. But idolatry was a big deal. There was a lot of secret cults that people were a part of, and also a significant Jewish community there, enough Jews that they had their own synagogue.

Paul reached the church at Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. He arrived there with his senior partner, Silas, or as he's called in 1 Thessalonians 1, Silvanus. That's the Roman form of his name. And his junior partner, Timothy. And we all know Timothy, the junior partner that was to become a close confidant of the Apostle Paul and receive the two letters, 1 and 2 Timothy.

Now, when Paul arrives at Thessalonica, in the words of Thessalonians, he had already been shamefully treated at the previous city, that is, Philippi, where he'd been whipped and he'd been put in prison. That's where Paul and Silas pray, they sing the hymns, the doors open, and there's that great conversion of the Philippian jailer.

Now, when Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he ministered there, according to the Book of Acts, for three Sabbaths. That is, he taught in the synagogue at Thessalonica for about three weeks. Now, given the content of what Thessalonians gives us, it's likely that Luke in Acts is leaving out some stuff just for his own purposes of his narrative. Luke's account is not exhaustive. There was likely a bit of a longer ministry that followed this ministry in the synagogues among the Gentiles in Thessalonica, perhaps for another month or so.

But after this ministry was really getting going, as Paul was continuing to teach this fledgling church, these new converts to the faith, the Jews in Thessalonica stir up the crowds against Paul, Silas, and Timothy, and against those who hosted them in the house of Jason. And in this stirring up, in this riot, they forced Paul out of the city.

Essentially, they convinced the leaders of Thessalonica that Paul and his buddies were a bunch of rabble-rousers, that they were going to get them in trouble with the Romans, and they were going to lose their status as a free city, which, of course, that's the last thing they'd want to happen. And so Paul makes the decision to leave Thessalonica for the safety of the church as well as for his own safety, makes his way to Bria, starts a ministry there, but then the Jews in Thessalonica come and persecute him there too.

So then he moves from there to Athens, where he has his famous speech at Mars Hill at the Areopagus, where he gives that famous sermon. And then after that, he has a longer ministry in Corinth. He stays there for, I think it's about at least a year, I think it might be two years. But while Paul is in Corinth, that is when Timothy returns. Paul had sent Timothy at some point during all of this to the Thessalonian church to check in on them.

Because he had to leave them so quickly, he was wondering what was going on with them. Were they faithful? Was the work that he'd done in Thessalonica in vain? Was all the work he'd poured in, all the sermons he'd taught, all the converts he'd made, was it all for naught? Well, Timothy brings back a largely positive report. The church is prospering, it's doing well, there are some issues, there are some parts that they could use some counsel and teaching on, but Paul, your work's not in vain.

And so in response to that, Paul writes this first letter to the Thessalonians, instructing this fledgling church, this orphaned church, about the gospel of Jesus Christ and really about why Paul had to leave so quickly. And that kind of leads us into a sort of rough outline for Thessalonians.

First Thessalonians, that is. Reading, at least for me, reading Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, books like that where it's doctrine followed by practice. First Thessalonians is a little bit odd. That's not how Paul lays out First Thessalonians. It's, in fact, some of the most intense doctrinal sections in 1 Thessalonians are intermixed with the exhortations. So how do we divide up the book of 1 Thessalonians?

Well, I don't want to give you like a full, complete outline because, you know, this introduction's already taken a little bit. But I want to give you three, well, four sort of headings that we can be thinking about on this macro scale as we walk through the book of 1 Thessalonians.

The first major section is chapter one, and it's about thanksgiving. This is a section that is at the front of most of Paul's letters. This is pretty common for Paul. He spends some time thanking God for the good work he's done in this church. The second major section covers chapters two and three, and that's explanation. Explanation. As Paul explains why he had to leave so quickly. explains his conduct among them, reminds them of how he treated them.

Because there were some in the church who were trying to say, well, Paul, he's a fair weather friend. He was preaching the gospel. He was doing his thing, probably so he could get your money. And then as soon as things turned sour, he was out of town. And so Paul has to explain himself. He has to give an explanation for why he had to leave so quickly. And then in chapter four, verses one through 12, we have exhortation. Exhortation.

As Paul lays out for the Thessalonians how they might please God, how they might live their lives, order their lives in such a way that God is pleased. And then finally, chapter four, verse 13, through chapter five, verse 11, we see consolation, consolation, as Paul instructs the Thessalonians about their hope, about what happens to those who have died, about what happens when Christ returns, because there was a lot of confusion about that. Now, obviously, not everything is gonna fit nice and tidy under these headings, but these are kind of just macro headings that will work as a general guide as we walk our way through. So let's read the text from 1 Thessalonians 1, verses 1 through 3.

But before we do that, let's ask God's help in prayer. Our Father and our God, as we read this text, as we proceed to apply it to our lives, we pray that your spirit be at work. For without the Holy Spirit, I am but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. But with your spirit, this is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes.

In Jesus' name, amen. Reading from 1 Thessalonians 1, beginning at verse 1. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers. Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the word of the Lord. May I add his blessing to it.

I must admit, as I was preparing to preach this sermon, I was trying to figure out how we were going to tackle this first chapter. Because if you read through all of chapter one, it's a pretty self-contained unit. It's the entire thing is one prayer, thanking God for the good work he's done in Thessalonica. And so the question is, well, how do you break that up? Do you break it up in terms of what he's thankful for? But everything's very connected. However, there is one aspect of it that I thought was an area in which we can see a bit of a division. There's two aspects to this Thanksgiving section that I thought were worth bringing out.

The first is the most obvious. It's looking at the Church of Thessalonica, what he thanks God for among the Thessalonians, and saying, hey, this is an example for us. This is what a godly church looks like. This is what God does in a healthy church. And we can learn from that. And Paul makes that pretty clear. He says, Thessalonians, you've been an example to all the churches in Macedonia. So there's something there. But there's another aspect, and that's the aspect I want to focus on this evening. And that is Paul's heart for the church in Thessalonica. How does Paul view the church? How does Paul relate to the church in Thessalonica? And that's important.

Because if you're a Christian, then you inevitably must relate to the church. God saves us individually, yes, but he saves us into the family of God, into the church. And the church is a reality for the Christian. In your second birth, your church family is as much of a reality for you as your biological family is when you're born into that.

And so we need to think about how should we relate to the church? Is there something we can learn from how the Apostle Paul relates to the church? And there are three aspects to how Paul relates to the church in Thessalonica on a macro and a micro scale. So how should we relate to the church on a micro and macro scale? First, we should relate with humility. With humility. Look at how Paul introduces himself in the first verse of Thessalonians.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. You'll notice it's a pretty simple heading there. He doesn't say Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ as he does in other letters. He doesn't even say Paul a servant or slave of God. He just says Paul. Now there are reasons for that. Obviously he knew this church really well.

And the church in Thessalonica was not in a situation where they were questioning Paul's authority. They weren't questioning his role as an apostle. We see later in Paul's ministry, particularly in places like Corinth and even in Colossae to a certain degree, there were those who were questioning Paul's authority. And so he had to spend some time establishing his authority as an apostle.

But Paul doesn't have to do that here. And so he doesn't. There's something to be said for that. Paul is willing to present himself simply as Paul. If he doesn't have to insist on his authority, he doesn't. There's something of humility there. And that gets even stronger when you see his name is listed alongside his co-laborers. I mean, Silas is great. But did he receive a direct commission from Jesus Christ to be an apostle to the Gentiles the same way Paul did? No, he didn't.

Timothy is the junior partner in the work, and yet he's listed alongside them. And again, there are reasons for this. Obviously, all these men would have been very well known to the Thessalonians, and Timothy was likely the one carrying this letter. It's important that when the letter arrives and it's being read, everyone knows Timothy carries the same authority as Paul, so if he needs to explain something in the letter, they know they can trust it. But there's also an aspect here of humility. Paul doesn't set himself apart. Paul is not above listing his co-laborers alongside him in pretty much an equal standing in this greeting. There's something of humility there. He doesn't need to insist on his authority. It's tender.

And this becomes even more pronounced when you see how he addresses the Thessalonians. While Paul doesn't use a lot of high titles or anything like that for himself, He is very generous, very honoring in the way that he speaks of the church in Thessalonica. Look what he says. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians.

Now we're tempted to just pass over that, the church of the Thessalonians, because church in modern English has become such a Christianese term. But remember, this is only Paul's second missionary journey. This is taking place in about, Paul probably wrote this in about 50 AD or so. So the word church, ecclesia, wasn't a Christianese term yet. Jesus had only ascended less than 20 years ago.

And so when people heard the word ecclesia, when they heard the word church, they wouldn't think of a building with a steeple. They wouldn't immediately think of the people that gathered to hear the preaching, heard the preaching of Paul, those who believe in Jesus Christ, though that certainly would have been one of the things they thought of.

Their first thought, especially the Jewish members in the church, would have been to how ekklesia was used in the Old Testament. The word ekklesia in the Old Testament most often is used to translate the word for assembly, particularly the assembly of God's people, the congregation of Israel.

In other words, when Paul calls the church in Thessalonica a church, an ecclesia, he is saying you are the people of God. You are as much the people of Almighty God, you have as much claim to the promises of God as Israel in the Old Testament. That's a high honor. But not only does he call them the people of God, he calls them the people of the triune God. Look what he says. You are to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a Trinitarian formula. Now you may ask, well, where's the Holy Spirit? I mean, I see God the Father and I see God the Son, but where's the Holy Spirit? Well, here's a little trick that Dr. Fesko taught me. It's not a trick, it's just what people back then would have read.

Christ, remember, is not Jesus' last name. It's his title. Christ is the Greek translation of the word Messiah, or anointed one. Jesus, the anointed one. Now, think for a second. With what, or rather with whom, is Jesus anointed? Think about that for a second. When we call Jesus the anointed one, with whom is he anointed? Well, he's anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, in his sermon at Nazareth, he says, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to declare good news to the poor. When Jesus is baptized, what happens? The Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove. Jesus is the Messiah. He's the anointed one because he's anointed by the Holy Spirit. He is true God, but he is true God. And as Messiah, he is the one anointed with the Holy Spirit. He works through the Holy Spirit. There's that triune action. Jesus is sent from the Father, and he works in the Holy Spirit. He is the anointed one. He is the Messiah.

And this church, this church in Thessalonica bears the name of that triune God. They are the church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus, the anointed one. They are in the triune God. That is a high amount of respect that Paul has for the church and humility as he approaches her.

I think sometimes we have a bit of an unbalanced view of Paul. As Protestants, perhaps rightly so given the climate that we're in, we read Galatians a lot. And that's good, I love the book of Galatians. But Paul's attitude towards the Galatians, his attitude towards the churches in Galatia is the exception, not the rule. Most often, if you read the book of Galatians, Paul has to be rather rough with them.

He has to call them out because they are in the midst of a soul-destroying heresy, and he's concerned for them. But that's not Paul's normal, his normal interaction with the church. That's not his normal attitude towards the church. Most often, his attitude is like that in 1 Thessalonians. He approaches her with humility. Even the church in Corinth. Have you read 1 Corinthians? They were dealing with some crazy stuff. They had someone, perhaps even in leadership, who was living with his stepmom. And yet, when Paul addresses them, he addresses them in his greeting with the utmost respect and thanks God for them.

Why? Because they're the church of God. And because of who their husband is, they demand an attitude of humility. The church demands an attitude of humility. So often it's easy, especially on the macro scale, to approach the church with cynicism. To say, well, the church has this problem. The church has this problem over here. I can't believe that the church is doing this. I can't believe the church in America is like this. If I had just got a hold of the church, I know I could fix it. Friends, if that's your attitude, you need to take a cue from the Apostle Paul. Approach the church with humility. She is Christ's bride, she demands your respect.

This doesn't mean the church is above rebuke, doesn't mean that we can't talk about the faults of the church, but we do so with humility, we do so with respect. So how are we to relate to the church on a micro and macro scale? Well, we're to do so with humility, but also with thankfulness, with thankfulness, look at verse two. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers. Notice something about his thanksgiving. First, it is towards God. Seems kind of obvious, but it's important to point out. Paul thanks God for the progress of the church in Thessalonica. Why would he thank God particularly?

Well, because the church is God's creation. In the words of The Church's One Foundation, it says, The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is his new creation by water and the word. The church is God's creation. It is God who plants churches. It is God who grows churches. It is God the Holy Spirit who has strived among the Thessalonians. It is God the Holy Spirit who first brought the Thessalonians to himself.

We see that in verse four. We'll look at this more closely next time. But it says, for we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with conviction. Why does Paul thank God for the church at Thessalonica?

Because it is God who made her. It is God who is continuing to form her. So this thankfulness is towards God. It's also universal. It's universal. Notice he says, we give thanks to God always for all of you. For all of you. not just the ones that are doing really well, not just the ones that have not fallen into the traps that he's going to talk about later, but all of them. All of those in the church that are truly in Christ, Paul thanks God for. It's universal.

And we shouldn't imagine as though Paul, when he's praying for the church in Thessalonica, as he's constantly mentioning them in his prayers, that he says, Okay, God, oh, I should pray for Thessalonians. God, I pray for the church at Thessalonica. He might have opened with that, but then he probably proceeded to name them all, didn't he? He worked among them. He knew them. He prayed for all of them.

Something for our elders. One of the things I love in the session meetings is the elders pray for the members of this church by name. That's good. That's wonderful. I want to encourage you. That's good. Keep it up. You are being apostolic. And for all of us in the church, it's good when we pray for each other by name. That's why we have the prayer meeting. It's not required, obviously, but it's a good opportunity for us to exercise prayer for everyone in this church, for Christians in other churches. So Paul's prayer is towards God, his thanksgiving is towards God, it's universal, it's constant, it's constant. He says, we give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

Paul didn't get up to write the letter to the Thessalonians and decide, Hmm, I should probably pray for them first. No, he'd been praying for them since he left. From the moment he was separated them, from the moment he was orphaned from them, he would constantly be remembering them, constantly praying for them. They were on his heart. He was thankful to God for them constantly. Constantly. What does that say to us?

Well, first and foremost, brothers and sisters in Christ, the Church of God is God's gift to you. It is something you should thank God for. Your church family is not here to try you. It's not here to get in the way of your Christian walk. It is here for your Christian walk.

When your brothers and sisters in Christ are faithful to God, when they go through trial, when they tell you about the trials that they've been through, how God has been faithful to them, They encourage you. And when they fall, when they have struggles, when they sin against you, they give you an opportunity, an avenue to extend the kind of love, the kind of grace that God has given you. The church is the primary field in which you can express your love towards God by loving your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember what Jesus said. For whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. You want an opportunity to serve Christ? You want an opportunity to help, to give Jesus a cup of cold water? Give that to your brother in Christ, and you've given it to Jesus. One of my favorite stories, little modern parables, well I guess it's not so modern anymore, is a story of an old shoemaker.

He's in prayer to God, and he's saying, God, if I could only see you, if I could only see your face, I would love that, I would be so thankful. And then he's put into a trance, he's put into a vision, and God says, Mr. Shoemaker, I'm gonna pass by your house tomorrow. And he wakes up, and he's all excited. The next day he gets up, he's up there early in the morning, he's watching.

First he sees an old woman struggling to carry a load. He goes out there, he helps her. He helps her get to her house, gives her a little bit of money for something hot, and then goes back to his perch, waits for Jesus. Then a couple of little boys come by, and he helps them shovel his driveway, pays them nicely, gives them some cookies, and off they go. And then a young mother comes by with a little one, shivering in the cold. He takes them in, gives them hot soup and a new coat. And he waits all day. No sign. He goes to sleep. And the vision comes again. And he hears the voice once again. And he says, Lord, I waited for you all day, but you didn't show. And the voice says, Mr. Shoemaker, don't you know me? It was I. Whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me.

The church is God's gift in that way. And the church on the macro scale is also God's gift to you. The teachers in the church. Ephesians chapter four. And God, and talking of Jesus from Psalm 68, it says he gave gifts to men. And then Paul proceeds to outline the gifts he gave some as prophets, some as apostles, some as pastors and teachers. They're God's gift, and that applies to Mac, it applies by God's grace to me, but it also applies to those teachers throughout the world, and teachers throughout history. They're God's gift to you. They're something good. Seek them out. Seek them out. So how are we to relate to the Church of God on that micro and macro scale? Well, we're to do so with humility. We're to do so with thankfulness. Third and finally, we're to do so with charity.

Look at verse three. Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. First, notice briefly what Paul remembers. You'll notice that he mentions the three cardinal virtues for the Christian, faith, hope, and love, but he attaches some modifiers to them.

First, he speaks of this work of faith. Now, Paul could be speaking here of the works that faith produces. As Protestants, we know that we are justified by faith alone, but we are not justified by a faith that is alone. Living faith,

true faith in Jesus Christ will inevitably be producing good works, and that is very possibly what Paul was speaking of here, but more likely, he's talking about a very particular kind of work that faith produces, the work of endurance, the work of enduring trial.

Remember the context of this letter. Why did Paul have to leave the Thessalonians? because of persecution. And that persecution is probably still there. And he's remembering that when he was leaving, in that time of persecution, they remained faithful to God, they endured. He remembers that. He also remembers their labor of love. The labor of love. Sometimes, loving our brothers and sisters in Christ is a lot of work. It's not always easy. We're sinners. They're sinners, it's hard.

But that's why we have the Holy Spirit. That's why God's love has been poured out in our hearts. And Paul remembers how, when he was among them, when he was among the Thessalonians, he remembers how they labored, how they worked hard, how it wasn't easy all the time, but they did express love towards him and towards everyone else. They expressed that God-given love. He also remembers their steadfast hope, their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the hope of Christ's second coming, the hope of all Christians.

In the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, if we have trusted in Christ for this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. Life in Christ, it's got its blessings now, but now is but the foretaste. Now is the way of the cross. When Jesus comes again, it'll be the way of glory.

And Paul remembers how that hope remained, how they did not give up on that hope, even in the midst of their persecution, even in the midst of all their trials, even in the midst of being orphaned from their beloved Paul. They did not give up on that hope.

Now we'll talk a lot more about how these virtues are instructive for us next time. I'll leave that to you for now. But what I want to focus on tonight is not just what Paul remembers, but how he remembers the Thessalonians. How he remembers them. Do you think the Thessalonians did all these things perfectly? No. They were sinners just like us. In fact, if we read on in Thessalonians, when we get to the exhortations, we can see that they didn't do these things perfectly. They didn't love each other perfectly. They didn't hope in Christ perfectly. But that's not how Paul remembers them.

He remembers them with charity. He remembers the good things. Not in a rose colored glasses way, but in a charitable way. Why? Because he loved them. Because he loved them. When you love someone, You remember them fondly. Even when you have your fights, even when you know they have their flaws, in the words of 1 John, love covers a multitude of sins. You love them. Those of you who aren't married, is your spouse perfect? No. I know your spouse. They're not perfect. They're awesome, but they're not perfect. No, they're not.

And yet, and yet, do you, I hope you don't remember their, when you remember them, when you think of them, when you're long away from home, and you're remembering your spouse fondly when you're missing them, do you think of their faults? No. You remember them fondly because you love them.

That's how we should remember our brothers and sisters in Christ. That's how we should think about our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should remember them fondly, not in a rose-colored glass way, not where we avoid conflict when it's necessary, but when, but in the words, again, in the words of 1 John, love covering a multitude of sins.

And that gets to really, if I were to take the entire, all these points and put them into one, the question I would ask you is, do you love the Church of God? Do you love the Church of God? Because if you don't, if you look in your heart and you have no love for the Church of Almighty God, for the Church of Jesus Christ for whom he shed his blood, then I would seriously look into your own heart, examine yourself as to whether you are in Christ. That may sound extreme. But think about Jesus. Think about what Jesus said about his church. Jesus gave his life for his church. He shed his blood. He died on a cross. He endured the wrath of God for his church. And if we love because he first loved us, if the love we have has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit he has given us, how can that love not extend itself toward his people for whom he died?

It must. It must. Now, that love might be faint. That love might have been damaged, hurt by someone in your past. But that love should still be there. It's the heart of Christ for his church. Cultivate it. Cultivate it. How should we relate to the church on a micro and macro scale? Well, we should relate with humility.

We're not going to fix the church. We can't even fix ourselves. We serve the church. We love the church. We are to relate with thankfulness. The church is God's gift to us. It is our avenue to serve Christ, and it is for our instruction, for our sanctification. And we should relate with charity, love covering a multitude of sins. Let's pray. Our Father and our God, we read texts like this, and we're convicted.

We see a love for the church, but it's faint. It seems dwarfed by our love for ourselves, our love for pleasure, our love for the world sometimes. Lord, increase in us that love for your church. Remind us, remind us that the world will know that we are your disciples because of our love for one another. Bring that to our hearts, Father. Bring that to our hearts. In Jesus' name, amen.