

broad outline, sort of broad headings to sort of center our thoughts around the Book of First Thessalonians, we've said that it kind of divides into four parts, four major headings. We had Thanksgiving in chapter one, as Paul thanks God for the work in Thessalonica. Now we're in the second section, which is explanation, as Paul explains his conduct among them, answering accusations, and explaining what's been going on with him and his companions. Then eventually we'll move to exhortation in chapter four, as Paul instructs the Thessalonians how to please God in their lives. And finally, the last section, last part of four into five, we have consolation, as Paul explains to his readers about the last days and about the fate of those who have fallen asleep.

Now, last time, if you'll remember, our last message, we talked about the Christ-like minister, particularly looking at Paul and his companions and how they ministered in Thessalonica and what that tells us about what Christ-like ministry looks like.

Now, some of them might have been thinking, wow, you're being really hard on Mac here? No, no, that was not my intention at all. I was probably more just being hard on myself. If I was going to paint the picture of the Christ-like minister, I would paint Mack.

Mack exemplifies these characteristics, and we are so thankful for him. In light of that ministry, which is much like the ministry of Paul and Silas, this text, Habakkuk for us tonight, has particular weight. Because if earlier we were talking about the proper Christ-like way to preach the Word, to administer the Word, Tonight we're gonna be looking at how to properly receive the word. How ought we as Christians, as we sit under a Christ-like minister and other ministers of the gospel, other preachers, as we hear the word of God, how are we to receive it? Well, let's look at how the Thessalonians received it in this text tonight.

So let's read this text together, but before we do, let's ask God's help in prayer. Our Father and our God, as we open up this text, we pray that what we know not, you teach us. What we have not, give us. What we are not, make us. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. In his name, amen. 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, beginning at verse 13. And we also thank God constantly for this.

Though when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews. who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out and displeased God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. So as always to fill up the measure of their sins, but wrath has come upon them at last. This is the word of the Lord. May he add his blessing to it.

Some of y'all probably know this, but in the great a phantom year that was 2020. I was, I had big summer plans. My big summer plans were, well, I was on a summer music team and we were going to go all throughout the country. We were going to be singing at different churches. It was going to be great. And then COVID happened. And then all those plans went out the window and suddenly I'm at home for the summer and I have nothing to do. And so I decided to pick up a summer job, earn a little bit of money. and I decided to pick up a job at a greenhouse. After all, it got me outside, I really enjoyed plants and I learned a lot.

I remember one day I was working the phones and someone calls in and says, hey, these apple trees are kind of expensive. Do you guys do a warranty on your trees? Like if they die, do I get like a discount or something? So I asked my boss, I was like, Adam, do we do that?

He says, absolutely not. Of course not. And if you know anything about the greenhouse business, you know exactly what I'm talking about. You can't put a warranty on a plant. Why? Because it's a living thing. You don't know what the guy's going to do with that plant. He might not give it enough water. It might be a shade plant, and he puts it out in the sun. It might not be put in good soil. There's all kinds of things that could happen to this plant. It's not enough just to have the plant. You've got to properly care for it.

Well, Jesus often compares the Word to plants, namely to seeds. Why does he compare it to a seed? Well, a seed in itself is a good thing. You can have the best seed in the world, but depending on where it's planted, you're gonna get very different results.

If it falls onto hard-packed soil, well, it's just, it's not gonna do anything. Birds will probably eat it. If it goes into the rocky soil, it's not gonna produce a crop, it can't get any root. If it falls into the weeds, it's gonna get choked out, and the list goes on and on. Now, this is just a protracted thing so I can talk about plants, probably, but there's an application here.

Friends, we have tremendous access to good Bible teaching. That is true here at Second Presbyterian Church, which is amazing. But just in the modern age itself, we have access. I could open my phone right now and find you five or six apps, at least, there's probably hundreds more, but just off the top of my head, I can think of five or six apps where you can get hours and hours of solid Christ-honoring Bible teaching. And that's incredible.

Most Christians have never had access to that. They didn't even have a copy of the Bible in their own language, let alone access to that amount of Bible teaching at the touch of a button. But you'll notice that despite our access to all this Bible teaching, the church at large hasn't made a huge difference. No, not really. Christians continue to struggle. We still have problems. Why? Partially because the seed might be good, but what about the soil?

The Word of God doesn't give you any good unless you receive it. So that's the main point I want to get at tonight. The main point I want you to take home tonight is receive the Word. Receive the Word. Now, as we talk about receiving the word, we're going to give two major examples. The first is going to be a positive example. A positive example of what receiving the word looks like and the kind of fruit it bears. And then we're going to look at a negative example. What happens when you don't receive the word and what kind of fruit do you bear then or lack of it? So first, our positive example.

Now, our positive example tonight is the Thessalonians. Here we have our Thessalonians, so let's read about them in chapter two, verse 13. And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God. So notice to start with here, Paul distinguishes between hearing the word and receiving the word. He says when you receive the word which you heard, when you receive the word which you heard.

This goes back to one of the most basic distinctions that we all learn in school. How many of you heard your teacher say, there's a difference between hearing me and listening to me, right? Those of you who have kids know this. Your kids might hear many things you say, but are they listening? Are they actually taking it in? There's a huge difference there. You might hear the word on a regular basis, but do you actually receive it?

The Thessalonians did not just hear the preached word from Paul and his companions, they actually received it. And that receiving it required them to have, to make a conscious effort. There was an active participation in their listening. They didn't just hear it passively, they actively listened to it, they received it. The ministry of the Word is not a solo act. The ministry of the Word is synergistic. It's something that you have to participate in as well.

One of the things that I love that Mack does often is he'll talk about how when we move to the preaching of the Word, he'll say, let us continue to worship God in the preaching of the Word. And some of you might wonder, how am I worshiping God in the preaching of the word? I mean, the preacher's doing something, but I'm just sitting here. Well, you worship God during the preaching of the word by listening to it, by receiving it.

And that requires active participation. You must receive the word. Now, most of y'all out here are married. And marriage is great from what I've heard. And you know, and wives, I'm sure you enjoy it when your husbands praise you, right? I assume they do that on at least some occasion. They probably compliment you every so often. I hope they do. And that's great. That's good.

But would you rather have a husband that praised you and complimented you all the time or a husband that always listened to you. Which matters more? The husband that says, oh, you're great, I love you, you're amazing, I can't believe that you're so cool, but he never listens to you. Or the husband that might compliment you every once in a while, but when you say something, he really listens. Probably the latter, right?

The same thing is true for us believers. How can we say, Lord, I love you, sing his praises, sing hymns like crown him with many crowns, and then when he says something to you, you're not listening? We need to receive the word. Now, how do we do that? If we've gotten into a habit where where we can sometimes, our minds can drift. I understand that. I've gotten into bad habits before. How do we break those kinds of habits? How do we put this word into practice?

Well, the Westminster Larger Catechism has some helpful pastoral advice here, some helpful pastoral instruction. It says, it is required of those who hear the word preached that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer, examine what they hear by the scriptures, receive the truth with faith, love, and meekness, and readiness of mind as the word of God, meditate and confer of it. Let's go through this just a little bit here, just briefly. They attend it with diligence and preparation and prayer. Preparation and prayer.

If you have trouble receiving the word, listening to it. Let me ask, do you spend time preparing to receive the word? If you plant seed in a field and the seed just continually doesn't take, what do you do? Well, you go out there and you tend to your field, you break up the hard pack soil, you remove the weeds, you fix your soil. Do you prepare? Do you pray? In the morning, before you come, do you take a moment to say, Lord, prepare my heart to receive your word. Preparation and prayer.

Do you examine what you hear by the scriptures? There's a reason that we encourage you to have your Bibles open as we preach the word, because throughout the sermon, we want you to continually be examining the scriptures to see what if what we're saying is truly coming out of the text. And that not only ensures that you see that what we're saying is really authoritative, it's also a great way of keeping your attention. If you're constantly checking what he's saying by the scriptures, then you're going to pay attention. You examine the scriptures. You receive the truth with faith, love, and meekness. There's that deception again. And readiness of mind. Do you take a moment to prepare your mind to receive the word? And finally, we have meditate and confer of it.

Meditation, Christian meditation. is not like the meditation we find in Eastern religion. That term has got kind of muddled that way. Meditation, according to Eastern religion, is to remove everything from your mind, to basically try to think about nothing. That's not what Christian meditation is. Christian meditation is to meditate, to think, to ponder, and to pray over one particular scriptural truth and seek to apply it to your life, to really exert yourself privately to contemplate God's word.

Do you ever do that? When you hear the word preached, when you hear, not even on Sunday, but you hear a good piece of Bible teaching or you do your private devotions, do you take time to meditate on that word? Do you confer of it? This is sort of some old English sort of phrase, confer of it. I don't think I've ever used the word confer in my day-to-day life. But to confer of something is basically just to discuss it, to talk about it.

This is sort of the social version of meditation. It is the body of Christ discussing the biblical truths they've just heard. When you have Sunday lunch or Sunday supper after the worship service, do you spend all your time talking about what's going on next week, what happened last week, your son's t-ball game or whatever it might be? Or do you spend any time discussing what you heard from the word of God? Now, I'm not saying it's sinful to discuss, to mention something from your week when you have lunch.

Obviously, that's not true. But that is still a golden opportunity to apply this text, to cement it in your own heart and life. This is a way that can help you receive the Word. It's a way you can actively participate in receiving the Word. So these Thessalonians, they actively received the word, but what else did they do? They accepted it according to verse 13. When you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God. They accepted it as the word of God. There's a common phrase, take it for what it's worth.

You know, if I give advice somewhere, those of you who've talked to me a lot will probably know, I'll sometimes add my little postscript of, now take that with a grain of salt because I'm a 26 year old man who's seen very little of the world, but there you have it. Now, I feel that's important because I don't have a lot of years on me. I might have some wisdom, thank God, but I want to give that little postscript.

We ought to take things, take any advice that we receive on the character of the person who gave it. If the person who's giving the advice isn't very trustworthy, we don't put a lot of stock in it. If it's someone that we trust and love, someone who has had a lot of life experience, we trust that advice more.

What is the preached word? The preached word is not my advice. It's not Mac's advice. It is the word of God. Now, be careful there. We're not saying that it's impossible for Mac or me to err when we're preaching the word. That's

certainly possible. That's why we want you to examine the scriptures to see if what we're saying is so. But if you examine the scriptures, and what we're saying is truly coming out of the text, it is truly what the word of God says, and we're truly applying it to your life, then that is the word of God to you. And you ought to receive it as such.

That's what the Thessalonians did. The Thessalonians didn't receive the preaching of Paul as the latest message from a traveling teacher. They didn't receive it as some nice life lessons. They didn't receive it as some good advice. They received it as a message from God himself. They received it, really, with faith. That's what Paul is kind of describing here, isn't he?

To actively receive something and to treat it as the word of God, that's just faith, isn't it? Now, what is faith? If you're not tracking with me here, faith involves three things. Faith involves knowledge. You have to know something if you're going to believe it. It involves assent to it. Yes, that thing is true. And it involves trust. You have to trust in that thing, be willing to bet your life on it.

What is the difference between assent and trust? Well, if Wayne were to make me a really cool chair, like he hand carves a chair for me, I don't think he does any woodworking, but let's say he did, he carves me a cool chair, and I might assent to the fact that, oh yeah, that chair can probably hold me up, but it's another thing for me to be willing to sit on it. That's the difference between assent and trust. Are you willing to sit on it? Are you willing to put yourself on the line?

That's faith. And that's what it means to receive this Word as the Word of God. It means to put your trust in it, to bet you'd be willing to bet your life on it. That is the kind of reception that this text demands. So these Thessalonians, they receive the Word of God in this way. The Word of God is met with faith. Now, what is the result of this reception? Well, first, this Word worked within them. It worked within them. Look at the last part of verse 13.

When you receive the, you receive it for what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you, believers. The promise of this text is that if you truly receive the word, if you truly believe it, if you confer of it, if you truly actively receive this word, if you are not a mere hearer, but a receiver, a listener to the word, then that word does not remain external. It becomes internal, and it works within you. Now, it may not always feel like that. Sometimes you'll hear a sermon, and you'll follow all these steps.

You'll meditate on it. You'll confer of it. You'll apply your heart to it. You'll apply it to your life. And yet, you won't really see any results. In moments like that, You need to trust the promise. Even when you can't see it, the Word is at work. Because God promised it will be at work. The Word of God does not remain external. It becomes internal. Comes internal. And when that Word becomes internal, when that Word works in you, it will work out of you. It will work out of you. Worked out of the Thessalonians. Look at verse 14. Notice this word for, this word for is linking what he's saying in verse 14 to what he said in verse 13.

He's saying, how do I know that you receive the word of God and that it is at work within you? because you became imitators of the churches in Judea. Now when he says that they were imitators of the churches in Judea, he's not saying that the Thessalonians actively heard about the churches in Judea and said, wow, those churches really

persevered, I'm gonna start imitating them. That's not really what Paul is getting at. What he's saying is that, rather, he's saying that they resemble the churches in Judea.

And why do they resemble the churches in Judea? Because they endured the persecution, they endured the snubbing from their community, the isolation, the persecution, in the same way as the churches in Judea did. Now, why? Why was there this similar effect? Because they had the same cause. In both cases, it was the same word that they received and the same word that worked within them. You know, the Apostle Peter often compares persecution to a refiner's fire. And it's easy to see why.

Refiners' fires have to get really hot to change gold ore into pure gold. It's not a fun process for the gold ore, I'm sure. If it could feel pain, it would feel a lot. But through that refining process, the gold ore that's in there becomes purified.

The dross, the non-gold, the things that have no value get burned away. That's the same thing in persecution, the same thing in any kind of trial. any kind of suffering that Christians endure, it draws you closer to Christ. It burns away what is unnecessary, what might be dishonoring to Christ, or even what is neutral in your life. It purifies you.

But you may ask, but can you do that with just anything? Like if I went to my backyard and I took a clump of dirt and I tossed it in a refiner's fire, would I get gold? No. I just get some really hot dirt. Yeah. You need gold ore. There has to be something of value in there if you're gonna get something of value out.

Now you may ask, how does the Christian life get value into you? That can be refined? The word of God. When you receive the word of God and the word of God is at work within you, it is that word that is purified. It is that word, that work of God within you that is purified when you go through trials.

To go back to our illustration of a plant, what are the two things does a plant need? A plant needs water and it needs sun. If a plant gets sun but no water, it withers. If a plant gets water but no sun, it fails to grow. Friends, we need both the Word of God, and we do need trials. Because the Word of God equips us. It gets that Word at work within us. And the trials come, and they cause us to grow. If we go through trials without the Word, we'll wither. If we get lots of the Word, and we were to get no trials, we wouldn't grow. This is the Christian rhythm. And it was the rhythm that was at work within the Thessalonians, at work within the churches in Judea, and it's at work even today. This is the Christian life. This is why you must receive the word. Because without it, when trials come, you're going to wither.

So this is our positive example, the Thessalonians who received the word. What about our negative example? Our negative example comes with the unbelieving Jews. The unbelieving Jews. Now, we have to be careful here. We're not talking about Jews in general. This text is not anti-Semitic. Obviously, I mean, it should be fairly obvious, God is literally a Jew in Jesus Christ. That's pretty standard. All the apostles were Jews. Paul was a Jew. What Paul is pointing out is those Jews who actively rejected the message of Jesus. who did not believe the gospel.

What was true of them? Well, let's read this text, chapter 2, verse 15. your own countrymen as they did from the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out and displeased God and opposed all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved so as always to fill up the measure of their sins.

But wrath has come upon them at last. So here we have, first, they are those who rejected the word. If the Thessalonians received the word, if they actively received the message of Jesus, the unbelieving Jews did not receive the message. They rejected it. Now, the idea of rejection implies that you actually heard the message. And they heard the message. They heard the teaching of Jesus. They heard the teaching of the prophets.

And again and again, they rejected that message. Now that rejection came in a variety of forms. Some rejected it actively, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They were incensed against it. They persecuted it and tried to destroy it. And there are many who reject the word in that way. They're hostile to it. But there were also some who rejected it apathetically. I think of Pontius Pilate. When Jesus said to him, I have come to testify of the truth, everyone who is of the truth hears my voice. What does Pilate say? What is truth?

The apathetic rejection. The apathetic rejection, some mocked it. Herod, when Jesus was brought before him in his trial, he wanted to see a miracle. When Jesus wouldn't perform one, he mocked him. Some reject the message, some reject the word by mockery. And some reject it by being, oh, you know, I'm interested in it, that's a great message. They give assent to the message. They say, yeah, that's true, that's right stuff. But they don't trust it. They don't put their faith in it. It passes them by, like the rich young ruler who heard Jesus' word, go sell out all that you have. And he loved his money more than he loved Jesus. And he went away sad.

But the key is, all of them failed to receive the message. And to not receive the message is to reject it. To fail to receive the word is to reject the word. There is no neutrality. You either receive it or you reject it. And if you reject the word, as these unbelieving Jews did, then rather than the word of God being at work within you, God's wrath will work within you.

Look at the last part of verse 16. But wrath has come upon them at last. Now, this is an interesting phrase to translate, especially that part, at last. If you have the NASB, it'll say, wrath has come upon them to the utmost. It's possible to translate this in multiple ways. The best way I've found to capture Paul's sense here is wrath has come upon them to the end. Wrath has come upon them unto the end.

This would fit with what Paul writes in Romans chapter 11, where he talks about how a partial hardening has come upon the Jewish people until the time of the Gentiles is complete, until the end of the age. There is a hardening that has come upon the Jewish people.

Why? because they rejected the word. When you reject the gospel, when you reject the word of God, it does not fail to change you. While the word of God is not at work within you, wrath works within you. This is the story of Romans 1. What is the first way that God's wrath is manifest against mankind for their rejection of God?

If you read Romans chapter one again and again, Paul says that because they rejected God, because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator who was blessed forever, God handed them over. God gave them over to degrading passions. God gave them over to the dishonoring of their bodies. He allowed their hearts to be hardened.

Friends, The word of God will never leave you neutral. It'll never leave you unaffected. If you hear the word, it either drives you closer to Jesus or further away. The word of God will either be at work within you or God's wrath will be at work within you. And if God's wrath is at work within you, then God's wrath will be worked out of you. That's exactly what we see with the unbelieving Jews. What does Paul say about them? He says that they are those who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out.

That apathetic rejection won't last long. Eventually, that wrath is gonna work its way out until you are not just, you are not just content with not receiving the word, with rejecting it in that apathetic way, but you will start to reject it in that hostile way. When the word does prick your conscience, you won't respond with a softened heart, you'll respond with a hardened heart. And soon you won't want to hear it. You'll oppose yourself hearing it, you'll oppose others hearing it, you'll simply oppose it. And finally, the final result of that wrath being worked out of you is it displeases God. you will be one who displeases God, and in verse 16, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins.

Friends, to whom much is given, much is required. If you hear the word of God, if the word of God is available to you and you reject it, it'll be far worse for you on the day of judgment. Jesus himself said that those who did not know the will of their master and did not do it will receive few stripes, but those who knew the will of their master and did not do it will receive many. This is a sobering passage and ought to be.

And Christians are not immune to a certain extent. Even Christians can have times of backsliding where we fail to hear the word. And if you do that long enough, then well, God's final wrath will not be at work within you. It may result in your backsliding further. That failure to hear God's word might manifest in your actions.

This is a sobering passage. This is why it is so important that we receive the word. Friends, Receiving the Word, if we go back to our positive example, the Thessalonians, it requires conscious, positive effort. It means receiving it as the Word of God, not as the Word of man. And if that is done, if you truly receive the Word, then the Word of God will work within you and will be worked out of you. But if you fail to receive the Word, if you reject it, You will not leave unchanged. You will leave change for the worse. And one day, God's wrath will work out of you.

Forever. But thanks be to God by his Holy Spirit. Let's pray. Father and our God, this is a sobering passage. It's good news in a certain sense because it's your promise that if we hear your word, if we receive your word, as the rain falls from heaven and does not return to you without watering the earth, giving bread to the eater and seed to the sower, so shall your word be. You've promised that if we receive the word, it will be at work in our lives. Lord, forgive us for times that we have failed to receive it as we should. and have thus failed to bear fruit as we should. Lord, break hardened hearts, remove stones from our lives. Help us to hear your word as we ought. In Jesus' name, amen.