

SHARING OUR OWN SELVES

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

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INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Union Church. If we haven't had a chance to meet yet, my name is Kyle Rodriguez, I'm one of the pastors here. And it's my privilege to open up the Word with you today.

Before we do that, let's pray.

Prayer of Illumination

This morning is a unique Sunday for us. As you've just witnessed, or been a part of, we are celebrating a new step for us as a church, recognizing one another and making promises to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ who are part of the same local body of believers in Jesus Christ.

A local church is ultimately not defined by the service times, the building they meet in, the types of worship songs they sing or the style of preaching. A local church is the people, collectively! People who commit to preaching the Word to one another, taking the sacraments together, and keeping one another accountable as we follow Jesus together.

And one of the unique things about this time of the life of Union Church is that we are so, so young. We officially launched less than nine months ago. We just welcomed our first, kind of "founding" group of members today. We are so young, we're just a baby. And that means that each of us has an outsized influence on the culture of Union Church.

There are not years of habits and cultural expectations built up here—either good or bad. Which means that our gospel-centeredness, and godly selflessness, character, compassion for one another, can lay a foundation of what this church will be like—God-willing—for years to come! But it also means that if we fall into habits of selfishness and divisiveness, habits of segmenting into isolated cliques and inner circles, habits of caring more about our preferences than about people, caring more about our comfort than carefully diving into the Word together, then those habits can lay a cracked and crumbling foundation for years to come. Each of us has an outsized influence, right now, not only on what Union Church is *like* now, but what it will be like for years to come.

So, as we follow Jesus together, whether you became a member this morning or not, I want to think about what the church is supposed to look like—what it means to be the body of Jesus Christ. And one of the first passages that came to mind as I thought about that concept was 1 Thessalonians chapter 2.

THESSALONIANS BACKGROUND

You see, the book of 1 Thessalonians is one of two letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, a city in Northern Greece. And this church in Thessalonica is one of the earliest, most influential churches in Europe—and, in fact, most Biblical scholars would say that this letter to the Thessalonian church is the oldest book of the New Testament.

So, let me paint a picture of this early, influential church, to show why I think it's so relevant to us.

The Apostle Paul had come to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey through modern-day Turkey and through modern-day Greece. The book of Acts, chapter 17, gives us some insights into that journey, describing how Paul spent at least three weeks evangelizing in the Jewish synagogue, but there is good indication that he spent some significant time there beyond just those three weeks, following up with and caring for the new converts there, and establishing a church in the house of a man named Jason. But, eventually, the Jewish leaders in Thessalonica grew tired of Paul's influence in the city and drove him out.

So, after leaving Thessalonica, Paul ended up traveling down further into southern Greece, through Berea, Athens, and eventually into the city of Corinth. And in Corinth he ended up staying longer than he had anywhere else, nearly 18 months. And it's while he's in this extended stay in Corinth that he writes this letter back to the church that he had planted in Thessalonica.

And it seems that in the six to 12 months since he left Thessalonica, the church has flourished. Listen to what Paul has to say about them in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8:

⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

So, the Thessalonians have become an example to all the believers in the region, word of their faith has spread. Their church—not the numbers but their faith—has become an inspiration across the entire region.

Paul also references the report he got from Timothy in chapter 3:

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and

long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

Paul is so, so encouraged by this church! Paul goes on to say in the first verse of chapter 4 that his instructions to the Thessalonians are basically: Do what you are doing, just do it more! This is a healthy and thriving church.

And one of the key reasons that they are healthy and thriving is what Paul said back in chapter 1: “You became imitators of us.” And so, my question is: What did they imitate? How did Paul and Silas and Timothy act while they were in Thessalonica? How did they conduct themselves in such a way that the Thessalonians took notice, and even after Paul left, they said: “We need to keep striving after Paul’s example”?

What is the foundation that Paul laid, that the Thessalonians built on, that has led to such a solid and secure church? That’s the question we’re asking as we look at 1 Thessalonians 2.

FOUNDATION: SHARING OUR OWN SELVES

Okay, now, before we go any further, I want to direct your attention to verse 8. I think verse 8 is the heart of this particular passage, it’s the center, the lens through which we need to read the rest of the passage. I remember reading this passage about two years ago and this verse has just crawled into my mind and stuck with me ever since: **So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.**

Friends, that is a verse that I hope would characterize the culture of a young church plant.

Think about what Paul is saying in this verse. He’s saying, “We LOVED you, Thessalonians, so much, we were so **affectionately desirous of you** that we couldn’t just roll in, preach the Gospel, then drop the mic and leave! We loved you so much that we had to, we were eager to share our very lives, our own selves with you!” This is a glimpse into Paul’s heartbeat for the Thessalonians, the heartbeat that has helped that church flourish. We were ready to not only share the gospel, but our own selves.

Ashley and I have moved several times over the last couple years, and there’s a few patterns that have emerged. For example: once pizza is served, any work that is left is not getting done. And conversely, if you are helping someone move, and pizza hasn’t been offered yet, you’re not done. But one unique thing that I’m thinking of this morning is that there are two types of friends that are revealed during a move. One friend hears that you’re moving and offers you all of the tools that you need: “Oh, hey, I’ve got boxes, I’ve got a dolly, I’ve got a truck, let me know if you need any of it!” And that’s great, that’s a friend offering helpful tools for moving. But there’s another type of friend who hears your moving and says: “What time? I’ll be there.”

Now, this isn’t to say that sharing tools with one another is bad! It’s not, it’s a good thing! But when you get to the end of the day, and you’re exhausted, and the pizza comes, and

you look around at the friends and family who just worked their tails off, who came into the mess WITH you, there's a different kind of love being shown there.

It's one thing to give people the tools that they need to accomplish something. It is another thing altogether to actually give yourself—to enter into the mess, to be a living, breathing person that is present in and through the problem. This is the kind of self-giving that Paul is talking about—and it's the kind of self-giving that must exist in a community of people that is going to last the long haul.

Make no mistake, the gospel message, the good news of God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ, is the single most important thing that we can offer one another. We have to be lending one another that tool constantly. But when you truly love somebody, you don't just drop off the tools and hope they figure it out. You step in. You teach them how to use the tool. You give your own self.

And that is what I hope to see us embody at Union Church.

So, if you're looking for kind of a one-sentence summary of what we're talking about today, it's simple: **For Union Church to be built on a long-lasting, healthy foundation, God equips us to share not only the gospel, but our own selves.** Let's spend the rest of our time together walking through Paul's reminiscing here to get some further instruction on what that might look like.

1. A Willingness to Suffer

The first thing we see is that **if we want to share our selves, we must be willing to suffer.** Paul says in verse 2: *But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.*

You can read about Paul's time in Philippi in Acts, chapter 16, and there, Paul and Silas, were dragged into streets, stripped of their clothes, publicly beaten and humiliated, and thrown in prison. Paul's not kidding when he says they suffered and were shamefully treated. Now, having endured that kind of suffering, you could understand if Paul wanted to take a break. Go back home, regroup. But instead, he and Timothy and Silas kept going. On to the next town. Thessalonica. And in Thessalonica, they would eventually encounter more suffering.

And Paul knew this. He knew what was coming. But they kept going anyway. Paul's ministry, a ministry of sharing both the gospel and himself, is a ministry of risk and suffering. In fact, Paul would go on to tell his protégé, Timothy, in a letter years later that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus" will suffer.

We will suffer normal, everyday things—as humans who live in a broken world, we all will experience suffering. But the New Testament also points out a *particular* suffering that

Christians will have to endure. The suffering that comes from having to kill sins and comforts that would keep you from following Christ. The suffering that may come from persecution from the world or attacks of Satan. But there is also the suffering that comes alongside loving another—sharing yourself with them.

It would be easy to be a church that merely shares the gospel with one another. We can meet here every week, sing the gospel to each other, preach it to each other, and beyond the minor suffering of having to carve out a couple hours a week to do so, it would be relatively pain-free. And honestly, for a huge chunk of the American church, that is what being a part of the church is. It's comfortable, it's safe.

But to share your very self with one another as Paul describes is to open yourself up to a new kind of suffering. It's to open yourself up to bear one another's suffering as you hear someone else's weighty, painful story and empathize with them. It's to spend sleepless nights in prayer for the couple who is on the brink of divorce. It's to be vulnerable in confessing your shameful sin to one another, or to swallow your pride and hurt and forgive one another when you've been wronged. It's to put aside your preference to spend the evening watching Netflix in order to have the widow or orphan over for dinner. To share your very self with one another will involve suffering!

But psyching yourself up to suffer is a difficult task. How do we do it? How do we do something we know will put us in the path of hurt? Well, for Paul, his willingness to suffer for something was directly tied to how much he valued that thing. The more you value something, the more you are willing to suffer for its sake.

We are willing to suffer going to gym because we value health. We are willing to suffer getting up in the middle of the night as parents because we value our children's health. We are willing to suffer long nights of studying because we value the education and opportunities that will come from having a degree. We won't ever willfully put ourselves in the path of suffering if we don't deeply value and long for something that lies on the end of that path.

And this is true of Paul, who says, even though we suffered, we still had boldness to push forward in mission. Paul is willing to suffer, because he values something so much that it's worth the risk of suffering. What does he value so highly? Well, keep reading:

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵ For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.

What is Paul's motivation? What does he value so much that he's willing to suffer for it? He values God! God is his ultimate treasure; God is the one whom he is trying to please. Okay, so, stay with me here: Paul's motivation to be willing to suffer is that he LOVES God. Paul says, if I was full of impure motives, if I just wanted to build my own reputation or make money, I would

not be doing this! Because this is hard! It brings suffering! There are easier ways to build a reputation or make money.

But Paul is motivated to please God first and foremost. God has graciously equipped him to preach the gospel, commanded him to preach the gospel, and Paul is compelled to obey. Not out of fear, but out of a deep longing to bring joy to the God who graciously redeemed him and made him a new creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works that were prepared beforehand for him (Eph. 2:9).

Think about what Paul says in Philippians 3:

"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ!"

In other words, Paul is not motivated by anything that this world can give him! Paul's eyes are fixed on his Creator, his Christ, rather than his contemporaries. And because of that, Paul can endure suffering—because the object of his affection is so worthy, so valuable, that any temporary suffering that may occur in pursuit of his God, in pursuit of the person of Jesus, will be well worth it.

Friends, is that how you see Jesus?

Brothers and sisters. If you are a follower of Jesus here this morning, please hear me: If you do not see the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the one who is infinitely valuable, infinitely worthy of your affection, as the one who is ultimately the source of your joy and comfort, as the one who is ultimately the one whom you are trying to please, then you will not be willing to suffer for his sake. There will be sin that you value more. There will be comfort that you value more. There will be a breaking point.

And if you do not understand that your brothers and sisters are HIS BODY, his Bride whom he loves, the people that he died for, and if you don't value them as a part of how you value him, then you will not be willing to suffer for them. You will balk at the idea of "sharing your own self" with them.

It is out of love for Christ alone—and love for his body, the church—that our commitment to one another must rest on. Let us learn to love and treasure Christ, that we might love and treasure one another, that we might be willing to suffer as we share our selves with one another.

2. A Mother's Gentle Touch

So, that's where we start: we must be willing to suffer. And it's a good starting point. But Paul has more to say. Let's keep reading.

⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸ So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. ⁹ For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

What we see here is that **to truly share our selves with one another, we must be characterized by gentleness.**

Think about what it looks like for a mother to feed her children. It means that when your infant son doesn't want to eat his dinner, you don't wrench open their jaw and shove that spoon down their gullet! A mother is gentle with her son, gently coaxing him to open his mouth—maybe using a few airplane noises in the process. Even if she has a million other things to do, her priority is not just to finish the job as fast as possible, she truly loves and cares for her child in a way that leads her to be instinctually gentle.

Paul says here that we **could** have made demands of you. As apostles of Christ, he and Timothy and Silas deserve a certain amount of honor, a certain amount of respect and even financial support.

Paul could have been **TOTALLY** focused on what the church owed him as he worked out the mission God called him to. He could have been a bulldozer, forging a path toward his goal as quickly as possible. He could have demanded a place to stay, discretionary income, so we could spend our every waking moment standing on the street corner evangelizing. He could have put his goals first—and they're important goals!

But instead of this rough, tunnel-vision kind of ministry, Paul describes their ministry as gentle, like a mother's care for her children. His primary concern was not what the church owed him, but what his new brothers and sisters in Christ needed in order to see and savor Jesus more clearly.

So, friends, as we think about what it looks like to share our very selves with one another, as a church, that means our primary mode of operation is not, how do I accomplish my goals within the church most quickly? Even if we have good goals! Our primary mode of operation is to look and see what it is that our brothers and sisters around us need and to be gentle with them as we coax them into following Jesus, more fully and faithfully.

And that's going to take time. Gentleness is slow. It takes time to gently coax a child into eating spinach baby food. Rough and direct is certainly a **faster** technique. But it may have devastating side effects.

So, sharing our very selves will mean taking time to listen, to get to know one another and figure out their needs. It will mean engaging in relationship over weeks, months, and years, practicing humility. A gentle touch means putting the experiences and needs of others ahead of our

longing for speed and results. To truly share our selves with one another, we must be as gentle as a mother.

3. A Father's Discipling Example

If Paul used the picture of a mother to describe a gentle attitude, next he uses the picture of a father to describe an attitude of discipleship by example. **To share our very selves, we must disciple one another by example.**

Let's keep reading:

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Now, the father metaphor here is a striking one. A father like the one Paul is describing is a father who is concerned with his children's growth, their day-to-day transformation from infants into mature, functioning adults. Look at the words Paul uses to describe what the father does here: exhort, encourage, charge. He's a father marked by gentleness, but also by a deep desire to see his children grow, a father who will not be complacent when he sees his children slipping.

Now, growing up in school, I knew exactly what it took to get an "A". But, honestly, I was pretty lazy. I wanted a good grade, but largely for the sense of other people recognizing that I could do it. And my father was pretty perceptive, and he started recognizing that about me. So what he started doing as I grew older, is every time I would write a paper, my dad would catch me before it was due, and he'd mark it all up in red pen, and I'd whine and say Dad, "you're so much harsher of a grader than my teachers, this is good enough." And he'd just kind of smirk at me, and say, "it doesn't matter if this is "good enough", you can do better."

Friends, our natural tendency is to settle for what the world thinks is "good enough". We're a part of a church, people think I'm a pretty respectable person, we have a comfortable life—as long as I avoid any major screw ups, we're doing great! But that's not following Jesus. That's just settling for what the world deems good enough.

But the New Testament doesn't call us to just avoiding big, public sins, it calls us to being holy as God is holy! It doesn't just call us to not have an affair, it calls us to be so dead set against lust that we'll be willing to poke out an eye if it causes us to sin. We're not just called us to avoid theft, we're called to kill every selfish impulse and lean into radical generosity. The call to be a disciple of Jesus is the call to radical transformation.

As a father, Paul saw it as his duty to help lead his children into that whole-life transformation. And that's basically why we have half of the New Testament, it's the reason why Paul continued to write these letters!

But Paul also knew that sharing his very self meant that he could not just call others into transformation without also walking alongside them. A good father doesn't ask his kids to do something he isn't doing. It's not an accident that Paul begins this reminder with his *own* conduct: We were righteous and blameless toward you. He's not saying they were perfect—but he is saying they walked the walk.

Friends, we must be concerned about the transformation of one another, we must—as a loving father—long to see the people around us grow. But if we are truly sharing our very selves with one another, we have to get in the game and lead by example when it comes to seeking holiness, growing in our faith, killing our sin.

Friends, your striving for holiness—your striving to look more and more like Jesus every day. It's not just for your sake, although it's good for you. It's not just for God's sake, although obeying him and glorifying him is our primary motivation. Your holiness is also for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ. It's for the sake of your children! That they might see you, that your example would drive them to holiness, that your encouragement and exhortation would not come off as a hypocrite who's focusing on the speck in someone else's eye while a two-by-four is jammed into their own—but that your encouragement and exhortation would be a reflection of someone who has been so enraptured by Jesus that their entire life has changed, and now you just want to help others see what you have!

We cannot aid one another in trying to become more and more like Jesus if we ourselves are not—by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us seek, like a good father, to lead by example.

4. How?

So how can we actually do this?

That's a lot of examples that Paul's given us, how do we actually put it into practice?

Because I have to tell you, these things are hard. I'm bad at them. I hate suffering, I try to avoid it all the time. I lose my patience, I am not always gentle, I sin, I am often a poor example. So, if you're sitting here thinking, wow, Paul left us a great example, but how am I, an ordinary Christian who struggles just to read my Bible during the week, how am I supposed to live up to that? —If that's you right now, I am with you. This sounds like way more than I'm capable of.

But the beautiful thing, Union Church, is that ultimately, Paul is not the only example of these things for us, but God himself, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, is the ultimate example of these things—and that example is the very thing that purchases for us the ability to live into them ourselves.

Did you realize that all of these things, are exactly what Christ has already done for us? He is the one who was willing to suffer on our behalf, knowing that he would be struck down and afflicted, pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53). He is the one whose motives were completely pure, seeking not fame and fortune, aiming not to please men, but to please his Father (John 8:29). He is the one whose conduct was completely holy and righteous, living the life we could not live (2 Corinthians 5:21). He is the one who is gentle and lowly in heart, inviting us to lay our burdens on him and find rest (Matthew 11:29). He is the one who cared so much for our transformation that he sent the Helper, the Holy Spirit, who grants us the power we need to grow into his image (John 14:16). He is the one who did not just give us the tools we needed but shared with us his very self as he bled and died upon a cross.

Oh, brothers and sisters, you cannot share your very self with those around you this morning if you are not simultaneously broken and then enraptured by the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has shared his very self with you.

So, friends, let us first look to Jesus this morning. Let us rejoice in the fact that he loved us so much, was so affectionate of you and of me, that he did not just share the gospel with us but he has shared his very self. Let us run to him in prayer, through the intercession of the Holy Spirit, asking him to equip us with the kind of holiness and love that a healthy church must-have.

Because he has shared his own self with us, may we long to share our own self with one another.