

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 14, 2015)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Senior Recognition Sunday

Next Steps

(1 Thessalonians)

Introduction: Graduating to...?

A few days from now, the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Golden State Warriors will be asking themselves, "*What's next?*" One team will wonder if they can repeat as NBA champions. The other will wonder what they need to change to win next year.

The several dozen men and women vying for the presidency in 2016 are asking themselves, a full seventeen months before the election, "*What's next?*" If they are to make a successful run for the White House, what should they do *next* to convince voters that they are "the one"?

Many High School graduates fresh from walking across a stage, are asking themselves, now that they have completed a major life milestone, "*What's next?*"

Will it be trade school? Will they go straight to a university or to a Junior College? Will they enter the job market?

The graduates we have heard from this morning have shared with us some of their dreams. They have told us where they would like to go and what they would like to do. They are excited about their "next steps."

So...what about you?

You may not have just walked across a stage, but "*What's next?*" is always a timely question.

What's next for your family? What's next for your career? What's next for your new and improved diet and exercise goals?

And what's next in your walk with God?

That's really what I want to ask this morning. Given where you *are* in your life with God, *what's next?* THAT'S an important question and I suspect it's on your mind because THIS is what I suspect is true about you.

One, I think you've come to church today because you wanted to. I don't think you came grudgingly or out of compulsion. I don't think anybody made you come to church. You've come to church willingly.

Two, I think you've come to church today because of a hunger for what only God can provide. You are thirsty for living water and, at some level, you're convinced that living water is only available from Jesus.

And here's the third thing I suspect about you today. Given that you are here because you want to be and that you are here because of a God-hunger, I also assume that you want to move forward in your walk with God and that you want to make progress. "*What's next?*" matters to you.

So, I propose that we spend our time in God's Word giving attention to one particular letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a church - a church much like our church - filled with people who had decided to follow Jesus, a church to which Paul gave "*next?*" words.

Now Paul wrote a lot of letters to a lot of churches. Some of the churches that received letters from Paul weren't doing well and Paul's letters to them contained painful rebukes.

Not this church. This church was doing VERY well and Paul commended them.

However, along with the commendation, they also received something else, and paying attention to that something else is where we're headed today as we each, individually, consider, "*What's next?*".

The people and the church we are considering today lived in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica, a seaport town on the northern shore of the Aegean Sea.

Meet the Thessalonian church...

Paul, along with Silas, a good friend and a partner in ministry, invested heavily in serving Jesus in Thessalonica for a very brief period of time on Paul's second missionary journey.

Their visit is recorded in Acts, chapter 17, which shows them moving from the city of Philippi to Thessalonica.

While in Philippi (Acts 16), they suffered for the Gospel. They were both beaten and thrown in jail for serving Jesus. While a church was established and lives were changed and souls were saved, Philippi was a place of pain for Paul.

So, after suffering, he and Silas left Philippi and made their way to Thessalonica. According to what we read in Acts (the New Testament book of church history), they spent little more than three weeks there.

They went to the Jewish synagogue on three consecutive Sabbaths where they presented the Good News that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, that He had died a sacrificial death for the sins of all people, that He had risen from the dead, and that He offered eternal life to all who believed.

Their message was well received by some; not so well by others.

A few of the Jews were persuaded. They believed in Jesus and joined Paul and Silas in forming the first Christian community in the city.

In addition to the Jewish believers, since the apostles were also sharing their faith with the Gentiles between Sabbaths, a number of them also believed. The result was the establishment of a beachhead for the Gospel in no time at all.

But then, after only three weeks in the city, the Jews who didn't believe *plus* some of the Thessalonian city officials violently opposed the Christians. And when a riot broke out Paul and Silas were quickly sent away by the new believers so that they - Paul and Silas - wouldn't be caught up in the violence.

So, Paul and Silas left Thessalonica, but they weren't about to be derailed from spreading the good news. They kept on evangelizing and they continued with their disciple-making ways as they traveled from city to city.

From Thessalonica they moved on to Berea, then to Athens, and finally to Corinth, where they stayed for more than a year and a half, establishing a vibrant, Jesus-centered, worshiping church.

But during all of this time they had not forgotten Thessalonica. "Out of sight" didn't mean "out of mind." They were very concerned for the spiritual and physical welfare of those believers who had only had three weeks of grounding in the faith.

So, Paul sent another one of his co-laborers, Timothy, back to Thessalonica to check up on the still new believers.¹

Timothy traveled from Corinth to Thessalonica, got a read on the church's health, and then came back to Corinth to give Paul his report. In response to Timothy's report, Paul sat down to write the letter that we call 1 Thessalonians.

Listen to what Paul says about this church. He is obviously VERY pleased with how things are going there.²

¹ [1] *Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, [2] and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith...*

"You've Taken Some GREAT Steps!"

Character (1:1-3)

[2] We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; [3] constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father

Work of faith

When Paul mentions the Thessalonians' "**work of faith**" he is telling them how excited he is that their faith is working. Their faith is working itself out in obedience.

When it comes to life in Jesus, faith is basic. It is essential to a relationship with God. Eternal life is God's gift, given to whoever believes in Jesus.

And that FAITH is to WORK. Paul often commended a working faith and in some places he commanded it (Philippians 2:12).

It is, however, clear from lots of places in his letters that it is very possible that a believer might NOT work out his or her faith, might NOT produce a "**work of faith**" and might NOT lead a God-honoring life. (Else why give the command?)

"NOT" happens, and when it does, it is a tragedy. But there was no reason to worry about the Thessalonian church. Theirs was a working faith.

In the first century, there were no Vacation Bible Schools or Sunday School classes. There was certainly no church yard to mow or trash to remove from the church building after services on Sunday (since there were no church buildings prior to AD 300).

But there were orphans and widows to serve. There were the poor in the community to feed and to clothe. There were needs to be met at every turn - and the Christians in Thessalonica were working out their faith by meeting needs.

Paul also speaks of their "**labor of love.**"

Labor of love

Love marked the church at Thessalonica. Those in the church loved each other. That means *less* that they had loving feelings toward each other (which they probably had) and *more* that they acted in ways that were loving toward each other.

They *labored* in love. They served each other when it was inconvenient and sacrificial and difficult. In a setting in which they were experiencing severe persecution, they put each other first.

They practiced the "**one anothers**" to which Jesus calls His followers. They *encouraged* and *prayed for* and *served* and were *hospitable* toward each other.

So, along with a vibrant culture of faithfulness, there was also a culture of love in the church in Thessalonica. There was, in addition, a culture of hope.

Steadfastness of hope / long-suffering, persevering church (2:14)

Paul mentioned their **[3] steadfastness of hope**, which is remarkable given what he says later - **[2:14b] for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews³**

You'll remember that opposition came almost immediately to the Thessalonian Christians.

² When they give thanks for this church's faith, love, and hope they are partly remembering what they had initially seen during the three weeks they had been with them and partly affirming what Timothy has just reported. (See 3:6ff)

³ They had been forewarned by Paul and Silas that following Jesus would involve afflictions, persecutions, etc... (3:4)

They faced opposition to their faith within three weeks time from government officials and from members of the local synagogue.⁴

The opposition was so violent that Paul and Silas were forced to leave the city.⁵

And some of these three week old baby Christians may well have suffered the kinds of things that Christians in many places are suffering today - loss of employment and social standing, loss of homes, loss of friendships, loss of family relationship - even loss of life.

However, based on Timothy's report, they stood strong while suffering because of their *hope* that what they saw and experienced wasn't the end of the story or the whole story.

They maintained a solid hope for a future with God, hope that they would one day hear, **[Matthew 25:21] "Well done, good and faithful servant"**, and hope that God would one day reward them for their faithfulness and love in these hard days.⁶

So, the church at Thessalonica was a fine church. Not a perfect church, but the cardinal virtues of faith, love, and hope were there in abundance.

Brothers and sisters, I look around at what is going on at our church and I see evidence of the same things.

⁴ [2:14] *For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews*

⁵ He brings up the suffering they endured in Philippi: [2:1] *For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, [2] but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.*

⁶ [Hebrews 11:6] *And without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to Him must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*

Regularly, you prepare meals for people who are sick. You mow yards for those who can't. You stock the Food Pantry for those who are unable to buy for themselves. And on and on it goes.

No one would suggest that we are a perfect people or that our church is faultless. But there is genuine faith and love and hope evident. If Paul had been looking here like he had looked at Thessalonica, he would commend us for good things.

God is making a difference in our lives just as He was making a difference in the lives of those first-century Thessalonian Christians. And when God is making a difference in lives, well, the word gets out.

The word got out - quickly! - about what kind of people these Thessalonians had become. It got out to the believing world of Asia Minor.

Testimony

Examples

[6] You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

They were examples of what disciples of Jesus should live like. And, despite the persecution they had suffered, they also lived joyfully. The Holy Spirit's presence and power was undeniable.

Whether the word got out through travelers who spread the word about how the Thessalonians imitated Jesus or by Paul telling the other churches, "Hey, look at the Thessalonians - they know what faith and love and hope is all about!", the word got out.

The Thessalonians' reputation among the churches probably got out unintentionally. But their impact on the non-churched world was quite intentional. They shared the Gospel far and wide.

Witnesses

[8] For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

[9] For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, [10] and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

These new Christians were flaming evangelists. They were so evangelistic that everywhere Paul went with the Gospel message he ran into people who had already been told about Jesus - by the Thessalonians.

This reminds me of something Dean Chollar wrote about recently in one of his newsletters. Dean leads Crossway, a ministry that we support that digs fresh water wells, serves orphans and widows, and shares the Gospel, primarily in Central America and Africa.

On a recent trip to Kenya Dean was sharing the Gospel and was seeing fewer positive responses to his message than he had in the past.

He wasn't concerned, but he was curious as to why so few were placing their faith in Jesus.

Then someone told him that many of the people to whom he was speaking had already come to faith because Crossway's in-country leader, Ken Gatithi, had beat him to the punch and had preached the Gospel before Dean arrived!

That's what was happening to the Apostle Paul. Those pesky Thessalonians were beating Paul to the punch and telling everyone in they knew in Macedonia and Achaia about the life-changing, soul-saving power of Jesus before he had a chance to do so.

So, the church at Thessalonica was filled with growing disciples. They were marked by faith, love, and hope and they were effective witnesses. This combination of character and witnessing, virtue and evangelism, were both abundantly in place among the Christians there.

And Paul affirmed them. He told them that their fervent, zealous, Jesus-loving ways were great.⁷

But he didn't leave them with "job well done" because they had not arrived. This really fine church filled with growing disciples was in need of a "next."

So, listen to what Paul says to them as he urges them to move forward.

"Here are Some Important 'Next Steps'"

Holiness (4:1ff)

[1] Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.

You're walking with God! (v. 1)

Those words - "excel still more" - paint a picture of progress and forward motion.

It is what happens after a graduation. The graduate celebrates, recalibrates - and then charges ahead. After High School, there are more challenges ahead. High School equips for the next challenge, but no High School graduate rests on his laurels and takes it easy.

⁷ Here's just one of many such encouraging words: ***[13] For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received 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, which also performs its work in you who believe.***

And Paul didn't want these faithful Christians in Thessalonica to think, "*MISSION: ACCOMPLISHED*" either.

As we continue reading what Paul wrote to them in chapter three, he addressed sexual issues.

A practical step "next" (vv. 2-8)

He mentions the need for purity. He calls for them to abstain from any sexual sin. He calls them to marital sexual expression, marital faithfulness and to sexual self-control AS IF these faithful, loving, hopeful Christians might be struggling - and failing - on the sexual front.⁸

Is it possible that the Thessalonian believers who were known far and wide as wonderful examples to fellow Christians and as vibrant witnesses to outsiders had a blind spot when it came to their sex lives?

Sure.

These guys lived in a sex-saturated society. The Greco-Roman world had moral standards that were *very different* from the standards they had learned from Paul and Silas.

And it isn't a stretch for me to think that serious Christ-followers would have had trouble moving from a super-permissive, "*anything goes*" mindset, to The Jesus Way of sexual celibacy if they were single and faithfulness to their husband or wife if they were married.

So, while affirming that they were actually walking with God (v. 1), Paul didn't hesitate to tell them to pay more attention to purity. Here was their "next step."

Now, if the Apostle Paul was to schedule a one-on-one with you, an after church lunch today, besides affirmation what might he say to you? What "*next*" might he suggest?

Would it be related to the sexual arena? Lots and lots of people struggle here. Our culture is every bit as sex-saturated as Paul's, with TV getting racier, exploitative movies and porn nearly breaking the Internet.

The Bible tells Christians to be sexually chaste if they aren't married. It tells married people to have sex with each other - and with nobody else.

Would Paul call you to "*excel still more*" in the sexual realm?

Or would he point out irregularities in your financial life?

Would he point out language you use - words you wouldn't use if Jesus was standing with you, slight exaggerations (i.e. - lies), slanders and gossip - that doesn't fit who you are as a believer in Jesus?

The race isn't over and we haven't arrived any more than the first century Christians in Thessalonica had. And Paul's not finished.

Right after he addressed sexual issues, he has another "*excel still more.*"

Love (4:9-12)

You're loving well (vv. 9-10)

[9] Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; [10] for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more

⁸ [2] For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. [3] For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; [4] that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, [5] not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; [6] and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. [7] For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. [8] So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

He has already affirmed that they are doing well when it comes to the virtue of love. (See 1:3; 3:6) But here he says that there is room for growth and change. The change he urges is not theoretical. It is extremely practical.

A practical step “next” (vv. 11-12)

[11] and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, [12] so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

Evidently, there was a tendency among the Thessalonians to not be hard workers. It may have been a city-wide tendency or even a broader cultural thing.⁹ But not working was not only a problem in the city, it was a problem in the church.

That’s the sense I get here in these verses and it is validated in 2 Thessalonians when Paul brings up the same issue, recalling what he and Silas had told them during those initial three weeks -

[2 Thessalonians 3:10] For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.¹⁰

So how is it that Paul would tie together the need to “*excel still more*” in love with the need to work hard?

The two are inextricably linked.

If we *can* work and we *do* work, we have the resources to not only meet our own needs, but also to do good to those who can’t work.

But if we *can* work and we *don’t* work we become a burden to those who could be using their excess to meet the needs of those who can’t work. Now, they have to support able-bodied non-workers. So, to *not* work when we *can* work is unloving.

Again, Paul is writing to growing Christians in Thessalonica with great reputations for godliness. But these faithful, loving, hopeful Christians had a chink in their armor, a glaring blind spot.

Now Paul wants them to be in a place where they can meet the needs of orphans and widows and the disabled, provide hospitality, and support the expansion of the Gospel - none of which could be done if they were unwilling to work.

So, quite simply, he urged them to “*excel still more*” when it came to love by getting a job.

Nothing theoretical or philosophical. Just an imminently practical way to carry out one of God’s greatest commandments.¹¹

There is no question that there is room for growth for every one of us on our way to fulfilling Jesus’ call to love. So, what would “*excel still more*” look like for you in the realm of love?

Would it involve being more patient and kind with your loved ones? Could you see yourself being more compassionate toward that especially needy person in your life? Will you be sure to carry your 70% portion of the load of your marriage - and do so with a smile?

There are countless ways to grow in love if we would only invite God to let us see them. No matter where we are in our walk with Jesus - just starting out, or decades in - we can all “*excel still more*” on our way to loving the way Jesus loves.

⁹ Paul made reference in his letter to Titus (who served on the island of Crete) to the well-earned reputation the Cretans had for laziness.

¹⁰ Earlier in the letter Paul made reference to how he and Silas had lived while they were in Thessalonica, making the point that they worked hard: ***[9] For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.***

¹¹ In another place, Paul says that love is more important than encyclopedic knowledge, mountain-moving faith, and eloquent speech. (1 Corinthians 13) and Jesus said that love for others is second in importance only to the command to love God. (Mark 12:30-31)

And speaking of ***“excel still more”***!

Paul ends this letter to the church at Thessalonica with about the most exhaustive listing of instructions to be found anywhere in the New Testament.

He encourages them to:

- submit to their spiritual leaders;
- deal sensitively with those who have particular needs;
- be peacemakers (NOT peacekeepers);
- pray for each other;
- NOT repay evil with evil but to do good to those you know;
- always rejoice, to always pray, to always give thanks; and
- give full rein to the Spirit’s activity - with discernment - while steering clear of every form of evil.

For the Thessalonians and for us, there is more to faithfulness than what we have practiced. There is more to love than what we have known.

Now is not the time for complacency. Now is the time to keep moving forward, to press on, to ***“excel still more.”***