

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 31, 2021)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Taking Your Next Step into Faithfulness

(Studies in 1 Thessalonians)

Applause from an Apostle

(Background; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)

Study #1

Introduction: The ideal vs the real vs...

In the ideal marriage, every day is an anniversary, and every other day is Valentine's. Love flows and respect flows at all times in this perfectly complementary relationship of equals.

Realistically speaking the ideal marriage is a mirage. Things are different in a real marriage.

In a real marriage, anniversaries and Valentine's Day celebrations sometimes take rain checks to get the tires changed. Kids move to center stage, joined by mortgages, careers, and carpooling. Husbands and wives often feel like vending machines for the world.

So, what's a husband and a wife who want a thriving, flourishing, fulfilling marriage to do?

You can't live in an idealistic mirage. But you also don't want to settle for an unhealthy and unsatisfying reality.

The best move is to enjoy the pursuit of the journey from the real toward the ideal. One day at a time, one step at a time.

What's true for marriage and career and other major life arenas is also true for life in the church.

We have this ideal in mind of a church where everybody loves everybody, and everybody is walking with Jesus. In the ideal church, everybody is serving, praying, giving, and evangelizing.

That's a great ideal, but you don't attend an ideal church. You attend the very real Northwest Community Church.

And here, sin happens. Here, we stumble and fall. Here, we serve each other one day and the next day don't get along all that well. Here, we serve Jesus one day and fail to even try the next.

Of course, there are good things happening here. But it isn't ideal. There are real challenges and problems.

So, just like in marriage, we will refuse to settle for something weak. And we will press on toward the ideal of heartfelt worship, genuine love, and fervent service.

We affirm that there has been progress. And we'll agree that there's a need for change if we, as a church, are going to become what God designed us for. And together, we'll take next steps into maturity.

That's exactly what one first-century church did. And it's their story we're going to explore over the next several weeks.

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter - 1 Thessalonians - to that church, and we're going to explore that letter. But before we open to the letter, I want to set the table with some background from the book of Acts, the book that gives us the history of the early church of Jesus.

Background to First Thessalonians (from the Book of Acts)

- *Beginning of the church to the First Missionary Journey*

After His death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven, the Holy Spirit arrived, empowering Jesus' first followers for service.

From the Day of Pentecost on, the church grew by leaps and bounds. There were miracles. Souls were saved. Lives were changed.

Then - persecution hit. An early church leader, Stephen, was stoned to death. That sparked widespread opposition to Christianity in Jerusalem. But instead of slowing the church's progress, persecution led to a scattering. And THAT led to the church's explosive expansion.¹

Churches were established throughout Judea and Samaria. The Gospel spread to God-fearing Gentiles in neighboring regions, south into Africa and north into Syria.

One of the new Syrian churches, located in Antioch, was eager to spread the Gospel to others who had never heard of Jesus.

So, they commissioned Paul and Barnabas and a young man, John Mark. Sadly, John Mark deserted when the going got tough, and Paul and Barnabas kept going north and west into Asia Minor.

- *Highlights from the First Missionary Journey*

They traveled through what is today, the country of Turkey. Lots of people came to faith in Jesus.

They equipped Christians to live for Jesus and were severely persecuted for doing so. At the city of Lystra, Paul became the target of a mob's violence and was stoned to the point where he was presumed dead. (Acts 14)

They returned to Antioch, got recharged from that first trip and were soon ready to head back out for more Gospel-spreading ministry.

But Paul and Barnabas couldn't agree about taking John Mark - the one who had deserted them - on Missionary Journey #2.²

¹ As a result of the church's persecution, the believers who had been nurtured and equipped in Jerusalem went out to the nations of the world, preaching as they went.

² We should note that Barnabas spent time with John Mark and that the young man became a solid, reliable man. Paul recognized this late in life and asked for Mark's service while he himself was in prison. Mark wrote the Gospel by his name.

The solution was a ministry-doubling break-up. Barnabas took John Mark under his wing for further training, while Paul took along Silas/Silvanus³ and Timothy on his travels.⁴

- *The Second Missionary Journey*

First stop, Philippi!

Not far into his trip, God gave Paul a vision where he was invited to go to Macedonia.⁵ So, they veered west and headed into the Greek world.⁶

The first city to which Paul, Timothy, and Silas traveled was Philippi. There, people were saved and a church was established. But, after seeing some spiritual fruit in Philippi, things turned difficult.

Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten, and thrown into jail for preaching Jesus.

But, on the first night of their imprisonment, while singing hymns of praise to God about midnight (!!), God sent an earthquake that released them from their chains.

The jailer, who assumed that the prisoners had all escaped, was about to commit suicide.

Paul assured him that all the prisoners were still there, and then he urged the jailer to believe in Jesus to be saved - which the jailer promptly did.

³ Silvanus had been one of the men who took the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts 15). He was known as a faithful preacher (2 Corinthians 1:19) and was the Apostle Peter's helper in writing his first letter.

⁴ We know that Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a converted, Jewish mother. Paul had Timothy circumcised when he took him on this missionary journey. Paul valued Timothy very highly.

⁵ With that decision, which may or may not have seemed momentous to Paul, the course of Christianity was set for centuries to come as Paul turned his back on Asia Minor and became the first Christian missionary to Europe.

⁶ See Acts 16:10.

The next morning, when the Philippian authorities begged Paul and Silas to leave, they headed straight for Thessalonica, about a hundred miles away.⁷

On to Thessalonica

Thessalonica was the largest and most influential city in Macedonia, the capital of the province.⁸ In Paul's day, it was home to over 200,000 people.

Corinth and Ephesus and Thessalonica were the main seaports to the Aegean Sea. And Thessalonica was strategically located on the main Roman road (The Ignatian Way) that led east to the Orient.⁹

There was a diverse population in the city, consisting of a large Jewish community,¹⁰ as well as a large [pagan] Greek population.

Luke mentions that, as was Paul's custom, he went to the Jews first and preached Jesus for three straight Sabbaths.¹¹

The Bible isn't clear as to how much longer Paul and his team stayed in Thessalonica. But it probably wasn't that much longer, maybe just a few more weeks.¹² The time there was productive, though, as they left behind a thriving, very diverse church made up of Jews, Greeks, and some of the city's leading women. (Acts 17:4)

⁷ Paul's usual "MO" was to serve in strategic population centers from which the faith might radiate out.

⁸ Thessalonica is one of the few cities that has survived from antiquity to the present. It is a large population center today, referred to as Thessaloniki. During World War I, it served as an important Allied base. In World War II the German army overran it and deported and then killed about 60,000 Jews from the city.

⁹ One ancient writer, Meletius, in referring to these items and the natural beauty and hot springs of the area, said, "*So long as nature does not change, Thessalonica will remain wealthy and fortunate.*"

¹⁰ Attested to by the fact that there was a significant synagogue there.

¹¹ Acts 17:2-3.

¹² We know that Paul stayed in Thessalonica long enough to receive two "home missions offerings" from Philippi. We know that he worked at his tentmaking trade to support himself. (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:6-15)

The reason the missionaries had to leave as soon as they did was because they were AGAIN opposed for spreading the message of Jesus, just like they had been in Philippi. Things got nasty in Thessalonica.

There was a riot. One of the new converts, Jason, was dragged from his house along with other members of the church to stand before the authorities. When it was clear that they could no longer carry out Gospel ministry in Thessalonica, Paul and his friends left.

As they left, Paul would have been thinking about all the things he wished he could have done there but had not had opportunity to do.

He hadn't taken them as deep into Scripture as he would have liked to have done. He hadn't told them as much about Jesus as he wanted to. He hadn't modeled the faith long enough.

He was no doubt concerned for them. How would they fare in the absence of any ongoing, nurturing, shepherding care?

Onward, from Thessalonica

From Thessalonica, Paul and his friends went to the cities of Berea,¹³ Athens,¹⁴ and then to Corinth.

So, given that he had seen little spiritual fruit from his ministry in either Berea or Athens, and that he had been rejected in both cities, in what frame of mind do you think we would have found Paul had we happened upon him in Corinth?

Remember, he had broken a relational tie with a close friend (Barnabas) and had been physically beaten in Philippi and been the focal point of riots in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. He had been mocked at Athens. And now, in Corinth, where he encountered initial rejection, he was essentially alone.

¹³ Acts 17:11-13. There was some receptivity to the Gospel in Berea, but opponents from Thessalonica opposed to the Gospel came and forced Paul to leave.

¹⁴ In Athens, he stayed a short while, and saw some small amount of fruit for the Gospel, along with rejection. (Acts 18:10-15)

It's reasonable to believe that Paul was discouraged when he came to Corinth after Athens. He even tells us that he arrived in Corinth ***[1 Corinthians 2:3] in weakness, and in fear and in great trembling.***

But, while he was in Corinth, he received news from Macedonia, specifically from the church at Thessalonica. A progress report came from Timothy telling Paul how the church at Thessalonica was doing.

Timothy reported that they were doing great. Upon discovering that, he sat down and wrote them the letter that is before us today.¹⁵

Throughout this letter, there is a spirit of delight. Paul was grateful to God for the progress the church in Thessalonica had made since he left them.

Now, for the time remaining, we'll look at the letter's first ten verses so that we can see what it was that brought such delight to Paul, because whatever was going on THERE, we want to see going on HERE.

As with any letter, there is a greeting. Notice how Paul opens.

Thanksgiving for a Church's Faith, Love, and Hope (vv. 1-4)

A Uniquely "Congregational" Greeting from Paul (1:1)

[1] Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ¹⁶: Grace to you and peace.¹⁷

¹⁵ Acts 18 tells us that Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth, and we understand that he wrote the letters of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in the early part of the year, 50 AD, while he was there at Corinth.

¹⁶ In the first verse, Paul refers to Jesus by the word "Lord." This was the word regularly used to translate the special name for God, "YAHWEH," in the Old Testament. *Κυριος* also held special meaning for Greeks. The word implied divinity to both Jews and Greeks. "Jesus" is His human name and would have reminded the Thessalonians of His identification with them. "Christ" is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word "Messiah" - meaning anointed one. The combination of the three terms into one impressive title gives us compactly a view of a Person who alone can be identified as God in the flesh.

Many of Paul's letters were written to individuals (like those to Timothy or Titus or Philemon) or to groups of people in the church (Elders and Deacons). This letter was written to ***"the church."***

It was directed to everyone who made up the church. Men, women, and young people, rich and poor, mature and immature in the faith. No one was excluded.

And Paul's self-identification is different than what we usually find at the head of his letters. Often, he called attention to the fact that he was "an apostle" or "a servant of Jesus Christ." Here it is just ***"Paul"***, which sounds friendly.

He prayed that his friends in the church in Thessalonica would experience the riches of God's grace¹⁸ and peace.¹⁹ He wanted nothing but the best for them.

And then, as he almost always did, he broke into commendation.

Commendation for Christ-Honoring Character (vv. 2-4)

[2] We always give thanks to God for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; [3] constantly keeping in mind your WORK OF FAITH and LABOR OF LOVE and PERSEVERANCE OF HOPE in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, [4] knowing, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, His choice of you.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been in Thessalonica only a few months earlier. Now Timothy has brought back news that they were doing GREAT. Specifically, they were abounding in faith, love, and hope.

There are a few places in the New Testament where we find these three graces lumped together to form a list of cardinal virtues.

¹⁷ The way Paul opens this letter is typical for letters of the first century. The author identified himself first, followed by the name of the recipients.

¹⁸ All that we receive from God through the work of Jesus on the cross.

¹⁹ The Greeks thought of peace as the absence of strife. For the Hebrews, it was something positive - shalom.

And we normally read **“faith, hope, and love.”**

I think that Paul changed the order here, largely because the Thessalonians were suffering for their faith and needed to hear **“hope”** round out the list.²⁰

He starts out commending them for their **“work of faith.”** Paul was excited that their faith was working.

Work of faith

The Bible is clear in its teaching about salvation. Being justified before God has nothing to do with our works. There is no amazing work you could do to be saved. There’s no number of good works you could do to be saved. Salvation is by God’s grace through faith.

But here, Paul combines the two words without contradicting himself. The Thessalonian’s faith in Jesus resulted in work for Jesus. They were faith-FULL.

Paul gives no content to the concept. We might wish he had given a specific, concrete example, and he didn’t give it. But we do get this image of a congregation that is fully engaged in working for, in serving Jesus.

In Thessalonica, such a high percentage of people were engaged in working in music and recovery and Sunday School and youth and video and sound production and Care Groups and Men’s and Women’s ministries and nursery and grounds maintenance and the food pantry and ESL (Greek SL?) and serving the poor that Paul could say to the whole church, *“I thank God for your /y’alls work of faith.”*

Labor of love

They were also known for how loving they were. He commended them for their **“labor of love”**. But **“labor”** is different than **“work.”**

“Work” can be pleasant and stimulating. **“Labor”** (think about a woman in labor) is the grueling activity that continues when the going gets tough.

There is great **reward** for work. There is great **cost** in labor. The Thessalonians labored in love, which is to say that they loved the way God loves.²¹

God loves us, not because we are worthy or because we deserve it. He loves us even though He knows we are unworthy.

As Paul thought about the kinds of relationships he saw in the church at Thessalonica, he saw them laboring to love each other well.

It isn’t easy to love when someone has acted unlovable or when someone has sinned against us or when someone has done something that violates the rules we say we believe in.

That’s tough for us, today, and it would have been tough for Paul’s friends in Thessalonica.

But he has heard from Timothy that even when church members were being porcupiny with each other, love continued to flow. They labored on, lovingly.

Finally, he commended these brand-new Christians for their **“perseverance of hope.”**

Perseverance of hope

Biblical hope is different than what might naturally come to mind when we hear the word, **“hope.”** Biblical hope is not resignation to fate and it’s more than cheery optimism.

²¹ The word Paul used for love in this case is the Greek word *αγαπη*, a word that was rarely used in the Greek language prior to the writing of the New Testament. The New Testament authors imported what they had come to understand about God’s love into *αγαπη*. It describe distinctively Christian love.

²⁰ See Romans 5:2-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5; Col. 1:4; Heb. 6:10-12, 10:22-24.

When the Bible talks about hope it points to active faithfulness when life is hard and when opposition hits.²²

Hope, by definition, is future focused. We hope for what we have not yet received, and our hope translates into action.

- Hope for a win motivates a team to play hard, even when it's behind in the closing minutes.
- Hope for an improved grade motivates a struggling student to study hard.
- Hope for a healthier marriage prompts a man and a woman to invest in marriage counseling when their relationship turns sour.

Hope is powerful, but it takes courage to act hopefully.

When Paul commended the Thessalonians for their ***“perseverance of hope”***, he didn't mean that they were in a particularly hopeful situation.

He was applauding them for continuing to follow Jesus, despite suffering for Jesus. He applauded them for serving Jesus, hopeful of Jesus' victory and for the fulfillment of all His promises - all evidence to the contrary, notwithstanding.

This was a church that was experiencing persecution. Fiercely antagonistic foes were making life miserable for these Christians - and they were remaining faithful.

That faithfulness was in place because they courageously refused to stop hoping for the future God had promised them in Jesus.

Paul calls them his ***“brothers and sisters, beloved by God.”***

One year earlier, he wouldn't have called anyone in that city a ***“brother”*** or a ***“sister”***. They were far from God. Now, they are family.

²² Both Thessalonians epistles have a lot to say about God's plans for the future, and it was the early Christian's grasp of a future controlled by a God who loved them that fueled their lives in the NOW.

As we listen to the words of verses two and three, where Paul describes the character of the church, there is no wonder as to why he gave thanks to God for them every time he prayed.

Another thing that made Paul smile was the Thessalonians' changed lives due to the life-changing power of the message.

Thanksgiving for Courageous Changes (vv. 5-7)

The Gospel Comes with Life-Changing Power (v. 5)

[5] for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sakes.

When Paul, Silas, and Timothy came to Thessalonica, fresh from escaping Philippi's jail, they arrived with the same attesting miracles there had been displayed in Philippi and at lots of other places.

The Gospel came to Thessalonica with God's power. It also came with apostolic integrity.

All three of these missionaries lived for an audience of One. They weren't greedy or deceitful. They handled themselves with unimpeachable integrity. (Of course, the Gospel of Jesus is true, even when preached by liars. But the character of Paul and his friends was an exclamation mark to the truth of the message they brought.)

Paul smiled when he reflected on the report Timothy brought back from Thessalonica. The lives of his friends there continued to be changed by the Gospel.

They were practicing “imitation Christianity” - imitating the apostles who had imitated Jesus.

Christians Who Reflect Jesus (vv. 6-7)

[6] You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word during great affliction with the joy of the Holy

Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

Pressure cooker Christianity

The word we translate here, **“affliction.”** is a word that, in other places, describes the process of pressing grapes when making wine. *Affliction* refers to a crushing pressure.

In Thessalonica, external forces were aiming to crush them for following Jesus. The church was under intense pressure, and that kind of pressure can be painful.

But pressure is not an altogether bad thing...

Pressure applied to grapes produces wine and pressure deep in the earth turns coal into diamonds.

In the same way, pressure in the form of opposition and persecution was turning the Thessalonians into a church of unforgettable impact.

In a couple of Sundays (November 14), we’re going to be observing *The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church*. We will be reminded of our own brothers and sisters who, today, are being “pressed” by affliction.

I regularly read about our family members who lose jobs, have their churches raided or burned down, are rejected by loved ones, and are beaten and maimed - just for following Jesus. And they are turning sweeter because of it, more loving, more forgiving, more like Jesus.

Our suffering family would urge us, who also suffer, even if not for following Jesus, to allow the Holy Spirit to use the afflictions we suffer to sweeten us and to turn us TO Jesus. Certainly, we are never to allow our hardships to turn us AWAY FROM Jesus.

Imitation Christianity (the good kind!)

Affliction was the order of the day in Thessalonica. The Christians there were under intense pressure, enough to make them burst at the seams.

Yet, this church, just a few months old, took to imitating what they had seen in Paul, Timothy, Silas. They were imitating what they had been told about Jesus.

Paul says that this toddler-aged church had become **“an example.”**

Not a church full of examples. No, the church itself became one example. The witness of the congregation, as a unit, testified to the Jesus they proclaimed.

Here, Paul is casting a congregational vision by a mouth-watering image.

These are brand-new Christians and they have become **“an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”**

Paul is applauding. And he’s saying to every congregation that ever reads this letter that it doesn’t matter if you are a young or a well-established church, a wealthy or a poor one, a small or a gigantic one.

If a church is faithful to Jesus, even under affliction, and if a church shines faith and love and hope, that church will be an inspiration to other believers to join in following Jesus.

The toddling Thessalonians, who imitated Jesus and the apostles, became the imitated. Can you imagine anything sweeter than us, here at Northwest, becoming an inspiration to other churches to follow Jesus? I can’t.

Paul’s final round of applause for the Thessalonians was prompted by their witness outside of Thessalonica. Their evangelistic fervor and missionary zeal brought Paul to his feet in praise.

Thanksgiving for Gospel Impact (vv. 8-10)

[8] For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place the news of your faith toward God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything. [9] For they themselves report about us as to the kind of 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.

We know from our study of Acts that Paul traveled from Thessalonica to Berea and Athens and Corinth. Maybe he stopped off at other places too, and that's just not recorded. We don't know that, but it's possible.

We do learn here, though, that everywhere Paul went, post-Thessalonica, people had already heard about what had happened in Thessalonica because the Thessalonians were out spreading the word.

They told their story of a turn to God from idols. Then, they told Jesus' story, that others could find the same life they did if they would turn to God.

They raised their eyes to the harvest. Just like Jesus, their hearts beat to see the lost, found.

Conclusion:

The Apostle Paul applauded the church at Thessalonica, and it's easy to see why. It was a young, persevering, vibrant, faithful church.

But, they had not "arrived." There was more progress to be made. They could become more faithful, more loving, more hopeful. They could shine brighter.

Paul will spend the remainder of this letter urging them to ***"excel even more"***.

Likewise, we hunger for more, too. More fervent worship, more genuine and loving community, and more effective impact on our world.

Paul will be urging us to ***"excel even more"***, too. We'll join the Thessalonians in taking next steps from the real toward the ideal.