

6.24.07

Lead A Life Worthy of God 1 Thessalonians

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

I wrestled all week with what to do this morning because I felt pulled to do something I have never done in worship, but fought against it mainly out of fear that people would think I was lazy or hadn't done my job. So I went back and forth all week right up to late last night between preaching a sermon like I usually do, and doing something different. After almost 18 years of writing sermons on a weekly basis, I generally know when I am on track with saying what I think the Lord wants me to say by a sense of calmness and peace that I get in my gut when I am praying, thinking, and writing. I never got that this week because this other idea wouldn't leave me alone, kind of like a bad case of poison ivy – it just kept itching me. After consulting late yesterday with a number of folks whose faith and judgment I respect, I decided I was supposed to follow what I hope is the leading of the Holy Spirit so here you go. First some background:

If the New Testament had been arranged according to the date when each letter or book was written, then when we opened our Bibles the first book of the New Testament would not be the Gospel of Matthew, it would be 1 Thessalonians. First Thessalonians is in all likelihood the first of all the New Testament documents, being written right around the year 50-51 A.D. It is the earliest evidence for the existence of Christianity.

Background: By the time Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, Thessalonica, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, had been under Roman rule for over 200 years, although culturally it remained a Greek city. As the capital city, it had certain political significance. As a port city also located on the major east – west Roman highway called the Via Egnatia, its residents were exposed to a wide variety of social and cultural influences. Religious life was diverse with all kinds of deities having followers in the city including gods representing Egyptian, Greek, Phrygian roots as well as the imperial cult of Rome. Spiritually it was kind of like the choice faced by a shopper at a mall – lots of options. In this bustling, commercial, cosmopolitan city, the message of the gospel brought by Paul and his companions would be like a new store opening in the smallest space available in the vast mall of spiritual choices. Both 1 Thessalonians (1:9-10) and Acts (17:4) suggest that the Thessalonian church was composed of Jews and Gentiles; however, most of the members of the church in Thessalonica were Gentiles (see 1:9 and 4:5). According to the account in Acts, Paul and his co-workers (Timothy and Silvanus),

encountered sharp opposition instigated by the Jews and were eventually forced to leave Thessalonica because of this conflict.

In this letter we hear the first notes of key themes that Paul will develop and write about repeatedly and more fully in letters such as Colossians, Philipians, Romans and 1 Corinthians that came in the years of ministry that followed. In First Thessalonians we are introduced to Paul's teaching about grace, faith, hope, and love; joy, prayerful thanksgiving, enduring persecution and opposition, about the second coming of the Lord, exhortations to holiness, sexual morality, and encouragement for believers to live as followers of Jesus as part of a community that is distinctive from the culture at large but inviting to other people.

Paul concludes this first Christian writing by solemnly commanding that the letter must be read to all believers in Thessalonica (5:27). This seemingly small instruction changed the history of the church and indeed of the whole world. The practice of reading this letter in the setting of the gathered community - and then the letters and Gospels that followed it - caused the church to enter into a permanent relationship with this text. Amazingly, the writing of this single letter to a small, specific group of Christians gave birth to the creation of the whole New Testament for the entire church. It is why we read scripture in the midst of our worship gatherings each week. Why do we continue to read such letters? Because we hear these words as God's word and because the issues Paul and his team address in 1 Thessalonians are still with us almost 2000 years later.

Foremost among Paul's assertions is **the conviction that humanity exists to please God and so we are to lead a life worthy of God**. First Thessalonians is about faith, love, and hope as gifts that come from God alone.

It is God who calls us into faith, who enables human love, and our hope is in the Lord.

How do we read such a letter? In the classic guide, *How To Read A Book*, Mortimer Adler notes there is one occasion when people do know how to read (page 14), "When they are in love and are reading a love letter, they read for all they are worth. They read every word three ways; they read between the lines and in the margins; they read the whole in terms of the parts, and each part in terms of the whole; they grow sensitive to context and ambiguity, to insinuation and implication; they perceive **the color of words, the odor of phrases, and the weight of sentences**. They may even take the punctuation into account.

Then, if never before or after, **they read.**"

I feel sorry for younger people who have cell phones and text messaging so when they are apart from the person who has captured their heart they don't know the feeling of going to a mailbox with a racing heartbeat, the thrill of finding an envelope with familiar penmanship, opening that letter with trembling fingers and devouring the words on the page like a starving man who finally gets the chance to eat. That's love and that is how we are to read the Bible.

1 Thessalonians is a love letter – it expresses Paul's love for the Thessalonians while reflecting how their love sustains and encourages Paul. The letter also reveals that their mutual love comes from God's love for them all and that they are to love one another more and more in holiness and in honor as they lead lives that are worthy of and pleasing to God.

So what I want to do today is to read you the whole letter as Paul instructed. This may be the first time you've ever experienced hearing a letter or book of the Bible read in its entirety in worship so I understand if it doesn't work for some of you. However, this is exactly how the church in Thessalonica would have heard Paul's instructions – they didn't have Bibles, there wasn't a copy run off the Xerox machine for everyone to look at. It was read and they listened and hung on every word because in an oral culture one was used to listening for repeated words, phrases, and themes such as *“As you know,”* *“your faith,”* or *“the gospel of God,”* that helped one to hear and remember a message. It is more difficult for us to hear well because we don't live in an oral culture, we live in an age of transition from a print culture to a video or image based culture, but today we're going to try to listen to the entire letter of 1 Thessalonians to receive the impact of these words for our lives of faith. As I read, I will add as little commentary as possible, just enough to help you follow along a little easier. So sit back and listen like you're hearing a love letter that is also God's word to us through Paul and his companions. Note that the very first line tells us Paul is part of a team and the letter uses “we” throughout. Paul was not a solo act; he was always part of a team.

Salutation

“From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and **peace**.

Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians Faith and Example

2 **We** always **give thanks** to God for all of you and mention you in **our prayers**, constantly 3 remembering before **our** God and Father your **work of faith** and **labor of love** and **steadfastness of hope** in **our** Lord Jesus Christ.”

4 For we know, brothers and sisters, **beloved by God**, that he has **chosen you**, 5 because **our message of the gospel** came to you not **in word** only, but also **in power** and **in the Holy Spirit** and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And **you became imitators of us and of the Lord**, for in spite of **persecution** you received the word with **joy** inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (uh-kay-yuh). 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place **your faith** in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among 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—**Jesus, who rescues us from** the wrath that is coming.

Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica

2 **You yourselves know**, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but though **we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi**, **as you know**, we had courage in our God to declare to you **the gospel of God in spite of great opposition**. 3 For our appeal **does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery**, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of **the gospel**, **even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts**. 5 **As you know** and as God is our witness, we never came with words of *flattery* or with a *pretext for greed*; 6 *nor did we seek praise* from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7 though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But **we were gentle** among you, **like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children**. 8 **So deeply do we care for you** that we are determined to share with you not only **the gospel of God** but also our own selves, because **you have become very dear to us**.

9 You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you **the gospel of God**. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. 11 **As you know**, **we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children**, 12 *urging and encouraging* you and *pleading* that you **lead a life**

worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. 13 We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, **God's word**, which is also at work in you believers. 14 For you, brothers and sisters, became **imitators** of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, **for you suffered** the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone 16 by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

Paul's Desire to Visit the Thessalonians Again

17 As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way.

19 For what is **our hope or joy** or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 Yes, **you are our glory and joy!**

3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, *we decided to be left alone* in Athens; 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God **in the gospel of Christ**, **to strengthen and encourage you** for the sake of your faith, 3 so that no one would be shaken by these **persecutions**. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were **to suffer persecution**; so it turned out, as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain.

Timothy's Encouraging Report

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of **your faith and love**. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. 7 For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and **persecution** we have been **encouraged** about you through your faith. 8 For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all **the joy** that we feel before our God because of you? 10 **Night and day we pray** most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12 And **may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another** and for all, **just as we abound in love for you.** 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in **holiness** that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

4 “Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us **how you ought to live and to please God** (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; **4 that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor,** 5 not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; **6 that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter,** because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.

8 Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

9 Now **concerning love of the brothers and sisters,** you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God **to love one another;** 10 and indeed you do **love** all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. **But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more,** 11 to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, 12 so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

The Coming of the Lord

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died (fallen sleep), **so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.** 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore **encourage one another with these words.**

5 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that **the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night**. 3 When they say, "*There is peace and security,*" then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

4 But you, beloved, are not in **darkness**, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all **children of light and children of the day**; we are **not of the night or of darkness**.

6 So then *let us not fall asleep* as others do, but *let us keep awake and be sober*; 7 for those who sleep **sleep at night**, and those who are **drunk get drunk at night**. 8 But since **we belong to the day**, let us **be sober**, and put on the breastplate of **faith and love**, and for a helmet the **hope of salvation**. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore **encourage one another and build up each other**, as indeed you are doing.

Final Exhortations, Greetings, and Benediction

12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; 13 esteem them very highly in **love** because of their work. **Be at peace** among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, beloved, to **admonish** the idlers, **encourage** the fainthearted, **help** the weak, **be patient** with all of them.

15 **See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

25 Beloved, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

27 **I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**