

“Fresh Affections for Further Impact”
I Thessalonians 1:2–10
Rev. Seth Richardson
June 26, 2016 – Evening sermon

The Scripture for this study is I Thessalonians 1:2–10 which says [2] *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, [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 loved by God, that he has chosen you, [5] because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. [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. [9] For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, [10] and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

(Beginning of sermon was not recorded)...things got so bad that in the middle of the night some of these new converts, encourage and force Paul if you will where he will say later, ‘I was torn away to leave the city in the cloak of darkness in the middle of the night.’ Then he goes on to continue his ministry in Berea and Athens and so forth.

This is a degree of speculation. Picture yourself as a new Christian in Thessalonica, there is both a local organic tribulation and persecution as well as an organized civic tribulation and persecution. You wake up one morning to find your spiritual leader has left town. Paul is sending Timothy back to Thessalonica to give them this word of encouragement. I Thessalonians 1:2–3 says [2] *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, [3] remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.* I think we can draw out some practical elements here that will be incredibly applicable.

We see that he engages prayerfully with thankfulness and thoughtfulness. We see in this passage that the church of Thessalonica was on Paul’s heart. It’s his first letter that he writes in the New Testament. I would think that Paul made such an impact on those he led to Christ that he had a prayer journal. Perhaps on one day he prayed for this group of people and Tuesday he prayed for the church at Thessalonica and so forth. I do that. We get a sense from what Paul says here that Thessalonica was on his heart. When I bow my head I almost instinctively pray for my wife, my children, my colleagues and my leadership. In essence these people have become our circle. So we see this tone of thankfulness and thoughtfulness because these people are on his heart. One of the ways we can increase our prayer life is to have God put more people in your circle. It is those you love deeply that when you bow your head to pray you pray instinctively for them because they are on your heart.

Next Paul will affirm them with truth. This is where I want to spend most of our time. Paul is going to simply encourage them. It doesn’t take a Greek scholar to figure out the concept behind encourage. Paul is going to give them courage to follow Christ in a life of faith and obedience. Very specifically and practically I want to show you how Paul encourages the church at Thessalonica.

First notice he affirms their position in Christ. I Thessalonians 1:4 says [4] *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you.* If that in and of itself was not significant enough I think this is incredibly important. They are loved by God, why? I Thessalonians 1:5–6 says [5] *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. [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.*

Paul applied accurate theology with an appropriate timing. Why would he remind them of the love of God and election of God in the midst of affliction? Is it not during affliction that we often battle this type of disbelief? Does God really love me? Is He really for me? Am I His? Am I secure? Paul applies the Gospel and particularly their position in Christ with theological accuracy with appropriate timing and appropriate tone. It definitely helps that it is the inspired Word of God but he told them the truth.

We can be the most empathetic, caring and tenderhearted people who ask wonderful questions and have a wonderful counseling spirit, but when we open our mouth and tell people things that are inaccurate we have done more harm than good. So the first thing we see with Paul is that he tells them the truth, even doctrines that may not come that easily to share in the midst of their suffering, like election. The first thing we see is that Paul affirms them in the truth by reminding them of who they are – their position in Christ.

Secondly, Paul will demonstrate God's work in their life. I Thessalonians 1:5 says [5] *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.* The Spirit of God works through the Word of God in the hearts of His people and that's what we see here. Paul affirms the work of God in their lives.

I work with developing potential leaders through recent college graduates and at the end of the nine months of working with them, one of the things I most appreciate is at the end we take turns affirming them and communicate to them what they have seen God do in their lives. When they leave that meeting it is like their feet aren't even touching the ground because they have been reminded that God is not aloof, remiss, or sleeping but God is actively working in their lives and Paul wants them to see this clearly. He communicates to those who were removed and far away from the Gospel that the mighty work of the Spirit has come through the beautiful Word of God to bring them new life. In verse 5 it says the Spirit brings life with full conviction or in some translations full assurance.

So the idea is that at one point they were not convinced. They did not know Christ and were not placing their trust in Him but here because the work of the Spirit and through the Word now they had become low. Paul is pointing out to them that they didn't just figure it out or wise up but that it was the powerful work of God. He was working in their life. If you want to encourage your loved ones and friends then be attuned. I can always tell two things after I leave that meeting with the fellows where we have affirmed one another. One is that the fellow who has just been affirmed feels like 'wow, they noticed that God is doing something in my life' and two they leave going 'Praise Jesus, this is not for naught.' How do we encourage people? Show them what God is doing in their life.

This next thing becomes a little difficult for us. Sometimes I think we think that if we encourage people too much that they will be big headed and become braggers. Next Paul affirms what they had done well, over and over again. This was no doubt done by the Spirit of God in their life but none the less Paul encourages and affirms them what they did well. I Thessalonians 1:3, 6–9 says [3] *remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love*

and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. [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. [9] For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

Paul is giving them a Gospel saturated at-a-boy. I am convinced that we could empower and mobilize by His Spirit simply by encouraging, affirming and telling them ‘good job.’ How has it impacted your life when someone has come beside you and said ‘good job, way to go’? Isn’t that what we long to hear when we see Jesus who would say ‘well done good and faithful servant’? I want to tell you a short story here.

The most hurtful word and encouraging word I have ever received came from the same man. It was from a football coach in high school. I’m not going to tell you the discouraging word but I will tell you about the moment I heard it and I still remember it to this day. We had just finished a two day practice with these drills but I was the last to go. I remember giving it my all and I recall what happened as if it happened yesterday and it happened 20 or more years ago. I heard my coach look at another coach and say ‘if we had ten more just like him we would have quite a ball team, wouldn’t we?’ I felt like my head was so big I wouldn’t even be able to get it out of my helmet. My chest was getting so big.

The reality was that I wasn’t even in the top ten best players on that team but at that moment it didn’t matter because at that time I would have run through a brick wall for that coach. Why? It was because he noticed my efforts and it encouraged me for it filled my heart with courage. That is what we need to be for one another particularly in this day and age. We need to encourage one another and give each other courage. Let’s look now at I Thessalonians 3. As we look at this I want to share a very practical guide that has been very helpful for me for some time now on how to encourage people.

I Thessalonians 3:2 says [2] *and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith.* Timothy was sent to establish and exhort. This has been a helpful framework for me in ministry. In interest of full disclosure it takes a degree of spiritual discipline to do this but this applies in any relationship. This takes much spiritual discipline for me because I’m one of those teacher types who would much rather talk than listen. Most of the time when people are talking I’m just thinking about I’m about to say. For instance, I may be at lunch with someone and regardless of what they are talking about they are going to hear what I had a quiet time on that morning. It’s just the way that I am.

Pastor Reeder said recently in a staff meeting ‘Wait and ask yourself ‘why am I talking?’’ That has been the best bit of advice I have had in a long time. When you are trying to establish and exhort you approach your time with someone as you would with a physician where you are asking questions. When you go to the doctor the doctor spends some time asking you questions so while you are asking questions with someone and they are talking think about this grid – do I need to establish them or exhort them or both?

Maybe they share something and I hear they are wrestling with who they are in Christ, then I need to root them deeper. I need to remind them of who they are in Christ and their adoption in Christ. Maybe they are wrestling with shame and I need to remind them that there is no condemnation in Christ but they may confess that they are struggling in sin so I need to exhort them to faith, confession, repentance and new obedience. This is exactly the message of

Timothy when he returned to Thessalonica. It is just a simple grid that may not cover everything but as you approach encouraging people you can feed it through this grid. How do I establish them? Root them deeper in the Gospel and in the truth of God's Word. How do I exhort them? How do I challenge them? Push them forward to new obedience and faith in Christ.

Notice the next thing Paul does. Paul models what he believes. I Thessalonians 1:5b says [5b] *You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.* This principle is sometimes difficult. We value authenticity, genuineness and being real with people and the way I would shape my behavior due to onlookers is sometimes a challenge for this generation. Paul is clear here in that he works to please God and not man. This is not an exhortation to be man-pleasers. Paul realizes his own Gospel changed life is the vehicle or conduit to communicate Gospel-transforming truths to others, which will verify the words that are coming out of his mouth.

Ultimately when you engage people with the Gospel you will pass on your passions. In our Fellows Program we call this animating values. When you squeeze the toothpaste tube, animating values are the things that really come out. It is the part of you that really drives your choices, affections and ultimately your life. That is why Jesus tells us to guard our heart because out of it flows the issues of life. Paul understands that his life has to match his confession.

Most days I wake up wrestling with this trying to actually live out what I confess to believe. To live out what we believe and how that really matters so that it is expressed and coheres with the words that we are saying. Here is why we need to preach the Gospel of grace. The reality is that often what we say and what we believe don't match up. So while by the Spirit I am endeavoring to live a life honoring to Christ and that my confession adheres to my belief and actions, the reality is that I fall desperately short all the time. So I have to preach, teach and model repentance all the time and our desperate need of the Gospel.

The next thing we notice from Paul is his whole entire tone in the way he interacts and engages with the people. We see this when he says 'for your sake.' This is very important to Paul. Remember he is the one that left in the middle of the night. He is the one that cares deeply about their growth in Christ so he wants to assure them of this. Let's look at I Thessalonians 2. This is my life verse as well as my wife's. I love this verse. I Thessalonians 2:8 says [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.* Do you love like this? Are there people that are that dear to you?

I Thessalonians 2:17–20 says [17] *But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face,* (not via text but face to face) [18] *because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.* [19] *For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?* [20] *For you are our glory and joy.* Do you minister and engage with people in a way that they know that they are your joy, glory and delight? Do you see here how Paul loves and engages them with the Gospel? Do you see how he wears his heart on his sleeve? It is so important to Paul that they know he loves them.

The last thing here is that he points them to God's grace. He is constantly pointing them back to the finished work of Christ on their behalf. He points them back to the future hope they have in Christ. I Thessalonians 1:9–10 says [9] *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,* [10] *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

Paul reminded them that they were saved by grace from sin, its consequences, its curses, the dominion of evil and from Satan but that they were primarily saved from God. Jesus is the One who delivers us from the wrath to come. This is the Gospel. We were once dead in our trespasses, deserving God's full intended wrath because of His righteousness yet because of His kindness, His covenant faithfulness and great love He saved us. He poured out that wrath upon His own Son. So this is Paul's consummate Gospel encouragement. He points them to the Gospel.

Paul is clearly speaking to the regenerate, to the believer, the follower of Christ yet he continues to preach the Gospel because he knows the heart of the matter is the heart. So we need to be reminded afresh of the power, beauty and the severity of the Gospel of grace. He says that they turned to God from idols. The Gospel is what causes us to turn from what we once put our hope, faith and trust in and put it in the Almighty God to serve Him. We place our hope in the return of Christ and not to place it in the vanity of riches or status or anything else this world may offer but to wait for Christ, the Son from Heaven who He raised from the dead. It is He who delivers us from judgment.

In closing let's look at I Thessalonians 5:8–11 which says [8] *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. [9] For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, [10] who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. [11] Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

What is the body life of the church? What is the great joy we have with one another? It is that we can build each other up in the wondrous work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, the wondrous work of the Gospel that has saved us from God's holy wrath in His kind, gracious and everlasting love. He died for us! Therefore let us encourage one another, with accurate theology, with wisdom from above that brings an appropriate timeliness and with the Gospel transformed tone of grace, goodness and love. Paul exhorted them like a father and he nurtured them like a mother but may we encourage one another with accurate theology, appropriate timeliness with an appropriate tone. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we thank You for our Lord Jesus who has come that we might have life and have it to the full. Thank You Lord Jesus for dying in our stead. Thank You that you have called us together that we might live life in community. Thank You for being our Hope and that we have set our feet upon the Rock of salvation. Thank You for Your Word, Christ's Name, Amen.