

Thessalonians, Pt 5: People

1 Thessalonians 2:17 ESV (Pg. 574) 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, **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.

- I. You may have noticed that the first few chapters of 1 Thessalonians are introductory and personal. The theological “meat” of the book (of which there is much!) does not begin until chapter 4. Paul spends 3/5 of his letter, assuring the Thessalonians of his love for them, explaining his sudden and lengthy absence from them, and assuring them of the integrity of his motives with them, as well as letting them know how he has been, and is, praying for them in their troubles and distress.
 - A. But even though the main topics of instruction are kept for the last two chapters, that doesn’t mean that there is nothing of value for us in the first three chapters (hopefully, that’s already been demonstrated to some degree).
 1. Reading Paul’s words, we discover what a faithful pastor looks like; how he serves the people in his care; connected both emotionally and in prayer. These words always have a convicting effect on me as I consider how I am serving (or should serve) the people I love here at North Ridge Life Church.
 2. But chapters 1-3 are not just filled with insights into faithful and ethical pastoring; there is much to be learned here for you as well. We know that Paul was a model pastor, but in many ways, the Thessalonian church was striving toward goals that should be common to us all as the Body of Christ.
 - B. Today, the Thessalonians will be kind of a case study to help us understand the bond of love that God intends for us to share, and how to be the effective church that pleases God, and transforms lives.
- II. We have already discussed many times how Paul was taken away from the Thessalonian believers after only a few short weeks when the local Jews incited a riot, jealous because of the effectiveness of his ministry¹. But he had become so invested in their spiritual health that this was very painful for him. He didn’t just move on to the next town flippantly or casually. The Thessalonians had captured his heart, and he thought about them constantly, and prayed for them always.
 - A. He begins in verse 17 by saying “**we were torn away from you, brothers**”. The Greek word used for “torn away” is *aporphanizo* - meaning “orphaned”². Although Paul is the spiritual father in this case, he is saying he had the same grief as someone bereaved of their own parents when he was forced to abandon the Thessalonians just as they were beginning to follow Jesus!
 1. Last week I said that Jesus isn’t some club that you join; that Christianity is not about accepting Jesus, but about following Jesus. One of the gospel’s mysterious effects on the followers of Christ is that it so binds our hearts in love, that love literally becomes evidence of the reality of our belief. This is not necessarily the case with those who have merely accepted Christ.
 - a) People who accept Jesus can be satisfied with religious duties like showing up to church semi-regularly, giving at least a little money every once in a while, voting for the candidates they feel are more on the moralistic high ground, etc.

- b) But followers of Jesus can't be satisfied with the lowest common denominator of nominal religion. They are consumed with knowing God through the Word and worship, and through loving others with their lives.
2. **John 13:35 ESV** By this all people will **know** that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. The love described here is not to be imagined as the way we carelessly say we love golf, rocky road ice cream, or even "going to church", but it is actually reflective of the way God perfectly and endlessly loves us! It is *agape* love, the highest order of love the Bible describes.
- a) In fact, in the verse right before, Jesus redefined the weight of the love that his disciples were to have for each other: **John 13:34 ESV** A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: **just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.** This was a radically "new commandment" because the requirement of the law was only to "love your neighbor as yourself"³, but Jesus raised the stakes considerably!
- b) How has Christ loved you? Sacrificially on the cross. Daily, mercifully, forgiving you. Patiently. Unceasingly. To be a believer means that we are constantly growing in love towards each other, and as God loves us.
- c) Galatians say that the way we fulfill the "law of Christ" is by bearing each other's burdens⁴. Are you growing that way? Are you increasingly more forgiving and patient; bearing all things, believing all things, hoping for all good things, and patiently enduring all hard things?⁵
3. But when Paul says he felt "orphaned", he is indicating that the love he felt for this fledgling church was the love reserved for family! They were not just people who showed up at the same place on Sunday, they were blood! They were not (as he points out in chapters 1&2) the warm bodies who paid Paul's salary, but they were brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers to him.
- a) **Matthew 12:47 ESV** While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. **48** But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" **49** And stretching out his hand toward **his disciples**, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! **50** For **whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.**"
- b) Jesus himself said that it was those obediently following him who were his true family. Paul seems to echo that sentiment, pointing out that a deep family bond is created when people are following Jesus together.
- B. This is a great promise! There are many of you who had terrible family situations growing up. You were neglected, rejected, abandoned, or abused. You've lived for a long time longing for someone to love you, accept you and care for you with all of their hearts. You've wanted a mom, a dad, a brother, sister or spouse.
1. The good news is that no matter how you got here, the church can be just that for you; a place where you can know true love, acceptance and family.
 2. I'm not saying they are perfect. They will require a lot of forgiveness and grace, but so will you!. Sometimes they will be hypocritical, harsh, and maybe even just plain stupid. But so will you! So why not commit to a family of people who are struggling together, so you don't have to struggle alone?

- C. Paul says 2 things about his separation from the Thessalonians: it was for “a short time”, and it was “in person not in heart”. The separation was short because Paul, in his anxiety, sent Timothy and Silas back to the them to find out how they were doing. We know that he was anxious because two times in chapter 3 he says there was a point in when he could “bear it no longer”⁶.
1. When you are away from the family of God, how much do they enter your thoughts? How much do they matter in your day-to-day life? Are they allowed to inconvenience you; invading your thoughts, robbing you of sleep as you carry their sicknesses, family problems, financial issues, etc.? May I confess to you that my love for you has been the cause of much insomnia? Yet I have no regrets. I love you and there’s nothing you can do about that!
 - a) Do you long to alleviate the suffering that you see in the Body of Christ? Do you truly bear the burdens of your brothers and sisters? How much do you pray for God’s intervention for others at North Ridge Life Church?
 - b) Even when Paul couldn’t do much because “Satan hindered” him, the Thessalonians were never far from his mind. So Paul made a huge sacrifice for their benefit: he was willing to be left alone on a trip that had seen one persecution after another so that he could send Timothy to see how they were faring. Paul didn’t just preach, he had skin in the game. Look back on your recent life. When was the last time that you or I really served each other in a way that cost us time, energy or money?
 2. Paul states that the hindrance of Satan prevented him from being face to face with the Thessalonians, but nothing could keep his heart from them!
 - a) Satan has a vested interest in destroying the fellowship in the church because of the power that is released when we are walking in unity. Think about what Jesus said about what happens in our unity: “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them”⁷.
 - b) Satan hates the unity of the Body! It was when the disciples were of one mind and one accord that the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost⁸ because they were doing **together** what Christ had commanded.
- D. Paul says “we endeavored the **more eagerly** and with **great desire** to see you face to face, because **we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again.**” This summer Ginger and I really needed a vacation. It has been a hard year. In many ways it has been the hardest in more than 25 years in ministry. So when we left for Yellowstone. We made a rule: no church talk whatsoever! Want to guess how long that lasted? Maybe a day or two in over two weeks!
1. How easy is it for some of us to sleep in on Sundays, or to make it a day for our own personal leisure, or avoid any extra sacrificial commitment to the people or the common mission that we have as a church?
 2. I promise that this isn’t meant as a “legalistic jab”. But ask yourself as you look at Paul’s words, have you ever experienced what it is like to “more eagerly”, and with “great desire”, long for the fellowship of this body?
- E. This boils down to the difference between what we “gotta do” and what we get to do! There nothing wrong with coming to church because of a faithful commitment, even when it’s hard. But if you only ever participate in the life of the Body because you “got to”, something’s gone horribly awry! Paul said that

- he “wanted to come”, he longed to be with them even when he couldn’t! And not just once, but again and again! He could not get enough of God’s people!
1. He had a strong (even emotional) urge to be with other believers. He turned it over in his mind how he could restore fellowship with them repeatedly. He valued the intimate connection that the gospel produced, but he had no opportunity to reunite with the Body in Thessalonica.
 2. By contrast, you and I have very frequent opportunities to gather with the church, but the question we must ask is, do we value the others or not?
- III. There seems to be perhaps 3 types of people in and around most churches:
- A. First, there are people who value the institution. They are rule keepers and traditionalists. They show up because they are good, God-fearin’, American Christians. They trade in morality, but rarely in compassion and grace.
 1. They may sing the loudest, give the most, and volunteer for the majority of ministries in the church. All of these in themselves are good things!
 2. But at the heart is a desire to either keep up appearances or earn their way to heaven. They aren’t generally happy or hospitable. They tend to be the ones who see the cloud in every silver lining. Because there is no genuine connection to Christ, they may burn out or move about to multiple churches.
 - B. Next, there are the people who merely “tip” God and his church in their giving, serving and loving. When you ask them to contribute time or money they almost always respond by saying, “Let me pray about it”, but never seem to busy themselves with anything that benefits the larger body. They like coming to church but not being the church. It may be a priority, but very low on the list.
 - C. Last, there are the people who are like the sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ head with expensive oil and washed his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair. When the Pharisees around him criticized Jesus for letting a woman like her touch him, he explained her reaction to him with a parable, and said **Luke 7:47 ESV “...her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”**
 1. The truth is that no matter how hard we try, our efforts to love God or people like Jesus, and to lay down our lives for them, are destined to fail for at least two reasons: sin has made other people too flawed, and made us too selfish.
 2. But there’s something about knowing your sins are forgiven that makes you love, and worship, and treasure the Lord Jesus very much! And when we love Jesus much, we will love people more and more, because to truly love Jesus means to love whatever he loves...and there’s nothing he loves more than the people he created and died for!
- IV. And it was the people of Thessalonica that Paul loved. **1 Thessalonians 2:19 ESV 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.** No matter what kind of kingdoms churches in our city and around the world try to build, what counts is making each other into disciples of Jesus Christ, living in mutual love and service.
- A. It doesn’t matter what kind of facilities we meet in, how talented and acclaimed our worship team is, how wise and good-looking our Pastor is, how many flashy

programs we offer, or what our annual budget is. None of those things are necessarily indicative of the health of an individual church.

- B. Instead, we should ask if the people are growing, maturing and becoming more healthy spiritually. Is worship becoming more genuine and passionate; and does worship happen when the music stops? Do the people serve with gladness or in a spirit of drudgery? Do they give time, energy and money for the benefit of those in need, inside and outside of the congregation? Are they doing all these things together, or is the emphasis on your “personal relationship with God” apart from the fellowship of the Body of Christ?
1. The point of any true church should always be Jesus Christ and his glory. But one great way to know if Jesus is being glorified, is by looking at the congregation: their unity, their service to each other, their love for each other.
 2. **1 Corinthians 1:10 ESV** I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be **no divisions** among you, but that you be **united in the same mind** and the **same judgment**.
- C. The high standard of “no divisions”, of “the same mind” and “same judgement” is only possible in a church whose members are committed to costly love; for Jesus first, and then whole-heartedly for each other.
- V. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

¹ See Acts 17:1-9

² <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G642&t=KJV>

³ Matthew 19:19; Mark 12:31 (Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18 from the Law)

⁴ Galatians 6:2

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 13 for a vivid description of the way God loves and calls us to love. Paul's argument in this chapter is that love is superior to the operation of any spiritual gift.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 3:1, 5

⁷ Matthew 18:20

⁸ Acts 2:1