

2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 (NIV)

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

⁵ All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

¹¹ With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. ¹² We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are talking, for a couple weeks here, about the *importance* of, and the *benefits* of, giving thanks — expressing gratitude.

Last Sunday we talked about how the cultivation of a grateful heart and then the practice of thanks-giving is *helpful* and even *therapeutic to us*, because just the recognition that we owe thanks to someone other than ourselves for the good things in our lives helps align us with the way God created the world to work.

The expression of gratitude reinforces in us the reality of just how much we *depend on God* and on *others*, and anytime we are able to move closer to working in this world according to the way God made it to work, that's a good thing that leads to our own health and wholeness.

You know, really — and this is no exaggeration — expressing thanks is so important to our overall mental and spiritual health, doctors ought to consider prescribing it!

"Instead of just sitting and stewing in some self-absorbed, things-didn't-go-my-way-so-I'll-just-pout-about-it fun, here's a prescription: Go home, write ten thank-you cards, and call me in the morning."

That would really help a lot of people in our world today get out of themselves and gain a healthier, broader perspective.

We saw last week how King David was a great example of someone who benefited from his own practice of thanksgiving.

Today, we look at how *our* expressions of gratitude also help move *other people* closer to God and to health and to wholeness. The gratitude that *we* express is

medicine — therapy, not *only* to us, but also to *those for whom we're grateful*.

Seriously — you want to help heal people, but can't spend a dozen or so years in school and residency? Just start telling people how thankful to God you are for them and why, and watch what it does to them.

That was the method of the Apostle Paul.

We see it happening in several places in Scripture, but I'd like to look, today, specifically, at that passage from 2 Thessalonians that was just read for us — if you'd like to turn back there.

Now, the real background for what's happening there we find back in 1 Thessalonians. That's where we come to understand that the Thessalonian church was undergoing persecution for their faith in Christ, and it was some of the hardest persecution to endure because it was all coming from their own people.

These were people who *were* your *friends*, your *neighbors*, your *co-workers* — even your *family* — just *days or weeks* before.

Things are going along just fine, but then, suddenly, you encounter Jesus, and your priorities begin to change and values change. And those who were so close to you: now, they're having trouble understanding you and what's happened to you — why you're not thinking the way you used to, or prioritizing the same things you used to.

And that lack of understanding, or outright disagreement, so often turns into something worse.

Anyone here who has come to Christ out of a non-Christian family, you know how this works.

Real, serious conversion to Jesus almost always sets a person on a pretty different course. And so often, unfortunately, those differences descend into arguments and marginalization, and then maybe to being made fun of or harassed — and sometimes even to violence.

People don't understand, and people get offended. That's what was going on in Thessalonica, and the Christians there were hurting because of it.

And in response to all that, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, not so much to *solve the problem*, but to *strengthen the church* so that it might endure the hardship.

Now, I don't want to get too far off track here, but let me make what I think is a very important point about that purpose or goal of Timothy's visit.

The fact is, apart from large-scale conversions to Jesus in the city there, the issue at Thessalonica was not anything that any person or group of people could solve — and this is something that we need to understand: *some Christian problems are not humanly solve-able*.

This seems to be really hard for some people, and particularly, frankly, for Americans — for American Christians — to comprehend. We have gotten our way for so long that we presume every problem that arises in life

must have a simple, achievable solution somehow, somewhere.

If we get sick, we fully expect that there must be a cure—that there is a pill or treatment or something we can do that will make us well.

If we disagree with someone, we presume that one of us is right and the other is wrong, and resolution would be simple—if the other person would just see things our way.

If there is a crisis, we immediately assume that if we would just do A, B and C, or if someone else or the government would just do A, B, and C, then that would set everything back to the way it should be.

But, you see, that's not always the way it is in our world—and especially so in the spiritual realm.

Sometimes there are issues that are just unsolvable in earthly terms. The tension between Christians and non-Christians, and the persecution that often comes from that, is one of those.

You see, Timothy had no standing to go to Thessalonica and pronounce to the non-Christians there in the city, "You have to agree with these Christians."

I mean, he could have tried that. He could have preached that and hoped people would listen and respond, but he couldn't make people decide to do it, any more than we can today.

The non-Christian world, apart from a move of the Holy Spirit, would just naturally respond with something like, "Who are you to tell us what to think and what to do? Who are you to force your opinion—your values and your Scripture and your Jesus—on us?"

You see, apart from a move of God, that's the natural human response. In and of themselves, no non-Christian cares what the Bible says or what Jesus says.

So, Timothy couldn't solve the tension in Thessalonica that way.

But, neither could Timothy go there and tell the church, "Oh yes, people are upset with you because of your stand for Jesus, so you need to compromise. You need to do what they want, live as they say you should live. You don't have to take what Jesus says about this or that seriously if those things cause friction with the world around you."

That wasn't an option for Timothy either, although, unfortunately, through the ages, some Christians, in the interest of "just getting along," in a warped understanding of love, have adopted this.

Actually, both of these approaches have been tried. The church has sometimes tried to assert authority where she didn't have it to assert. And, Christians have sometimes compromised Jesus' values, in order to keep peace with the world.

But the fact is, neither of those solve the problem.

We have to embrace the fact that embracing Jesus in a broken world introduces problems that are simply not humanly fixable.

And Paul knew that, which is why he sent Timothy to Thessalonica: not to *solve* their persecution problem, but to *strengthen* the church in their *resolve* to *keep going*—*keep following* and *keep believing*—in the *midst* of the persecution.

And, it's a good thing Timothy went, because this second letter of Paul indicates that the persecution there was only getting worse. The tensions were stronger—the hatred was hotter. You can tell that because, in this second letter, Paul is speaking to those Thessalonian Christians' hope for deliverance—and to their desire that those who were persecuting them would not escape the justice of God.

You see, people don't typically get into those sorts of topics unless the persecution is intense.

And so, Paul reassures them of the coming of the justice and judgment of the Lord. Beginning in verse 5, Paul promises that God Himself will "*trouble those who were troubling them*," and that God would "*bring them relief*" in that day when Jesus is revealed.

And even beyond that, Paul promises the Thessalonian believers that God would most certainly punish—with everlasting destruction—those who don't obey Jesus' gospel. Paul says they'll be shut out from the presence of God.

Now, the truth is that this kind of language makes some of us uncomfortable. We like to think of the loving aspects of God, and we tend to downplay His justice.

But we need to see and to remember that God's love and justice are inseparable. They are two sides of the same coin, and we'll never really understand the one unless we keep tightly tied to the other.

And that is as Paul does here: it's precisely because of God's *love* for His people that *justice* for them is inevitable.

So, Paul promises that relief to come—some day.

But, as true and important as all that is, notice that it is not what Paul begins his letter with.

To a church that is suffering and struggling and looking for hope, Paul leads off his response with *thanksgiving*—thanking God for the Thessalonian believers and all the good that God was doing in them and with them in the midst of their hard times.

And Paul gets specific with his gratitude, because specificity is important.

I mean, which means more—which builds a person up more: to say, "I'm thankful for you," or to say, "I'm thankful for your deep love," or, "your consistent courage," or, "your great wisdom?"

If you want to inspire someone, tell them you're grateful for them.

You want to really inspire someone, tell them *why* you're grateful for them.

Paul understood this, and he gives here three specific reasons why he's thankful to God for the Thessalonian believers. And, coincidentally, they are probably the top three marks of a healthy and vital church.

First, in verse three there, Paul is thankful because their *faith is increasing more and more*, which means they are growing surer and surer of Jesus every day, in spite of the persecution—or maybe, to be honest, because of it.

The Thessalonians' trust in Jesus may have begun in rather hypothetical terms, but that trust was quickly becoming more and more a certainty.

You see, here is something American Christians—Western Christians—can learn from our brothers and

sisters who live in places like the Middle East or India or certain parts of Africa: what does it mean, really, to trust in God and not in ourselves or government or in anything else?

About 100 years ago, British writer James Agate put it this way: he wrote, "My mind is not like a bed that has to be made and unmade day by day. There are some things in life of which I have become absolutely sure."

The believers at Thessalonica had come to that place of testing everything by Christ and holding only to those things that stood the test.

And for that increasingly tested, tried and sure faith that Paul observed in the Thessalonian church, Paul expresses his thankfulness to God.

Second, and also in verse three there, Paul says he's thankful for the Thessalonians' love and how their love for one another is increasing.

It's interesting that back in Paul's first letter, he prayed that their love might increase and actually overflow for each other and for everyone else.¹ Here, Paul is letting them know that he sees the answer to that specific prayer being worked out in them, because Christians loving each other is the only way through persecution and challenges to faith.

When put under pressure, as the church is today in many ways, the only way through is when Christian brothers and sisters love each other more than they love anything or anyone else, beside Jesus.

When any other devotion is put above Christ and His body, you see, the Christian family is undone and the church divides and falls.

That's why Jesus prayed for – that's why Paul prayed for, and here gives thanks for – the love of the Church.

And then third, Paul gives thanks for their perseverance or endurance there in verse 4.

The word he uses is *hupomone*, which is a complex and, really, a magnificent word. It is usually translated *endurance*, but it doesn't mean just that passive ability to hunker down and simply bear whatever may descend upon us.

It really means, along with the ability to bear, the ability to master the circumstance and use it for our own growth and strength.

Hupomone is the sort of quality that not only shoulders the blows that life brings, but that also transforms them into stepping stones to even greater achievement.

It's recognizing that future strength comes through present pain, and consciously using today's pains for tomorrows success.

The Thessalonian believers are not whining about their trials.

Neither are they merely enduring them.

They are using them to build themselves into stronger, more consistent, more able followers of Jesus, and for this, Paul is thankful to God.

In fact, Paul is not only thankful for what he sees in the Thessalonians, he admits there in verse 4 that he is boasting about all that God is doing in them to other

churches – using them as examples of faith, love and endurance.

So, what do you suppose Paul's words here did for those suffering Thessalonians who read this letter?

Have you ever found yourself in the middle of something really, really hard – and you're wondering how much more you can take?

And then, out of the blue, you get a note, a letter, or maybe a visit from a person who knows what you're dealing with – I mean who really understands it because they've been there too – and they say something like, "Man, I am so grateful to God that you are where you are in this moment – at this time! You are doing a phenomenal job! God is using you; God is helping you; God is changing you. Even though the time is hard, I can see God working in you and through you!"

Have you ever experienced that?

What did it do for you?

It caused you to be able to get up the next day.

It renewed your strength.

It brought new perspective.

It made you to think, "OK, as hard as this is, maybe I can do this. If *he* sees God at work here – if *she* can say that – then I can keep at it. I can give it another go."

To someone who wonders if they're good enough –

To someone who wonders if God really can use them –

To someone who wonders if they have what it takes to make it –

this kind of word, this sort of expression of gratitude, can mean the difference between life and death, you see?

It's food to the starving.

It's air to the suffocating.

It's an injection of hope to the one who's just about to run out.

That's what a thanks-giving – an expression of gratitude – can be to someone else.

And you and I can be the doctors to administer it.

Just as it was in Paul's power, so is it in your power and mine to administer – to give to someone who needs to know that God is with them and in them and using them, in spite of how it may seem at the time.

I remember getting this sort of injection from Bishop Roller once. It was at a gathering of Free Methodist pastors of college churches, and I remember him saying, just offhand to all of us, "I'm so grateful to God for what you do. I don't think there's any job – any role in the church that's any harder than the one you do."

Now, I don't know whether that's true or not, but his recognition of that, and his expression of gratitude meant so much to me in that moment – that was 15 years ago, and I still think about it – and more on some days than on others.

We all have the potential to give

new life,

new hope,

new assurance,

to someone who is struggling, simply by our expression of gratitude to *God* and for what we see *Him* doing in and through *them*.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 3:12

We can all be healers in this broken world.

Will you take on that role?

I promise you that there is someone – and maybe many someones – around all of us who needs us to be *thanks therapists* to encourage them, to make them stronger, and to make the church stronger, and to make the world better.

Closing Prayer

Benediction

A word spoken at the right time is like an apple of God in a setting of silver (Proverbs 25:11).