

The Good Word
2 Thessalonians 3:16-18
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We turn in God's word to the final verses of the Thessalonian letters from the apostle Paul. As we have been in this series *An Advent People*, we began this series to continue the theme of advent, which is typically thought of as the time prior to Christmas and His coming. But because of the resurrection, we still find ourselves as an advent people awaiting the Lord's return as He has promised.

This was important for Paul because it was a concern of the church. We've seen many places within these two letters where Paul was addressing several things, confusion regarding the resurrection, it's timing, whether they had missed it, whether it was going to happen, what to do with those who were brothers and sisters in Christ who had passed away prior to Christ's returning again, those who took the whole issue of Christ's return and allowed it to negatively affect their dependence on others because they were failing to provide for themselves because they thought it as an opportunity to simply take from others, because why bother working if the Lord is returning? It has had a lot to say about our work, the value of everything whether it is the mundane realities of a Tuesday morning, or it is the high and lifted up praise of the grace of our God.

Paul has taken us in these letters to important places, though these letters are considered to be – perhaps among some scholars – not as important as some of his other greater works like Galatians or Colossians or Ephesians. But there is something uniquely Pauline about these letters. We will see it particularly in these final verses of the second letter, Paul saves what is uniquely Jewish that he has appropriated in the coming of Christ and His resurrection and His appearance to Paul. And now he's appropriating those Jewish elements within a fully Christocentric way, finding Christ at the center.

But I begin this morning with the title of this sermon, the good word. The good word is a phrase which comes from the Latin word "Benedictus," which we get the word "benediction." If you're new to us, you might not be aware of what we're doing, but now you know. The final word in your outline this morning on the worship service bulletin says "benediction." This has been a long-practiced tradition within the church across traditions, but particularly within our own reformed Presbyterian tradition, it is always that way which closes up the service. And it's important to note that we view worship as a dialogue. Worship is not our performing for God. It is God in dialogue with his people. And so, there's always a give and take both vertically and horizontally, as we've already done that this morning. We encourage one another horizontally, but we give praise to God vertically. But He is also calling us to worship.

So, it's important that we note that the service both begins and ends with a proclamation, both of them in their own way an invitation. One is an invitation to worship. The other is an invitation to be reminded that we leave this place not under our own strength, but only by God's favor. This is His good word. So, let me be clear, this is not just mere religion or practice or tradition. I need to pronounce the benediction upon you because I need the benediction. I need the good word to be reminded it is not my word or your word that we finish with. It is God's good word that brings us to Himself but sends us forth.

This is Paul's good word, the benediction to the Thessalonian church. Hear now God's word, 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. [ESV]

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ upon whom and whose work and resurrection, you have established your church. And through your apostles, though broken and weak, they were enabled by you and carried along by your Holy Spirit to write these letters to the churches which have been preserved since their writing to edify and build up your people which we receive according to the instruction of your word as your very voice to the church. And so, we receive this word, this benediction not only to the Thessalonians, but to us as your word literally from the mouth of God through the work of the Holy Spirit through the formation of Paul in his coming to faith and now writing it out by his own genuine authenticity to us. Now, Lord, we ask by your Holy Spirit that you would give us the good word. O Lord, we need it. We need it because our words are weak. They fail us. They hurt others. They fail to inspire. They are certainly not always kind. They are not always necessary. And they are most certainly not always true which is why we need your word. We need the word because it is always good. It always brings light and invites us to life. Help us, we pray. And help the teacher. In Jesus's mighty name we pray. Amen.

As you look at your outline, you'll see the three words which we're going to unpack this morning. He announces peace, he proclaims authenticity, and he finishes with the well-wishing, the pronouncement and declaration of grace. Peace, authenticity, and grace.

Let's look together first at this peace which he pronounces to them. He says, "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way." What Paul does here with his pronouncement of peace, he does it in the most Christocentric of ways. It's important for us because what he's doing is he's doing and using that which is a most uniquely Jewish declaration stemming all the way from the Old Testament. We think first of one of the most famous declarations comes as what we know as the Aaronic Blessing as Aaron pronounces his good word, the pronouncement from God's word in Numbers 6 when he says, "May God give you peace, may he lift up his countenance upon you."

This idea of peace unfortunately for us merely means the absence of hostility – and it most certainly is that – or the absence or the opposite of war. And it most certainly is that. But what is being pronounced here is something far more complex than that. It is the great biblical and Jewish understanding of shalom. It includes all that which I've already said, the absence of war, the opposite of hostility. But it is so much more.

And here, what Paul is doing is he's taking this pronouncement of shalom and he takes it and he fills it with what is very characteristically Pauline, a very Christocentric way of understanding it. The Lord give you peace. This for Paul is important because this is what he has been about. In pronouncing this blessing on the church, he's been about teaching them the necessary of understanding that Christ being the center of all things. But to understand what is being meant here by shalom and its Jewish character, its Old Testament and biblical understanding, we must first look at it in three quick ways under the idea of peace.

First of all, to pronounce peace embedded within it is this whole understanding of reconciliation. For Paul to pronounce shalom upon the people of Thessalonica and which we receive as the same good word, we must understand embedded within it is this idea of reconciliation that we have been reconciled to God through Christ's victorious work on the cross and through the resurrection. Now, it's important to understand that embedded within this idea of reconciliation that we have been brought close to God. We have been reunited with Him. Yes, the hostility has been removed. But reconciliation, we must understand for Paul, it's incredibly layered and complex. But I'll simply explain it in this way. That one way to understand reconciliation is that yes, we've been reunited with God. But that also means that something had to happen with that which caused the brokenness or the rupture of the relationship. And that was our sin. But more than that, to be reconciled also meant to be reconciled with God in a Jewish sense, it also had to be a sense which we are purified. Guilt had to be removed.

The problem is over the years, theologians as they get into understanding and teaching how Paul understood reconciliation, it's merely been reduced to the removal of guilt. And it is that, that Christ on the cross took our guilt upon Himself so that our guilt because of our sin would not be imputed to our account. That is the whole idea of justification.

And so, with that, Paul builds on this idea that it is not merely the removal of guilt. It is literally the being drawn close to, being united to, in relationship, in the tender mercies of God. Not only has Christ taken on our guilt and paid the debt of our sin, not only has our guilt been removed and that guilt not being imputed to us, we have received the righteousness of Christ, but oh, so much more than that. Because if we were to leave there, I want to tell you within our own tradition, and one which I hold dear, all of that which I just told you has a very legal courtroom picture to it. God is judge, we as the guilty, Christ who comes into the courtroom of the majesty of God. At our pronouncement of being guilty, Christ says, I who am innocent will stand in their place. I will take their guilt. I will pay the price for their sin. And we are set free.

That is beautiful indeed. But, you know, the last time I was in a courtroom, it didn't warm my heart. It's not like the judge called me up and said, hey, you want to go get some dinner? I'll pay. We'll be good friends. No, the judge of all the universe does all of that but then calls us His children and gives us the treasures of His majesty and gives us everything we need for life and for godliness. It's more than a courtroom. It's a home. He is our Father. Christ is our brother. He is our defender. Power and honor and glory have we sung. That is ours. Now, that is reconciliation. That is peace. That is the beginning of the picture of shalom.

But not just reconciliation; he has pronounced that the Lord who used to merely be referred to as Yahweh, He was the one upon whom they would call on to pronounce peace. Now, he is saying it is through the Lord Jesus. Jesus because of His work, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords says to you, His children, shalom, I give you my peace.

Finally, it is also a pronouncement of God's posture towards you and towards me. When Paul pronounces this, "I want you to know," he wants the people of Thessalonica to hear – and I want you this morning to hear this good word first and foremost – is God's protest against the brokenness of the world, against the brokenness because of our sin, and death, and pain, and weeping. This is the protest to say that God's posture towards us despite all of this is one of peace. And whether it is a whisper or a shout that you need, He says to you this morning in this moment, in this hour, in this world, and in your life, peace be upon you, my children; I have loved you while you were yet my enemies. Peace I give you.

This is the promise that Paul begins with and he's ending with. But in case anyone is doubting, he moves to authenticity. So, he announces the peace, then he sandwiches in this whole idea of authenticity. And for Paul, this is important because Paul didn't always write it with his physical hand. These letters were dictated. But he would inscribe at the end these words when he says, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine." This is important for us to understand because there are some who would say, this letter was never written by Paul; it shouldn't be in the Bible. And they use this sentence as an argument for why it can't be genuine.

But here's the challenge which we need to ask. Why? Why would someone else under Paul's name write in such uniquely Pauline ways these two letters? What would be the purpose? Yet, Paul understands that in the midst of the church at Thessalonica being, if you will, divided at times by false teachers regarding the return of Christ, how we are to experience the resurrection or not, what happens to those who passed away prior to Christ's return, he finds it necessary at times to establish: hey, I've written this to you. And if it doesn't have my genuine sign-off, be careful what you receive.

So, it's Paul's calling and saying this is in essence my business card. I have written this to you. And not only why would someone do this, but what would ultimately be how they would do it? Although we've not talked about it in great length because we don't want you to fall asleep, there are many words within these two letters that are uniquely Pauline ways of saying things. That would mean that the person would have to come up and draw up some reason for writing these under Paul's name and then they would have to appropriate Paul's language in such a way to then send it to the church. It just makes no sense other than it being Paul. But his purpose for doing so is to establish his ministry by way of letter.

Very early on at the beginning of the church, Paul is showing that the way in which their ministry to the church would be through writing of letters, more than we actually have. We know that there is likely another letter that would've been written to the Corinthians, but we no longer have. But by God's providence, according to His will, we have these letters within the New Testament. And this is his way of saying, you can trust and

know that this has been my hand and verified by my words to understand over against the false teaching which has invaded the church. This is Paul's way of saying, not only does the Lord's peace be upon you, I am Paul who have written this to you. It is a trustworthy word.

I encourage you to at least understand God's word in this way and ask these questions because this Bible is just like all the centuries before. It has been questioned and will continue to be questioned until the Lord's return. Understand and know what some of the debates are about. This is just one of them. But the ultimate question that we have here is why, and what would be the purpose, and how they would do it. Paul puts here for us; I have written this to you because it establishes my ministry.

But if there's any way of establishing his ministry, it is in this final word that he gives in his benediction when he writes the words in verse 18, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." One of the reasons I am so grateful for the way in which this letter is finished is to be reminded that the way Paul ends is the way he began the benediction. When he pronounces the peace of God upon the people, he's saying, this has happened because of God's reconciling power, his is the Lord our God working through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is His posture towards you. He then finishes with the idea of grace.

And the reason why I'm grateful for it is that nowhere will you ever find an end word from any hand of any writer in the Bible these words, be good people. I say that as a father. I tell Caroline when she drives off in the morning bleary eyed, a little bit of caffeine, going to high school, "Drive safe." I don't know why. I apologize, Caroline. I know that probably doesn't help you very much in the mornings, but it just comes out of me. It's my way of saying, "Be good. Be a good driver because I can see you out our back window whether you stop at the stop sign or not." But that's not the point. She knows I can. But I am grateful that the letters of Paul and the writings of God's word don't tell us, be good y'all. Because we can't.

The Lord's word never begins or ends with a command. It is always establishing who He is and what He's done. And then it finishes with what He has done. And in the middle, He tells us how we ought to live. Does it say in God's word to be good? Yeah. Does it say to obey His word? Yeah. Does it say to follow these commands? Yes. But we can only do so because of the reconciling power of the peace of Christ and through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And how he finishes is with the grace. It represents the totality of God's actions towards us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The pronouncement of grace represents the totality of God's actions towards you and me.

But to understand this grace that is being pronounced here, we must first also be reminded of the background of the complexity of this grace. I've said it a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating. Again, within our own tradition, the way in which we have taken the idea of grace and shortened it to a sentence, we say that God's grace towards us is His unmerited favor. Yes, and amen. We cannot merit or deserve or act or do anything upon God that then makes Him a debtor to us. Therefore, He responds with grace. That is never the case. It is always God's unilateral act of graciousness towards us and we never deserve it. But grace is so much more. It comes and has come and will continue to come until Christ's return in the midst of even our rejecting Him. God's grace comes to a people that didn't ask for it, weren't looking for it, and if they were, most of the time and in our natural born state, we say nope, I'm good. I don't need you. God's grace is more than unmerited favor, it comes in the midst of our rejecting God.

This was Paul when he announces in the letter to the Romans, "While you were yet sinners, Christ died for you." Think about it this way. American author of the 20th century Thornton Wilder's 1927 novel – some of you may have read this in school – *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928. But one of his major characters Marquesa, he's giving voice to her thoughts as she's looking at the world around her. And she summarizes human beings in this way, "She saw that people of this world moved about in an armor of egotism, drunk with self-gazing in dread of all appeals that might interrupt their long communion with their own desires. These were the sons of Adam from Café to Peru." I love that phrase.

We have about us this armor of egotism drunk with self-gazing, in dread of all appeals that might interrupt our long communion with our own desires. In our natural born state, we only want the selfie. We want what we want when we want it. And so, long as that intersects conveniently with what God wants, we're all good. But if God's photobombs our selfie, when He photobombs that selfie of that perfect moment with that

sunset and you have it, you're ready to share it, and suddenly He photobombs it with something that is uncomfortable, that is painful, that is disruptive, and we want nothing to do with, we shake the fist and say no thank you. And yet, God in His benevolent merciful grace says, grace, grace is greater than all your sin.

Let me go further. When Paul announces here, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with" y'all, is what he's saying. He's encompassing not just the people who were with him at Thessalonica, but even those who disagreed with him because this is the only place where he says, be with y'all. It works in Greek, just not up here. It works in the south and it works in Greek, "Be with y'all." It includes those who agree with me and even those who disagree with me. Grace be upon you. But even more, it takes the language that he opened up with.

Notice, I kind of skipped over it when he says, "Peace be with you at all times and in every way," so is the case with God's grace. It is His blessing in all times and in every conceivable way and every nook and cranny of your life, grandiose or mundane, glorious or embarrassing, celebratory or hurtful. God's peace and His grace be with you.

Here's what that pronouncement includes. It includes God's irresistible invasion. What do I mean? He's not saying, do you agree with this grace? Are you seeking the grace? Do your circumstances sing the grace? It doesn't matter because this is God's irresistible invasion of His will. Do you know God's grace is so fierce that it is attached to His eternal, holy, and righteous will? Which means nothing can separate us from His gracious will. Some of you need to hear that this week. Nothing can separate us from His love, not even our rebellion while we were yet His enemies, not even our sin. For we've learned in these letters, God is present with us even when we sin. Yet, His grace is still with us. Even in our circumstances, the Lord says, peace be with you in every way and at all times.

This is not about our will. The benediction, God's word, why it is pronounced upon you at the end of a service, it has nothing to do with what we want or hope or think we have. It is God's eternal, irrevocable, unbreakable, unshakeable will. And that word to you this morning is the peace of the Lord be with you in all times and in every way. And the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with y'all. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would be with us. And I ask, Father, that your Holy Spirit would minister this grace to us, that your peace would be with us even when the evil one would want to deceive us and have us question whether you are present or real. May your promise and may your word by your Holy Spirit be an ever-present whisper or scream or shout, whatever it needs to be, to remind us that we are yours and that we are invited by your reconciling power to experience this peace and to know this grace. Father, there are some who hear my voice this morning, Lord, who hear my words and do not believe and disagree. And maybe they have really good arguments. And maybe I would have a really good response. But Lord, unless your grace works in each of us, myself included and everyone who can hear my voice, unless your grace is at work, none of us can truly understand this. And I pray for those, Lord, who question whether you are real, may your Holy Spirit graciously and irresistibly demonstrate who you are to them this morning. And may they simply receive the grace that is offered. And may they know a peace that can never be revoked even when our circumstances scream otherwise. But you, O Lord, are faithful. This is a promise that is proclaimed. Help us now to receive it and rest in it alone. In the majesty and in the power and in the glory of the name of Christ we pray. Amen.