

Clarity and Comfort

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

You are Our Glory and Joy

September 13th, 2020

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 2:17.

Before this series began, I studied my way through 1 and 2 Thessalonians and began to draft a preaching calendar. I confess that, as I initially prepared that calendar, I looked at this passage and wondered “What am I going to say about this?” At first glance, this passage is pretty straightforward. He missed the Thessalonians, so he sent Timothy to see them, and then he was encouraged! And that’s interesting, historical information. But I wondered how relevant it would be for us today.

Can I tell you something? I was dead wrong! This text is so obviously RELEVANT! There is so much here for us today.

If you are an elder, this text is for you.

If you are a parent, this text is for you.

If you are a DISCIPLE MAKER (which every Christian is called to be) then this text is for you!

I believe that, by His grace and with the help of His Spirit, God is going to use this text to transform us into better disciple makers. That’s my prayer for us this morning.

So turn with me now to 1 Thessalonians 2:17. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

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

3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

⁶But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹²and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In these 16 verses, we catch an in-depth look at Paul the disciple maker. But – and here's the critical, DRIVING idea that is going to shape our study this morning – when we learn about Paul's life, we catch a glimpse of what our lives ought to look like. Paul – inspired by the Holy Spirit – said:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV)

So, as we look at the text this morning, our job is not simply to UNDERSTAND Paul, the disciple maker. Our job is to IMITATE Paul, the disciple maker. That's that I believe God would have us do this morning. That's why these events have been recorded for us. Outside of Jesus Christ, Paul was the most faithful disciple maker in the history of the church. So, let's lean in and learn a lesson in disciple making.

A Lesson in Disciple Making

Lesson 1: Disciple makers should:

1. Understand that you will give an account for the people you lead

We find this in chapter 2, verses 19 and 20. Look there again with me:

For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰For you are our glory and joy. (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 ESV)

Paul says something very interesting here. Did you catch it? Paul tells the church in Thessalonica that THEY are his hope, his joy, his crown of boasting before the Lord and his glory. At first glance, that almost sounds inappropriate, doesn't it? Clearly, Paul doesn't sing the same songs that we sing! We sing:

My **hope** is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.¹

We sing:

And let my song forever be, my only **boast** is you!²

So, we sing that our hope, joy, glory and boast is JESUS, but Paul says here that his hope, joy, glory and boast is in the Thessalonian church. Are we singing bad songs? JOSH!?

¹ Edward Mote, *On Christ the Solid Rock*.

² Jordan Kauflin, *All I Have Is Christ*.

When Paul says that the Thessalonians are his crown of boasting before the Lord, he isn't saying that they are the reason he will be saved. We know that, because elsewhere Paul writes:

For **by grace you have been** saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, **so that no one may boast.** (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV)

So, when it comes to our SALVATION, we can only boast in one thing: Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Our songbook is safe! Well done, Josh!

But, then what is the boasting that Paul talks about in today's text? I think commentator Jeffrey Weima is helpful here:

With great joy Paul anticipates the day when the Thessalonian church, along with his converts in Philippi and elsewhere, will be presented by him to the returning Lord as **proof of his faithful missionary labors.**³

Picture it this way: When Paul stands before Jesus, the disciples that he has made in Thessalonica, Philippi and everywhere else where he has ministered will be like a gift that he can offer to Jesus. And their faith will give evidence that Paul was a faithful disciple maker.

Paul doesn't want to stand before the King emptyhanded with nothing to show for his ministry. The Bible tells us that some disciple makers will do just that. You can read that warning in 1 Corinthians 3. Some will stand before the Lord one day with nothing to show for their ministry because they didn't build on the right foundation. But Paul wants to stand before his master and to hear him say:

Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. (Matthew 25:23b ESV)

One day, we will stand before the Lord and present to him all of the people that we have discipled.

Have you ever thought of that?

³ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 202-203.

Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd. He told stories about how he would leave the 99 in search of the 1 and how he would put that sheep back up onto his shoulders and carry him back to the fold. We're going to stand before THAT Jesus and we're going to answer for how we ministered to the people in our care.

Can you imagine looking Jesus in the eye and trying to justify why you turned a blind eye while the people entrusted to your care wandered out into sin and ruin? I would suspect that James was pondering these things when he wrote:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. (James 3:1 ESV)

This is one of the reasons why we push membership so often in our church. If we're going to stand before the Lord and give an account for your souls, it's really helpful to know who's in and who's out. If you're just a passin' through, then we are happy to have you visiting with us. Grab a complimentary mug on the way out and we look forward to seeing you again. But if you consider us to be your elders and pastors then we need to know that! Because Jesus is going to hold us accountable for the way that we care for your souls.

Parents, you are going to stand before the Lord and give an account for the way that you disciplined your children. Will they be your crown of boasting? Or will they be your shame?

Christian, you will give an account for the people in your life that you are discipling. If you've been putting off the hard talk that you know you ought to have with your Christian brother, it's time to get to it. If you see that new believer slipping back into her old habits, it's time to put another arm around her and to lift her back up.

It will be a glorious day when we limp over to King Jesus with some weary Christians draped over our shoulders and we say to him, "They fell down along the way, but I couldn't leave them behind." Disciple maker, this is your first lesson: Understand that you will give an account for the people you lead.

For our second lesson, we learn that we should:

2. Expect opposition and resistance

Paul faced plenty of it, and we shouldn't expect our journey to be any easier. He says in verses 17-18:

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. (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18 ESV)

Where the ESV translates “we were torn away from you” the NIV does a better job capturing what Paul was really communicating. John Chrysostom explains:

[Paul] did not say, ‘separated from you,’ nor ‘torn from you,’ nor ‘left behind,’ but ‘orphaned from you.’ He sought for a word that might sufficiently show the pain of his soul.⁴

That's what the Greek word here means. Paul was *orphaned* from the Thessalonians. Now, the ESV obviously decided to try to capture the meaning without using a confusing term. After all, in last week's text, Paul described himself as a mother and a father of this church so it's confusing that he would now call himself their orphan.

But that's exactly what Paul says! He was a master of words and he wanted to communicate to the Thessalonians just how traumatic it was that he had been separated from them. So, he wrote, “When I left you, I was like a child being ripped away from his family!”

And who was it that orphaned Paul from the Thessalonians? We learn in Acts 17 that the Jewish leaders had incited a mob and had essentially chased him out of the city. But is that who Paul blames here? No, he says: “Satan hindered us.”

There was a driving, spiritual force behind all of the opposition that Paul faced. He was engaged in a spiritual battle, and he knew it. In fact, that verb “hindered” was a warfare term. In the Ancient Near East, armies would sometimes dig large ruts and trenches in the road to impede the

⁴ John Chrysostom as quoted by Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 196.

advancement of opposing armies. Paul says, “That’s exactly what Satan is doing here. I’m trying to get to you, but the enemy is destroying all of the roads that lead home.”

Christian, you should not be surprised when your efforts to disciple someone are opposed. Discipleship is hard, because it is opposed. Your kids are going to have friends who influence them to rebel. That young woman you are mentoring is going to become convinced that you don’t have her best interests in mind. Unforeseen circumstances like, I don’t know, worldwide pandemics, are going to create distance between you and the person that you are discipling.

And here Paul reminds us that behind bad friends, bad thoughts and bad circumstances is a bad devil who is actively opposed to the advancement of the gospel. We’ve been called to be disciple makers, but he desires to be a disciple breaker. This is a spiritual battle, therefore:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. (Ephesians 6:11 ESV)

That’s our second lesson. The third lesson feels very basic by comparison. Paul teaches us:

3. Don’t underestimate the value of your presence

This IS basic, yet what an important lesson for us to learn. In a culture that is plagued by isolation, our ministry can be so effective if we will be courageous enough simply to show up.

Paul desperately wanted to be with the Thessalonians. For some reason unbeknownst to us, he was unable to return to them. Some have speculated that the city of Thessalonica had placed something of a “restraining order” on Paul and Silas or perhaps he had an illness that prohibited him from making the long trek back. Whatever it was, Satan had hindered Paul and he was unable to see the church in person. But, even though he couldn’t be present physically, he still found a way to make his presence felt. We read in the beginning of chapter 3:

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2 ESV)

Out of his desire to be present with the church in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas, sent their only beloved partner Timothy to check in on the church.

It's hard – almost impossible – to influence people from a distance. Older parents, you can testify to that, can't you? Once the kids move out of the house and make a life for themselves three hours down the highway, your ability to shape and mold them takes a big hit. The same is true in the family of God. Christians who isolate themselves from community don't grow. Christians who ignore godly mentors, who cut themselves off from Christian friendships and who neglect the corporate gathering of worship put themselves in a very dangerous place.

Therefore, part of being a disciple maker means going after the straying. Let's get really practical: Drive to that house. Make that phone call. Have that awkward conversation. Grab that weary brother, throw him up over your shoulders and bring him back into the fold. As James wrote:

whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:20b ESV)

But you'll never bring anyone back if you don't show up. You can't make disciples from a distance. Don't underestimate the value of your presence. That's our third lesson.

Next, Paul teaches us to:

4. Equip those you disciple to suffer well

Look again at verse 3:

that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. (1 Thessalonians 3:3b-4 ESV)

Over the last two years we have spent a great deal of time in 1 & 2 Peter and in Daniel. Both of those books have a great deal to say about suffering for our faith. As I began to study through 1 Thessalonians there was a little part of me that said: "Suffering again!? People are going to think that's all we talk about!"

And once again, I feel a rebuke from the text. Paul was only with this church for a brief period – maybe 3-6 months – but look at what he says here: “We kept telling you that we were to suffer affliction.” You don’t preach one sermon on suffering per year to tick off the box. You don’t give one suffering disclaimer in the early days of your mentorship. To train up a disciple of Jesus is to frequently remind them of the cost. And do you remember what the cost is? Jesus said:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24b-25 ESV)

If the people that you are discipling are surprised by suffering and hardships, then you are not discipling them faithfully. Not only did Paul prepare them for the *possibility* of suffering, he told them that it was an absolute certainty. Did you see that at the end of verse 3? Paul wrote: For you yourselves know that we are DESTINED for this!

Suffering is written into the script for our lives!

This is one of the reasons why the prosperity gospel is such an abomination. These false preachers promise health and money and happiness in this life, and crowds of people line up to follow Jesus. Who wouldn’t? But when the evangelists fly out of town in their private jets, and the people begin to face persecution from their neighbors, and their diseases don’t go away, and they don’t find a miraculous outpouring of money, they think that Jesus has failed them. That he didn’t deliver on his promises.

But Jesus didn’t fail them. That criminal on the private jet failed them. He didn’t give them the gospel. He INOCULATED them to the gospel by giving them a cheap counterfeit that has no saving power.

We may not be flying private jets and selling “healing hankies”, but if we are not careful, we can be guilty of this same sin. We attempt to lead people to Christ without even mentioning that following Jesus will mean moving out of their girlfriend’s house, or giving up that addiction, or turning from a homosexual lifestyle. We encourage people to make a public profession of faith

through baptism without warning them that the Devil's going to see it too and he's going to come after them with his attacks when they pop out of that water.

Ever since that 1 Peter series, whenever I interview people for baptism at this church, I ask them if they are ready to die for Jesus. I warn them about what they should expect in the days ahead.

If we want to be faithful disciple makers, then we need to be truth tellers. We need to look that would-be-disciple in the eye and say, "There will be trials. There will be pain. There will be cost. People will mock you. The devil will come after you. He will accuse you. He will attempt to isolate you and you will LOSE the life that you once knew."

But of course, if we're going to equip people to suffer well, then we can't stop there. Jesus didn't stop there.

You WILL lose the life you once knew... But whoever loses his life for the sake of Jesus will find it!

The suffering will give way to glory! The persecution will give way to vindication! The accuser of your soul will be thrown into the fiery pits hell and you will receive the crown of life!

The people who are following our lead need to hear that message from us. We haven't done our job until they are equipped to suffer. That's our fourth lesson. In lesson five, Paul teaches us to:

5. Celebrate every victory

Paul wasn't afraid to celebrate the wins when he saw them.

Sometimes I think we forget just how messed up some of these churches were that Paul was writing to. The Corinthians, for example, were tolerating incest and fighting about whose spiritual gifts were more impressive! And yet, Paul opened his letter to them with this encouragement:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...

you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:4, 7 ESV)

Isn't that fascinating? Sure, the church was in a constant, immature dispute about whose spiritual gift was more impressive, but at least they HAD spiritual gifts! It's as if Paul said, "Well, I'm thankful for THAT!"

I can only IMAGINE the letters that some of us would write to that church! How quick we are to write people off. How slow we are to find the good and praiseworthy attributes in others.

Paul does the same thing here with the church in Thessalonica. They have some issues too. Paul will address those issues later in the letter. But first, he takes some time to rejoice over what God has done. Look with me at verse 8. Paul writes:

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you...

For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 3:6,8 ESV)

Timothy came back with a report of good news about the church, but his report also included questions, concerns and moral shortcomings. And yet, even though the report wasn't perfect, as Paul reflected on the faith of this congregation it was as if he had been brought back to life!

I think it's worth noting that he didn't immediately turn to their problems. I felt rebuked by that this week. Isn't it often the case that we only speak up when we see something we don't like? In most cases of discipleship, if your words of rebuke outnumber your words of encouragement, you are doing it wrong. That's not disciple making. That's disciple breaking. That's the work of the accuser himself, and it's not what we are to be about. If we are going to make disciples then, for our sake and for theirs, we need to celebrate every victory.

Finally, our last lesson in disciple making is that we need to:

6. Identify and supply what is lacking

That was Paul's desire for the church in Thessalonica. In verse 10, Paul says that he prayed earnestly for an opportunity to supply what was lacking in their faith. In the coming chapters, he is going to do just that. It would appear that they still had some lessons to learn about personal holiness and about loving one another. They also seemed to have some confusion about the return of Christ and about their work ethic. Paul saw these deficiencies and he was PROACTIVE in addressing them. He identified and supplied what was lacking.

If we are going to follow Paul's example in this then we will need to follow both of those steps.

First of all, you need to know the person you are discipling well enough to know where they are lacking. You need to get close enough to see through the presenting face. If you are investing in someone then you ought to be looking for the areas of deficiency in their faith. How do they relate with their spouse? What is their work ethic like? Ask them about their private devotions. Are they reading their Bible? How often? What does that look like? What does their prayer life look like? How is their theology? How is their grasp on the gospel? When is the last time that they shared their faith?

This might sound like overkill, but that's what disciple making looks like.

I want you to imagine one of the people that you are discipling right now. This could be your child. This could be someone you led to Christ. This could be your friend who is younger in the faith. Now, imagine Jesus approached you and he said, "Tell me, what are the three areas of their life where the most growth is needed?" You ought to be able to answer that question.

Now, IF you know where the person is weak, then you ought to have a proactive plan to meet that need. Isn't it amazing that Paul had no car, no e-mails, and by all accounts he appeared to be in terrible health, but he still made it a priority to fill up what was lacking in the faith of the Thessalonians? He couldn't get there in person, so he wrote them a letter. He challenged them on their personal holiness, he invited them to show a greater love for one another, he rebuked them for their idleness, and he taught them about the final days.

What's your plan?

Can I challenge you this morning? Elders. Leaders. Parents. Mentors. Disciple makers. Don't make the mistake of assuming that the person you are discipling will simply sort themselves out. There's a weight loss commercial that always plays on the sports radio channel and the line goes: "If you could do it alone, you would have done it already." He's not wrong. If that person you're discipling – that person who is struggling to get to church, struggling to pray, struggling to leave behind a pet sin, struggling to read the Bible – if THAT person could have done it on their own, they would have done it already. They can't do it on their own. That's why God placed you in their life. Lift them up out of the mess. Point them back to the hope of the gospel. Encourage them. Fill up what is lacking.

This past summer I taught my daughter Abi how to swim. If you are teaching your child to swim, it might be good to let them thrash in the water for a moment to see where they are at with their abilities, but once their head drops below the water, you jump in after them. Don't you? Then why is it that we so often stand idly by while our spiritual brothers and sisters drop below the water line all around us. It is time to dive in!

Whether God has called you to disciple an entire congregation, or an elder care list, or the members of a prayer group, or your children, or your spouse, or your friend, you need to take that task seriously. There is no greater privilege than walking beside a brother or sister and helping them to grow into the likeness of Christ. And when you stand before him one day, you will not regret a single moment that you spent investing in the church that he purchased with his own blood. I hope, by God's grace, that we will look out on that day over the men and women that we disciplined and that we will be able to say with the Apostle Paul

For you are our glory and joy. (1 Thessalonians 2:20 ESV)

The training of disciples is that task that has been assigned to each one of us. This is our responsibility. This is our privilege. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.